Introduction

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and techniques of life - George Simmel, The Metropolis and Mental Life.

Winner of almost all coveted awards in Literature, a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize, Philip Milton Roth, popularly known as Philip Roth, is a social realist with a universal human concern, whose perceptive eyes have portrayed the existential predicaments, erroneous life and manners of post-war Jewish American society. The litany of major Literary Awards that this Jewish American writer has won over five decades of literary career include, three PEN/Faulkner Awards (1993, 2000, 2007), two National Book Awards (1960, 1995) two National Critics’ Circle Awards (1987, 1991), The Pulitzer Prize (1997), France’s Medici Foreign Books Award (2000), PEN/Nabokov Award (2006), PEN/Bellow Award (2007), Man Booker International Award (2011) and the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Award (2013). In 2014, presenting Philip Roth as the ‘most gleefully talked about loser of the year’ Emma Brockes, a famous British Author and Journalist in her column remarked that “the real scandal of Patric Modiano’s Nobel win is that Philip Roth is a huge loser-again” (www. the guardian. com/09oct.2014). Her emphasis on the word ‘loser-again’ strengthens the initial claim of Roth being a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize in literature.

The survey conducted by the World Literature Forum in 2015 reveals that Svetlana Aleksijevit, Haruki Murukami, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Philip Roth and Joyce Carol Oates made the top five probable contenders to win the Nobel, though it again, finally went to Belarusian journalist writer, Svetlana Aleksijevit for her polyphonic writings, a
monument to suffering and courage in our time. Brockes’ hypothetical reason for Roth not yet being the recipient of the Nobel Prize, corresponds to the same concern once raised by Steven Milowitz in the introduction to his monograph Philip Roth Considered, where he opines that Roth, along with his works, has been a “victim of gross misreading” (ix). His works are often uncritically and unsympathetically devaluated as having anti-Semitic and misogynistic overtones, and were labelled as self-referential.

The clichéd term, ‘First impression is the best impression,’ seems to have proved right in the case of Philip Roth, as the initial anti-Semitic label, which Roth received in his early career. In fact, it has been tagged to his name even today. Also, it has led to a general tendency among the readers and critics to bypass Roth’s essential socio-moral concern; one which expresses itself in a realistic presentation of the psychologically painful post-war societal experience, as against contemporaneous literary tendency of writers to circumvent moral questions for fear of derision and disapproval. Along with presenting the socio-moral predicament of the post-war America, the present research aims at unearthing Roth’s essential humanistic concern in his uniquely realistic mode of presentation, highlighting his characteristic style of blurring the distinction between facts and fiction, fictional and autobiographical.

Richard Chase’s introductory observation in The American Novel and its Tradition, that a “willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society” (ix) becomes a signature characteristic of the contemporary writers with exception of a very few. This general tendency could be considered as ‘precautionary’ as the realistic presentation of contemporary society often entails more cries of outrage from a wide spectrum of readers and critics, than a retrospective attitude of calling a spade a spade. This often leads to a precautionary restraint from the part of a writer, as s/he feels threatened to present the shockingly absurd facts of contemporary social experience. Any
attempt by the writer in this direction is often meted out with sharp and scathing criticism from the broad-spectrum of public in general and a more vociferous verbal assault from the affected segment in particular.

Contemporary life appears to be more ‘surreal’ and ‘imaginary’ than ‘real’ and therefore, what is acceptable and appreciable is more of a ‘surrealistic’ or ‘imaginary’ presentation of contemporary experience. The forced restraint, the tendency to avoid the literal presentation of the psychologically painful societal experience, for fear of derision and criticism is one of the prominent characteristic features of the American fiction of the post-war era. Ihab Hassan, for example, in his Radical Innocence, analyses the surrealistic focus of much of post-war American fiction, wherein he opines that “the individual’s sense of his own potency, his power to effect change and mould events, seems in steady decline” (15). Such a non-appreciative and overly critical tendency of the American society towards any realistic portrayal of the ‘American social experience’ has forced John McDaniel to state in his book The Fictions of Philip Roth that “many of our writers turn from unimaginable realities of American experience, to mourn and celebrate the possibilities of everyman, the archetypal self who lives at any time, except now, anywhere except here” (3), making post-war American fiction, what Benjamin De Mott in one of his essays calls, a “universal descent into unreality” (128). This manifest unwillingness of the post-war era to confront the social reality with its entire vicissitudes and ambiguities, originates from two complementary factors, a fear of being branded and the trepidation of being criticised. Being branded as a radical and criticised as a non-conformist, produces in a writer a sense of being a persona-non-gratia which forces him/her to shift to a safer realm of fantasy and surrealism.

It is here the research situates Philip Roth as a class apart. McDaniel observes that “Philip Roth is a singular figure in recent American fiction: a social realist who
adamantly refuses to withdraw from the field, even though he sees around him no smiling aspects of American life” (3). He has been the most prolifically controversial social realist, who has defied criticism to take on the socio-cultural predicaments of the ‘real world’ America, especially in the post-war era. Though McDaniel made such a sweeping statement way back in 1974, Roth has continued to do the same over five decades till his last published work *Nemesis* (2010). The intensity and passion with which he has continued his social realism, presenting the socio-cultural predicament of the post-war generation makes Derek Parker Royal in his book entitled, *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author* to endorse McDaniel’s view after three decades, saying, “unlike many aging novelists, whose productive qualities wane over time, Roth has demonstrated a unique ability not only to sustain his literary output, but even to surpass the scope and talent inherent in his previous writings” (2).

Born in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey on March 19, 1933 Philip Roth is considered and acclaimed today by the vast majority of the literary intelligentsia as a giant of Jewish American literature. As one of the most prominently controversial writers in contemporary literature in general and Jewish American literature in particular, whose “rebellious outpourings,” and his “fascination with sex and power … the intense excavation of the continuous battle between parents and children and his disquieting focus on the terrible internal war between desire and conscience” (Milowitz ix), has established himself without question as one of the most honoured writers in America.

Born as the eldest child of a first generation Jewish American parents Herman Roth and Bess Finkel, Roth had his graduation from Bucknell University after completing his primary education in Newark Schools. Having completed his Masters Degree in English from the University of Chicago, he joined the United States’ Army, from where he was discharged due to a back injury he sustained during the initial training period at Fort Dix.
Though he had enrolled himself for the doctoral studies in English at the University of Chicago, he withdrew himself in his greater desire to pursue his career as a writer, which had its genesis way back in 1951 when his first story “Philosophy,” as recorded by Jeffrey Hunter in the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (218), was published in the college magazine *Et Cetera*, for which he himself was the founder Editor. In 1959, he married Margaret Martinson Williams, a divorcee with two children. A turbulent married life as it turned out to be, the couple got separated after three years, but ironically their embattled marriage later became an inspiration for many of Roth’s female characters in his fictions.

In his Autobiography, *The Facts*, Roth agrees to this fact that though his wife was his worst enemy ever, ironically she was “nothing less than the greatest creative writing teacher ... specialist par excellence in the aesthetics of extremist fiction” (qtd. in Hunter 80). From 1962 Roth continued his career as a writer-in-residence or visiting writer at various Universities, such as the University of Iowa, the University of Pennsylvania, the Princeton University, and the State University of New York and Hunter College, till his retirement in 1992. Prior to his retirement from teaching assignments, in 1990 Roth had a second marriage with Actress Claire Bloom, with whom he had a live-in relationship for almost fifteen years. This too lasted only for three years, as Claire Bloom giving a public vent of her dissatisfaction in her memoir *Leaving A Doll’s House*, to which Roth responded with *I Married a Communist*, which many a critics like Hunter considers as a “veiled rebuttal of Bloom’s memoir” (112).

Over fifty-four years of literary career that began with the publication of his first book, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959), to the official announcement of his retirement to *Les Inrocks*, a leading French magazine in 2013, saying “to tell you the truth, I’m done,” Roth has made relentless ripples in the ocean of American Literature. In an interview given to the magazine and later reported by *The Telegraph*, he expressed this
in unequivocal terms, when he said, “I do not write anymore. I have dedicated my life to
the novel...I studied, I taught I wrote and I read, to the exclusion of almost everything
else” (The Telegraph, Nov. 9, 2012).

Though the literary career of Roth began on a silent mode with the publication of a
series of stories such as “Philosophy” in the university literary magazine Et Cetera (1951)
as noted earlier, and then “The Day it Snowed” in The Chicago Review 8-Fall, (1954) and
finally “The Contest for Aaron Gold” in Epoch 5-6, (1956) it was with Goodbye
Columbus and Five Short Stories (1959), that Roth earned visible critical attention. It was
an indictment against the American materialistic values, against the background of the
inner emotional conflicts of lower-middle-class Jewish character Neil Klugman, in his
struggle to come to terms with the unfamiliar life styles and attitudes of Brenda Patimkin,
a Nouveau riches Jewish suburbanite, with whom he falls in love. In the words of Ira B
Nadel, Goodbye Columbus was a blunt critique of “Jewish assimilation, religious
practice... sexual freedom that contrasts one generation with another” (102).

Letting Go (1962), a realistic exploration of the gap between literature, love and
life, and When She Was Good (1967) yet another social commentary that juxtaposes
individual autonomy and socio-cultural enfranchisement, received favourable review
from critics. In Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), considered to be one of his most famous
works which earned him critical and commercial success, Roth portrays in an
unconventional manner the struggles of a Newark youth, growing up to be a modern
American Jew, with a ‘liberated libido’ caught between the determination to be free and
the moral strictures imposed by familial coercion, social proscriptions, which Roth in his
autobiography The Facts considers to be the result of a “meaningless affiliation to the
Jewish fraternity” (77). The naked presentation of the “puberty driven obsessions and his
over possessive Jewish mother” as noted by Gary Kerley in Greenwood Encyclopaedia
of Multiethnic American Literature (1929), incensed Jewish readers and critics, who accused Roth of being an offensive and ‘self-hating Jew’. The letter sent to the Anti-defamation League by the Jewish public saying, “Mr. Roth, with your one story ... you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done,” (qtd, in Philip Roth “Writing about Jews” 203), seems to sum up the sentiments of the orthodox Jews who felt betrayed by a fellow Jew.

In spite of the mounting opposition against a Jew “going wild in public” about which Roth mentions in his essay “Imagining Jews” (258), he continues to expand his satiric indignation in and through his characters like Mickey Sabbath’s in Sabbath’s Theatre (1995), who categorically affirms that his goal is “to affront and affront and affront till there was no one on earth unaffronted” (qtd. in Nadel 15). In the first half of 1970s Roth goes on with his social criticism, even extending it to the American politics, through Our Gang (1971), The Breast (1972), The Great American Novel (1973) and My Life as a Man (1974). Reading Myself and Others (1975) originally a collection of twenty-five interviews and the essays that Roth wrote between 1959 and 1974, is an insightful self commentary that provides the raison d’être of hitherto Rothian corpus.

Professor of Desire (1977) and The Ghost Writer (1979) continue with the life of his fictional Alter Egos, David Kepesh and Zuckerman respectively. Professor of Desire is “about the surprises that desire brings” (Searles 111), a back story for Kepesh the protagonist of The Breast. The Ghost Writer, which actually introduces Zuckerman is followed up by a series of novels such as Zuckerman Unbound (1981) The Anatomy Lesson (1983) and The Prague Orgy (1985) in which Roth make use of Zuckerman as his “mouth piece for Jewishness and all its attending cultural and intellectual problems” (Kerley 1930). These novels in general examine the conflicts between traditional and contemporary moral values in the context of familial and sexual relationships.
The National Book Critics’ Circle Award winning novel *The Counterlife* (1986) narrates the story of Zuckerman’s travel first to Israel and then to England where he “combats English anti-Semitism” (Hunter 219).

*Deception* (1990), is considered to be a Rothian testament to the reality of fiction and its ability to convince the reader that the imagined is real. It is an example of Rothian attempt at blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. He expresses his dissatisfaction over the attempt of various critics in separating the two by saying, “I write fiction and I’m told it’s autobiography, I write autobiography and I’m told it’s fiction, so since I’m so dim and they’re so smart let them decide what it is or it is not” (*Deception* 184). This outrageous comment becomes poignant in the wake of the conflicting and contrasting review that came up after the publication of *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988) and *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991). Therefore, this saying of Roth would be repeated a couple of times in the course of the research, as it explains the reason for certain ambiguities that recur in Roth’s writings. *The Facts* was aimed at constructing “the structure of a life without fiction” (*The Facts* 6), and *Patrimony*, a memoir of the last years of his father Herman Roth. In both these works, Roth blends fact and fiction, experimenting with what could be called a Rothian ‘fictionalized autobiography,’ and this would be taken up in the third chapter of the research, dealing with the hermeneutic, narrative and ethical predicaments.

*Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) is one of Roth’s most experimental works after *Counterlife*, in which he begins his experiments with some of the postmodern and metafictitional tendencies, by which his fictions try to obscure the thin line between fact and fiction. However, *Sabbath’s Theatre* (1995) brings back Rothian focus on the “sexual obsession and monomaniacal musings of a self-involved” (Hunter 219) protagonist Mickey Sabbath. *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married A Communist* (1998), and *The
Human Stain (2000) forms the American trilogy which many consider to be Roth’s best. American Pastoral, first of the trilogy and the winner of National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize, is a realistic chronicling of the middle-class values and its shallowness that measures success only in terms of material prosperity.

In I Married a Communist, considered to be one of Roth’s political novels, he analyses the pitfalls of McCarthyism, outlining “post-war anti-communist hysteria” (Nadel 131) that paralysed liberalism. The last in the trilogy, The Human Stain is a powerful exploration of the identity politics, confronting those controversial and sentimental matters of race and identity in American society. The Dying Animal (2001) which concludes the story of David Kepesh, the protagonist of The Breast and The Professor of Desire, outlines the possible disordering of life, as a consequence of dedicating one’s life fully to sexual pleasures. It also presents the possible dangers of unguarded professor-student relationship, callous and playful intellectuality, over indulgence in “non-committed student romances” (Nadel 63).

The Plot Against America (2004), in the opinion of Debra Shostak as reported in Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America, is a continuation of Roth’s “deep engagement with the particulars of American history and culture” (4). In “Just Folks homesteading: Roth’s doubled plots against America” Brett Ashley Kaplan remarks that it is the perfect example of his “endless fascination with the traumatic hidden truth behind the glowing mask of the American dream ... whose ruse of the Just Folks Movement is a thin veneer that hides the violent anti-Semitism beneath the surface of the American myth of equality” (116). It is penetratively frightening fictional presentation of the fascist rule in America, headed by Charles Lindberg, a Nazi sympathizer.
With the publication of *Everyman* (2006), part of the quartet of *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009), and *Nemesis* (2010), Roth returns to his favourite locale, the Weequahic section of Newark, the bedrock of his literary identity and creativity. According to Nadel, Roth in his last published work *Nemesis* draws on the “memories, family life, and ethnic attitudes” (192), in greater social detail and succeeds in recreating the Newark of 1944 devastated by the polio Epidemic.

With his thought provoking and well regarded novels, Roth has, in the words of Timothy Parish established himself as one of the “most critically significant and consistently controversial” (1), American writer, whose books in the words of Alison Flood has “stimulated, provoked and amused an enormous and still expanding audience” (*The Guardian* n.pag.) for the past five decades. At the end of the long and fruitful literary career, which began with the publication of *Goodbye Columbus and Five Other Stories* (1959), and ending with *Nemesis* (2010), he has authored over twenty-seven novels, numerous stories, two memoirs, and two works of criticism, propelling *Time* Magazine to name Roth as “America’s Best Novelist” (Flood n.pag.) in 2001. After having completed five decades of prolifically compelling and thought provoking writing, Roth has under his belt all most all the possible literary awards of his time, as mentioned at the beginning of the introduction.

Going through the Rothian oeuvre, one finds that he has an unmatched ‘fascination for predicament’ (qtd. in McDaniel 8) and it captivates his imagination to such an extent that working it out within the framework of the everyday lived experience, which often infuriated and stupefied him, has become his hallmark. This made Roth’s creative impulse to enter into direct confrontation with the contemporary society. The observation of McDaniel while introducing the fictions of Philip Roth is enlightening in this regard.
McDaniel observes the following:

It is predicament that fascinates Roth, captivating his imagination and feeding his creative impulse. He will not be defeated; he will not turn to other matters, other worlds. Like Kafka before him, he will turn the familial, communal, and cultural pressures facing him into the very substance of his art. (8)

Though, Bellow, Malamud and Roth are considered to be the triumvirate of post-war Jewish American fiction, Roth stands out as a unique Jewish American writer with an unmatched uniqueness. Bellow and Roth persistently remain more ‘humanistic’ in their concerns than Malamud who is pronouncedly more ‘Jewish’. What assumed here is not an ‘ontological Jewishness’ but more of a ‘thematic Jewishness’ in their investigation of the existential human condition. What makes them ‘Jewish’ is the recurring presence of Jewish characters in their helplessness to counter the dehumanizing social, political, cultural and religious forces, both at an individual and communitarian levels. It is the subtle and complex interplay of ‘particularity of Jewish characters’ and ‘universalities of human condition’ that makes the fictions of the trio of Bellow, Malamud and Roth unique in comparison with many other post-war Jewish American writers. McDaniel in his book The Fiction of Philip Roth observes this facet of Jewish American Literature when he says, “from the subtle and complex interplay of both Jewish and non-Jewish influences has a fiction whose flavour and frame of reference are often Jewish, but whose meaning extends through and beyond the confines of the Jewish experience” (38).

The uniqueness of Rothian fiction derives from his consistent and continuous preoccupation with the fundamental existential problems of an individual’s survival against the sovereign powers of society, which Balbir Singh in his work The Early
Fictions of Philip Roth, considers to be “bereft of basic human values like justice, love and human sympathy” (16-17). The society, in his opinion, demands conformity to its normative values, denying, at the same time, any freedom to the individual to fulfil his/her aspirations. This instinctive urge, he goes on to say, of the individual to maintain personal freedom, and the suffocating weight of the forces of normalcy as demanded by the society, introduces us to the deepest problem of contemporary society, a mutual existential conflict between the individual and society.

It is here the observation that George Simmel makes in his Metropolis and Mental Life becomes relevant, wherein he notes that, “the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his/her existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and techniques of life” (1). What happens often in normal circumstances is the humble submission of the individual to societal prescriptions, comprised mostly of familial and religious values and traditions. Any attempt by the individual, to unlock him/her from these curbing forces, are seen by other individuals as well as the mainstream society, as radical and revolutionary, singling out any digression for indictment. Roth having an incisive eye for socio-cultural and religious observation coupled with his first hand knowledge of the political and ethnic undercurrents in the post-war American life, carries out his role as a ‘social realist’ and ‘culture critic.’ How Roth carries forward his realistic social criticism would be the focus of the first and second chapter of the research, which focuses on the socio-moral and religious predicaments respectively.

Realism in literature, very specially in fiction is often identical with a movement that gained currency in the nineteenth century, mostly associated with the trio of Gustave Flaubert, Honore de Balzac and Stendhal (Marie Henri Beyle) in France, George Eliot in
England and William Dean Howells in the United States. The list in not exclusive, it is listed due to prominence and leadership. This movement in literature, having a recurrent mode of expression, across various spectrums of literary forms, represented human life and experience, sans idealization and romanticizing. Such realistic representations are chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life, especially of the middle and lower classes, where each and every character is a product of socio-economic factors and environment.

Tracing the origin of the term, Rene Wellek in an entry on “realism in literature” in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas takes us back to thirteenth century scholastic philosophy where it meant a “belief in the reality of ideas” (51). By eighteenth century the meaning of the term realism underwent a reversal in the hand of the existential philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Thomas Reid wherein realism was pitched against idealism. Early nineteenth century it gained the status of a “faithful imitation, not of the masterworks of art, but of the originals offered by nature” (52). It was with Gustave Planche, an anti-romantic critic, who equated realism with certain exactitude of description and minute description of contemporary manners, that the process of formation of a definite literary creed for realism got crystallized. The creed that follows literary realism as noted by Wellek in his Dictionary of the History of Ideas is that, “art should give a truthful representation of the real world. It should therefore, study contemporary life and manners by observing meticulously and analysing carefully” (51). An important point to be noted here is that the observation and analysis should be objective, done with an impersonal and dispassionate disposition, so that the surface appearance of lived experience, and social condition is presented in an unembellished manner, devoid of any artificial sentimentality and romantic subjectivity.
Realist fiction mirrors life ‘as people experience it’ with the associated challenges and predicaments, conflicts and contradictions, desires and disappointments. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, in their Handbook to Literature points out the function of realist fiction very clearly when they say, “where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists centre their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence” (428).

Going beyond the idealism of romantics, stereotyping of naturalists, the realist author focus on the sitz-im-leben, with a series of believable characters, with language and actions, proper to their cultural setting. A realist, however, does not in any way, dictate or prescribe any specific ethical or moral beliefs and mores, but only give an impassionate reading of the cultural context, by presenting characters with verisimilitude, even to the extent, sometimes, of being irksome. Presentation of the unpleasant and unpalatable existential currents, which Amy Kaplan’s Social Construction of American Realism, considers as something that would probably go on to become the “threats of social change” (ix), unless curbed in the beginning, in its utter nakedness. Such an attempt always invites indictment.

Realism in American literature encompasses a broad period of time beginning with the Civil Wars, having Mark Twain, Henry James and Dean Howells as the stalwarts of such a literary mode, who used fiction as a medium of accurate representation of American life with its depth of darkness, exploring American lives with its verities of everyday existence, within the contemporary socio-political climate. Though the Post-Civil War American scenario with its unprecedented industrialism and rapid urbanization, coupled with rising middle-class affluence, provided a fertile ground for literary realism, it met with a mixed response from the critics. While the realism in the works of Twain
and James found favour with the twentieth century critics, Dean Howells’ realism did not find the same response from the critics, who were supporting conventionality in social, moral and literary standards. This tendency, in the words of famous American literary critic George Santayana forms the basis for the ‘gentle tradition’ in American literature, a term coined by Santayana, while referring to a late nineteenth century literary practice of emphasizing the conventionality in social, religious, moral and literary standards.

The present research aims at presenting Philip Roth as a social realist with a universal vision, who in his fiction fearlessly attempts to present life ‘as it is’ defying the general tendency among his contemporaries who engage themselves in idealized fiction, portraying life ‘as it should be’. Endorsing the definition of realist fiction by William Harman and Hugh Holman, Roth in his writings purposefully concentrates on the ‘here and now’, taking the post-war era in which he lived as the historical moment, while dealing with the ordinary people, with ordinary speech and ‘local colour’. An un-idealized presentation of characters with all the complexities of temperament, conflicting loyalties and ethical dilemmas, is what distinguishes Philip Roth from other writers of his time. Any such contemporaneous attempt, in language of the local colour, with inherent social criticism tends to fall into disfavour with those whose private domains are apparently infringed. Roth’s attempt to present the Jewish American predicament is to be seen as a micro presentation of the universal human predicament of the contemporary world, with special reference to the post-war Jewish American context.

The post-war era that has seen a galaxy of Jewish American novelists, who in their own way dealt with, what Shuchi Agrawal in her monograph A Study of Philip Roth : An American Bestseller Novelist considers as the, “clash of psychological forces at the pressing points of character and explore erotic cravings, taboos and inhibitions” (vii). Going through Rothian corpus one realizes beyond doubt that regarding consistency,
quality and volume, Roth is unmatched. Speaking about the undiminished vigour and creativity of Roth, Daniel Walden, writing a preface for Derek Parker Royal’s *Philp Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, is of the opinion that for the past half a century, like “the mighty Mississippi” (qtd. in Derek Parker viii), Roth explores the innermost recesses of post-war human psyche with undiminished vigour and indomitable determination, with an undaunting passion for realistic rendering of lived experience.

He has the distinction of negotiating the turbulent and tortured emotions of modern man caught in the whirlwind of competing and conflicting passions. His steady and sedulous effort in exploring the existential predicament of his characters, in their struggle to negotiate this conflicting and competing claims, the American ideal of vertical advancement with traditional Jewish heritage and mores, of individual freedom and social prescriptions, desire and conscience, traditionalism and liberalism, restricting socio-religious taboos and all pervading opportunities for indulgence, has undoubtedly re-energised and re-defined the role and status of American fiction in general and Jewish American Literature in particular.

But prior to the investigation of Roth’s realistic exposition of post-war human psyche, with its conflicting passions and desires, possibilities and predicaments, a short survey of the emergence of American literature alongside the European exploration of the new World is undertaken. Side by side its passage through chronological periods of Modernism and Postmodernism, the post-war prominence of marginal and ethnic literatures, the transformation of Jewish American literature is also undertaken. It is seen that the passage from an immigrant literature chronicling the psycho-social tensions arising out of the encounter between the traditional and liberal cultures of orthodox Judaism and liberal America, to the 1950s which is often considered as the ‘Jewish decade’ of American literature, provides the research with the essential spatio-temporal
context, in which Philip Roth with his undiminished vigour and indomitable determination, gives a realistic rendering of lived experience of the post-war socio-historic context.

If 12th October 1492, is undeniably a momentous day in the history of America, it could be said with certain glee that it was also a historic day as far as the genesis of American literature is concerned. It was on this day that Christopher Columbus, a Genoese navigator made the first recorded discovery of the western land, though he was under the impression that he had reached Asia. Ever since then, the European exploration continued its journey under the guidance of Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci. The journals and letters they wrote for their personal purpose, along with the promotional writings of Captain John Smith who stressed the “incredible abundance” of the New World, provided the rest of the world an enticing image of America. Jules Chametsky’s entry on “Jewish American literature” in Harper Collins Reader’s Encyclopaedia of American Literature presents the New World as an “open society in which someone without benefit of family connections, inheritance, or formal education, can through hard work alone, enjoy a happy, independent, and prosperous life” (439).

The large body of writings that grew out of the European explorations of New World can be considered as an encounter with the nascent traditions of American literature. Going through the colonial history that continued, one can easily conclude together with Chemetsky that “even before the American people created a new nation, they began the process of creating a new literature” (440) as a subset of English literature. Though much of colonial writings were promotional in nature, intended to attract new settlers to America, it all contributed to the creation of a new tradition of American literature.
Proving wrong the commonly held view that the strongly religious orientations of the Puritans were a deterrent to literary creativity, the writings of Thomas Hooker (1586-1647), Edward Taylor (1644-1729) and Jonathan Edward (1753-1758), among others provided the impetus to further emergence of American literature. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) most outstanding writer of the colonial period, and a vehement supporter of the enlightenment ideals, provides in his *Autobiography* (1771), a memorable picture of life in early America, as a model for success, “as a place where a person might make his way from humble origins to accomplishment and fulfilment.” (qtd. in Chemetsky 442) Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in his masterful *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) echoes the same sentiments, where he presents America as a place, where individuals of “all nations are melted into a new race”, making it the great ‘*alma mater*.’ This would later become the inspiring force behind the great ‘Horatio-Alger-myths’ and the ‘great American Dream’, widely popular after the Civil Wars.

The American Revolution that spanned from 1775 to 1783, and the subsequent creation of a new nation under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, saw the emergence of a new system of governance. A similar consolidation and innovation took place in the field of literature too, wherein the writers tried to build on the lessons of the past, at the same time responding to the existing situations of the American society. The revolution and the subsequent American freedom from the British colonial rule, gave a renewed urgency in answering some of the vexing questions of identity and ownership. Though answers to these questions were sought by literature of the time, it was by the end of eighteenth century with the emergence of the American Novel, that a solid expression to themes important to American literature and life were provided. Initiative to such an undertaking was found in the works of Susanna Rowson, Hugh Henry, Gilbert Imlay, William Hill Brown, and Charles Brockden Brown. Washington Irving and James
Fennimore Cooper, through their perceptive writings gave a real identity to the American literature of the nineteenth century.

American literature, under the creative and critical leadership of Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, took a moralistic turn as they unleashed a series of protest against the uncontrolled urbanization, to the extent of endangering the hitherto hallowed national morality. They unveiled the rapidly growing contradictions between the idealized image of America as the ‘New Eden’ and its everyday reality. The first generation American writers were painfully aware of the possibility of a post independence cultural imperialism wherein without a unique and specific American literary culture, The United States would exist, as noted by Sanford E. Marovitz in his description of Jewish American Literature in the *Encyclopaedia of American Literature* as “nothing more than an economic arrangement” (444).

Therefore, the writers of the 1930s tried to match the political independence with a literary independence. This desire was signalled by Emily Dickinson’s “I see-New Englandly”, a notable phrase in one of her poems which begins with “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune.” A similar desire to leave behind all the past was expressed by Walt Whitman when he exhorted his friends to debouch upon a newer and mightier world. The age was characterized by an unprecedented literary experiment, an undermining of, and an unsettling of the traditional literary genres. Here it is worth mentioning that the promise of an unprecedented literary bliss that was made at the beginning of the age of experimentation was like that of a paradise promised, but revoked sooner and forever. Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, Dickinson etc., who were the stalwarts of the age of American experiment, promised a lot but either retreated on their promise or failed to live up to the expectation, and thus, in some way failed to teach us the art of life.
The period between 1860s and 1920s saw a more creative and decisively different American literature in the hands of Henry James, a key figure of the nineteenth century literary realism. He propagated that a ‘text,’ first and foremost be realistic, one that contains a true representation of life that is cognizable to readers. It was he who gave a realistic picture of the American encounter of Europe and Europeans. This period saw more attention being given to the everyday texture of American life, leading to a combination of realism and naturalism in literature. *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells and *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James are praiseworthy examples of the realistic mode. The change in the socio-cultural milieu, brought about by the new wave of immigration, unprecedented demographic shift from farm to city, rapid growth of personal income coupled with an equally rapid industrialization, increased the scope and range of American literature, as many and varied writers came up with possible local responses to the emerging problems. This resulted in a glaring rift between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ arts.

After the Civil War, American literature saw the emergence of women writers, African and Jewish writers in a manner that was unprecedented. All these writers tried to answer the ever pressing question: “how does one plot a meaningful life in an increasingly frantic and racially, industrially and heroically meaningless universe?” (Marovitz 449) Mirroring the randomness of the modern life, the hitherto predictable rhymes and forms were dispensed with, for a chaotic and disjointed presentation and narratives. To cope with the disillusionment of modern life, new forms of literature and new aesthetic principles were established, and these principles and forms continued to be the animating force for many years to come.

By 1920s there transpired a devastation of faith that occurred as the result of the new theories proposed by Charles Darwin, and it only got aggravated by the demoralizing
effect of World War I. People all over the world had lost the belief in the assurance that religion, politics and society hitherto provided. Modernist literature characterised by a new self-consciousness went into a mode of radical formal experimentation. A group of American writers under the leadership of T.S. Eliot expressed a deep sense of loss and despair, while Ezra Pound, who envisaged the possibility of a new age, where a more free and empowered artist, could contribute meaningfully to the society. This was expressed in his modernist exhortation, ‘make it new’. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* epitomized the anxious psyche of the modern man whose life was fractured and fragmented.

If 1920s were the period of modernism, and 1930s the period of the Great Depression, then 1940s saw the disappearance of the socio-political consciousness that marked the literature of the past two decades. While writers like Steinbeck and Hemingway were busy with antifascist works, the new generation writers, mainly the soldiers returning from war, turned their war time experience into straight forward realistic literature.

Prominent developments worth mentioning during 1940s to 1960s were the emergence of the Jewish writers in the urban north under the leadership of Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, the coming into prominence of African-American, and Asian-American literature. The Jewish-American literature concentrated on the realistic fiction, while the African American writers challenged the American conscience with the race relations and power structures, and the Asian-American writers focused on male domination and the Korean War.

The ever present nuclear gloom, and the continuing inequity in the society, disillusioned the writing fraternity and they resorted to give an alternative vision of human experience, making use of the non-traditional forms and narrative techniques. The
post-war era, therefore, saw a series of literary experimentation, as the traditional mimetic function of fiction were found to be wanting. The subsequent literary innovations and creative expressions of then existential situation gave way to the metafictional mode of writing in American literature.

The ambitious project of providing an alternative vision of human experience through a series of literary experimentation and innovations were backed by philosophers and thinkers across the globe, who had in the past believed that society has a trajectory, and that it moved according to immutable and unchanging laws and that there is a driving force that drove society forward. Evolution of the society was always considered to be a progressive one. Keeping in pace with such notions of change and progress human society has come across seminal movements in history, leaving an indelible mark in the evolution of human society; be it in the field of art, architecture, literature or culture.

Contemporary human civilization is characterised by an inexhaustible variety and complexity. Variety resulting from a symbiosis of opposites, complexity brought in by being allusive and indirect, fragmented and non-traditional. Complex and ambiguous, as ‘change’ and ‘experimentation’ becomes the only ‘constant’ factor in the ever changing contemporary society. “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man” (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 06 November 2015. n.pag.), the ever reverberating words of Heraclitus, one of the ancient Greek philosophers, known for his doctrine of change being central of the universe, seems to be more relevant today than ever. According to him, society was in a constant flux, everything always on the move.

Such an intellectual movement and cultural ambiance developed in the Western Europe during the seventeenth century reaching in its zenith in the eighteenth century is
known as ‘Enlightenment’ period. Sometimes referred to as ‘the Age of Reason,’ the period was known for its profound faith in the powers of human reason and an equally pronounced devotion to clarity of thought, to harmony, and a sense of proportion and balance. This period was facilitated by what the German philosopher and thinker Jurgen Habermas has identified as the creation of Bourgeois Public Sphere: new forms of Urban Sociability facilitating open discussions of ideas, and an explosion of print culture. The one single undisputed belief of this movement was a hitherto unheard faith in the ‘universal’ and ‘uniform’ ‘human reason’ and its capacity to solve crucial problems of life and society, leading to a universal moral and intellectual self realization that would usher in ‘universal peace, prosperity and happiness.’ But the social, cultural and political events that took place later on, forced many of the twentieth century philosophers and writers to question such a faith in reason as they either lived through the world wars, or experienced and witnessed the unimaginable human suffering and fragmentation in the post-war era. It is in this context one need to situate modernist, postmodernist and post-war literature and culture.

Modernism, to put it in simple words, stands for an aesthetic movement that was in vogue during the early part of twentieth century. In Beginning Theory, Peter Barry defines modernism as the “movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century ... an earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture” (78). As M.H Abrams puts it in A Handbook of Literary Terms, it is used to “identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts and styles of literature and other arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, but especially after World War I” (176). It involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases of western art and culture. Whereas, Postmodernism is a socio-cultural and literary theory
that refers to a ‘shift in perspective’ that has its manifestation in a wide range of disciplines including social sciences, art, fashion, architecture, literature etc., it is a shift in perception that germinated as early as 1950s, which is still continuing. A shift in perception, which is associated with the economic power shifts, onslaught of consumer capitalism and the cries and anxieties of the dehumanizing socio-political environment after World War II.

Due to the close association between modernism and postmodernism, any attempt to define postmodernism necessitates an ‘a priori’ understanding of modernism, and then the specific modernist features can be distinguished from those that are specifically postmodern. Modernism with its unparalleled emphasis on subjectivity and impressionism was more concerned with how one sees or perceives, than what they see or perceive. They were more focused on how impressions are formed on the mind of the individual and how the subjective self responds to such impressions. Modernity in literature as noted by Barry entailed a “movement away from an apparent objectivity of narration” (79). This was evident from the fact that the till then prevalent narrative techniques such as the presence of an omniscient third-person narrator, presence of a consistent and fixed point of view, and the presence of a clear cut moral positions etc., were replaced by multiple points of view and ambiguous moral positions.

One of the best adjectives that can be used to refer to the modernist literature is Hybridity. As a signature term of postcolonial theory, hybridity is characteristic of a cultural form that comes into being by the interaction of two or more separate and independent cultures or forms. A hybrid culture or form, though having characteristic features of either or both of the parent culture or form, is a distinct and unique entity. In Literature it often refers to the intermixing of literary genres practiced by the modernist and postmodernist writers in their effort to represent the fragmentation and discontinuity
of the modern world. What one can see in modernist literature is a deliberate blurring of distinction between literary genres, a technique for example, extensively employed by Philip Roth in his fictional writings.

The conscious and purposeful fusion of artistic categories, utter discard for continuity, coherence, chronology and linearity as against the new found fascination for fragmentation and discontinuity which Barry considers as a “random collage of disparate materials” (79-80). Such a random mix of diverse characters, incidents and images becomes evident in T.S Eliot’s The Waste Land, the harbinger of modernist mood. Along with the fragmentation in form and structure, there emerged the metafictional tendencies, a self consciousness, and a reflexivity regarding the very nature of art itself.

Unlike the realist fiction that used various techniques to make the readers feel that what they read corresponds to the reality outside, the metafictional writing makes conscientious effort to make the readers aware of the fictional nature of fiction, so as to keep an emotional distance from it. Lawrence Sterne’s reflexive novel, Tristram Shandy, (1760) is by far the best example of the same. The modernist metafictional writing abstains from the traditional claim of representing reality, but in and through their fiction, makes conscious effort to present the ‘fictionality of fiction’. This points out to the fact that there is ‘reality’ that exists beyond the realm of fiction, and the reader should go beyond what Philip Roth in Reading Myself and Others considers to be the ‘written-world’(xiii), while keeping an emotional distance from the same.

Once modernism is defined as a period dedicated to literature of innovation and experimentation, the next sequential question is about the nature of postmodernism. Is it a continuation? Or is it an opposition and rejection? Is it a continuous engagement or is it a complete replacing of one by the other? To begin with, J.A Cuddon, describes
postmodernism in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, as a movement characterised by an “eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche” (553). But this does not completely clear the distinction, as all the four characteristics such as a predilection for eclecticism, aleatory form, parody and pastiche etc., are also vital components of modernism at its best. In such a situation the best way to establish a clear cut distinction between the two, in the words of Peter Barry, is to “dissolve the sequential link between them by retrospectively re-defining certain aspects of modernism as postmodernist, ... they are not two successive stages in the history of arts but two opposed moods or attitudes” (80). Postmodernism, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Intimations of Post modernity* is, “modernism conscious of its true nature” (287). It is not chronological period that is to be focused, but a way of thinking and doing, as Tim Woods puts it in *Beginning Postmodernism*, it is a kind of “social and intellectual self reflexive mood within modernity” (8).

In this context, the differences and similarities between the two need to be clarified further. Modernism projects the fragmentation, and the decentred scenario of the post World War II as tragic, and laments the loss of unity, and ultimately suggests that the works of art can provide the lost unity, coherence, continuity and meaning in the modern life. This fragmentation of modern life, for example, is nostalgically lamented in T.S Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which presents modern society as an infertile waste land, needing restoration of its lost fertility. Modernists present this fragmentation and incoherence of modern life not only in the content but in the form as well, as they employ collage, a random mix of diverse characters, incidents and images. However, *The Waste Land* at the end tries to re-capture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to eastern cultures and by bringing in Tiresias the Greek Prophet, as the most important personae,
the unifying force of the multiple consciousness of the text, the one and only example of stability and unity in an otherwise disjoint and chaotic modern day society.

In contrast, postmodernism though accepts the existential fragmentation and de-centeredness of contemporary world, does not consider the situation as tragic, but the postmodern mood is one of celebration, as it considers fragmentation and de-centeredness as the only possible way of existence.

The postmodern disbelief in coherence and unity brings to fore yet another important point. Modernism while acknowledging the reality of loss of unity, believes that, unity and coherence is possible and therefore emphasises the importance and primacy of rationality and order. Modernism is based on the assumption that more rationality leads to more order, and more order leads to perfect coherence and unity. In order to establish the primacy of ‘Order’ modernism persistently highlights the concept of ‘disorder’ in its description of the ‘other’ which includes some of the binary opposites such as non-rational, non-whites, non-male, non-heterosexual etc., Here a special mention may be made of the postcolonial concept of the ‘orient’ as the ‘other’, something that has become a bone of contention among the postcolonial theorists. In the process of establishing the superiority of the ‘order’, modernist art creates the impression that all the ‘marginal’ and ‘periphery’ as ‘disorder’. Postmodernism, however does not take sides, it cynically says that everything is ‘disorder.’

The modernist belief in ‘order’, stability, coherence and unity is what the postmodern thinker Jean Francois Lyotard calls a ‘meta-narrative’ or ‘master narrative.’ While modernism operates on meta-narratives, postmodernism questions and reconstructs it. Meta-narrative is a story that a culture tells itself about its beliefs and practices. For example, a country like India tells itself that it is a democratic, socialist, secular country,
albeit in actuality there are numerous anti-democratic, anti-secular, anti-socialist elements and practices in the country, a fact which every self-conscious and objective observation would prove beyond doubt. But with the constitutional provisions and other administrative mechanisms India make itself to believe the falsehood that it is a social, secular and democratic country. Here secularism, socialism and democracy become meta-narratives. Peter Barry observes that these meta-narratives “which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality” (83).

Therefore, any attempt to create and propagate a grand but often untrue conception of society and culture can be considered meta-narrative, and postmodernism is against such false presentation and make-beliefs as it hide, silence and negate contradictions, instabilities and differences that are inherent in any social system. Therefore, postmodernism propagates ‘mini-narratives’ which in the words of Barry are “provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide basis for actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances” (83). Beatrice Skordili’s entry on “grand narratives” in the *Encyclopaedia of Postmodernism*, is of the opinion that “postmodernism is heralded when grand narratives lose their credibility and the little narratives proliferate” (165).

Literature is an artistic mirroring of life, imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things in the world. In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, a well known Philosopher, novelist and literary critic, one of the chief motives of artistic creation or Literature is certainly the “need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world” (qtd. in Leitch 1336). Any change in the nature, structure and texture of the world, more often than not, is reflected in the literature. If October 12, 1492, was a momentous day in the history of America, that unearthed the incredible abundance of a New World, World War
II was yet another momentous occurrence leading to an all round geo-political re-configuring. Therefore, the end of World War II marked the beginning of a new era-a post-War world, a world which never could remain the same as before. Once the immediate post-war uncertainties were over, there surfaced an ideological collision between communism and democracy, represented by the then Soviet Union and the United States respectively, leading to the “cold war” between the two. The military supremacy gained by the United States during the world war lasted only till 1949, when Soviet Union successfully tested their nuclear bomb. The tensed historical and political atmosphere is well captured by Tony Judt when he remarks in Post-war: A History of Europe Since 1945, that “the two great powers of the day were arming themselves to the hilt and preparing for the eventuality of a thermonuclear war” (247).

The economic expansion and the apparent realization of the ‘American Dream’ by the Nouve Riche middle class in the immediate post-war era took a downward trend, as a result of the collision of the political forces of communism and democracy. It led to a ‘communist paranoia’ wherein the Americans viewed communism as another radical ideology, as venomous as fascism, which finds expression in Roth’s I Married a Communist. This heightened fear, was fanned to fire by unfounded allegations of communist activity from “traitors within our own ranks” (Judt 247-248) by senators Owen Brewster and Joseph McCarthy, in their self proclaimed crusade against communism. This deep rooted communist paranoia, exacerbated by the possibility of a nuclear attack by Soviet Union affected the socio-cultural life, which otherwise had moved by leaps and bounds in the immediate post-war era.

Post-war American society was multifaceted. A socially conservative main culture, in conflict with the all permissive and liberal ‘Beatniks’ counter-culture. The mainstream culture was one of conservatism and conformity, except for the ‘Red Scare’ also called
the ‘McCarthyism’. The unparalleled economic prosperity, increasing number of marriages and a subsequent ‘Baby Boom’, uncontrolled suburbanisation, clearly defined and firmly established gender roles, feminist and minority struggles etc., were the characteristic of post-war American mainstream culture.

But side by side, the growth of an amorphous and ill-defined counter-culture of ‘Beat Generation’ paused a great threat to the conservative social fabric of American society, with its patronization of sexual liberation, homosexuality, use of drugs etc. The Beat Generation in general refers to those poets, artists and writers, who actively challenged and rebelled against the homogenization of American culture by rejecting the status quo in the 1950s.

The group was characterised by uninhibited drug experimentation, passion for raw and free life. They had the intellectual support of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, who rejected traditional conventions, capitalistic ideals and religious norms. Thus, the post-war era, characterised by the unparalleled economic boom, increased expectations, and a visible demographic shift, feminist and ethnic struggles, communist paranoia of the mainstream culture and the liberal and licentious Beatniks’ counter culture provided a fertile ground for the flowering of American literature in the post-war era.

Introducing American Literature and culture in the post-war years, Josephine G. Hendin in *A Concise Companion to Post-war American Literature and Culture*, compares post-war America to a “rhetorical figure for modernity in all its disruptions and progress” (1). It becomes the birth place of “recognition and reconciliation of differences,” celebrating the power of “difference” (Hendin 1-2) to inspire. It is already seen that the post-war American society as a veritable admixture of culture and counter-culture, conservatism and liberalism, conformity and licentiousness, tradition and
experimentation. But it is significant to note that amidst all these social, ideological, and moral contradictions and sharp polarisations, post-war American literature displayed a great ability to dialogue with ‘differences’ and thereby sustain its variety and dynamism. It illustrates the tenacity to accept and encourage divergent perspectives and voices. Hendin expresses the same opinion when he says, “the interaction and even symbiosis between margin and mainstream nourished acceptance of new voices” (7). It is this acceptance and coming into prominence of the marginal or ethnic and subaltern literature that remains as one of the remarkable features of the post-war American writing. The effort of many of the marginal and ethnic writers to give a realistic picture of their ethnic isolation, subalternity and cultural estrangement, an attempt to give a ‘universal voice’ to their problems, so that, a post-war American, irrespective of racial and religious affinities, can say ‘that is, and can be myself.’

It could be said with a certain amount of veracity, that the immediate post-war American Literature was a Jewish American era, providing thoughtful meditations, often blunt and critical, satiric and realistically revealing, on the conflict between hedonism and orthodoxy, between moderation and licentiousness, self-identity and assimilation. Jewish American writers attempted to decode the pain of marginality, subalternity and alienation within the context of the conflict between the marginal (immigrant, or Jewish) and mainstream (American or Christian) culture. It portrayed the blind adaptation of the young immigrant generation at the cost of Jewish mores and traditions, in their desire to reconfigure the ethnic practices to meet the demands of assimilation.

The conflict emerging from the ‘desire to take a hold on’ the new and liberal culture and the ‘desire to hold on’ to the ethnic culture, giving way to a predicament of choice- a choice between two ‘desirables’- the desire to be a ‘Jew’ and an equally pressing desire to be an ‘American’. This un-reconciled conflict, whether to be a ‘Jew in America’ or to be
an ‘American Jew’ forms the crux of, what many consider to be, the Jewish problem. The predicament of reconciling ‘Jewishness’ with ‘American-ness’ was, and is the recurring theme of Jewish American literature that is taken up by the stalwarts of Jewish American writers, though lacking uniformity and continuity, both in form and theme.

The Jewish presence in American soil as recorded by Gloria L. Cronin and Alan L. Berger in the *Encyclopaedia of Jewish American literature*, dates back to 1654, with the arrival of 23 Jews in the Dutch colonial part of New Amsterdam on the French ship Sainte Catherine, later called as the “Jewish-Mayflower” (xiv), reminiscent of the Pilgrim Fathers’ arrival on the New England. However, Jewish literary presence began specifically with the arrival of the orthodox Yiddish speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who fled the pogroms and other government sanctioned violence in the wake of 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Though the descendents of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain included notable theologians and thinkers, their impact on the American literary scene was negligible. It was the Eastern European Jews that influenced the nature of American Jewish life and culture decisively. This massive Southern and Eastern European immigration came to an end with the promulgation of the Johnson Act in 1924 which effectively shut the door of Illis Island National Immigration Centre. During this period between 1881 to 1924 Yiddish literary culture and language made initial breakthrough into the mainstream American literary culture.

“The New Colossus,” one of the earliest and most enduring Jewish American poems by Emma Lazarus gives expression to the best side of American society, which welcomes the “tempest tossed” and “huddled masses” of Jews... “yearning to breathe Free” (qtd. in Cronin xvi). The statue of liberty, symbolizing all the values that America stands for, has on its base these stirring words of Emma Lazarus. But the true originator and the first Jewish American writer of real stature is Abraham Cahan, then editor of
political propaganda magazine and newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*. His life and work over seven decades summarises the early immigrant concerns. In *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a seminal work of its own stature, Cahan chronicled the psycho-social tensions experienced by the immigrants caught between Jewish traditions and American modernity, two inherently conflicting components of their existence. It was Cahan, who dealt with the effects of immigration and the problems associated with accommodation and acculturation in the initial stages of Jewish American literature. The inherent stigma of ‘immigrant-ness’ and the existing desire for cultural and social acceptance was the recurring theme of the early Jewish American novelists, spearheaded by Cahan. Through the *Bintel Brief* (qtd. in Cronin xvii) section of the political propaganda magazine, Cahan was instrumental in bringing into light the heartbreaking account of familial dislocation, abandonment and poverty of the immigrant population.

A marked presence of Jewish writers in what is known as the ‘American Proletarian Literature’ of the 1920s gave a fillip to the nascent Jewish American literature, as stories of appalling and exploitative sweatshop and factory working conditions were published. Its initial stages saw a reactionary mode of writing against the economic misfortune that welcomed the ‘American Dream hunting’ immigrants, along with prevalent anti-Semitic tendencies. These ‘revolutionary literature’ records the “heroism of Jews who protested the outrageous economic exploitation and their effective disenfranchisement from the American dream” (xix). Their writings were patronised by the avant-garde journals such as *The New Masses, The Comrade, The Liberator,* and *Partisan Review*; among which, both *The New Masses* and *Partisan Review* had major chunk of Jewish editors, the likes of Mike Gold, the author of *Jews Without Money*. The two pioneering Jewish American novels: Abraham Cahn’s *The Rise of David Levinsky,* and Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep*
were moral boosters to the next generation Jewish writers in their attempt to break into the mainstream American literature.

*Encyclopaedia of Jewish American Literature* in its survey of Jewish American literature opines that the “trickle of American writers” who took part in the American proletarian literature of the 1920s and 1930s became a torrent by 1950s, effectively making it the “Jewish decade of American Literature.” The post-war era thus witnessed the emergence of writers such as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth to the forefront of American Literature, heralding an era lasting from the mid 1950s to 1970s aptly termed as the “Jewish-American Literary Renaissance” (Chametsky 517-518).

These champions of Jewish American literature, coming of age after the world wars and a worldwide anti-Semitic genocide, killing around six million, ably encouraged and supported by Isaac Bashevis Singer, J.D Salinger, Grace Paley, Norman Mailer, Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok, stalwarts and mainstream writers in their own time and contexts, moved their pen with extraordinary passion to voice their concern over the themes such as alienation, ‘otherness’ and self-deception while being humorously sensitive to the existing human condition. This most mature expression of the Jewish American literary voices during the post-war period marked the transition of Jewish American fiction from an ‘ethnic voice’ to an integral part of world literature. The focus of the Twentieth Century Jewish American fiction was a passionate exploration of the conflicting pulls between Jewish tradition and assimilation, experienced by those who passed the gates of Illis Island until 1924.

Over the past few decades, Jewish American Literature has become a force to be reckoned in the mainstream of twenty first century American literature. Jewish writers in recent past have excelled in all major literary genres, though fiction predominates. The
galaxy of Jewish American authors, though not all American born, depicts the exigencies and vagaries of American life in their own unique way.

Analyzing the history of Nobel Prize winners for the last hundred years in his *100 Years of Nobel Prize*, Shalev Baruch notes that Saul Bellow was awarded Nobel Prize in literature in 1976 for the “human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work” (61). Two years later in 1978, Isaac Bashevis Singer was awarded the same for “his impassioned narrative art which, with roots in a polish-Jewish cultural tradition, brings universal human conditions to life” (Baruch 61-62).

The post-war era has seen a domination of Jewish American fiction, led by Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok, and Philip Roth. These authors, though having the same Jewish roots, all of them have their own unique and peculiar approach to their fiction writing. The trio, Bellow, Malamud and Roth could be considered as the masters of post-war Jewish American fiction, equally supported by the trio of Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick and Chaim Potok, the three writers who form an indispensable cog in the wheel of contemporary Jewish American fiction.

A close look at these writers would reveal that in spite of their diverse roots, there is a common thread that link them together and that is *Yiddiskayat* or ‘Jewishness,’ the most distinguishing feature of Jewish American literature. It is the recurring and omnipresent reminiscence of Eastern European life in the *Shtetlakh* of Jewish Pale, and the early pogroms of Tsarist Russia. The initial stages of *Yiddishkayat* in the Jewish American literature were a consistent self portrayal of the uniqueness and “chosenness”. But a gradual realization of the possible isolation, there emerged a quest for American
identity and consequently there is a paradigm shift, and assimilation and acculturation becomes a major concern.

One of the earliest concerns of Jewish American literature was its advocacy of liberal democracy. It was this that attracted most of the immigrants to embrace the gates of Ellis Island, and it is this sentiment that is reflected at the base of the statue of liberty, where the words of Emma Lazarus, one of the first Jewish Americans to write, are inscribed:

Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp! Cries she,
With silent lips. Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me (qtd.in Encyclopaedia of Jewish American Literature xvi).

This visible support to liberal equalitarian, pluralistic and democratic traditions of American society in the writings of the Jewish Americans germinated from the realization that to foster ethnic or religious prejudices against one society or religion is the easiest way to attract the same to oneself. American Jewish writers were aware of the religious and ethnic hostilities and prejudices in the Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe. They were hesitant to indulge in such exclusive prejudicial literature that would have an adverse effect on the immigrant American life.

Surveying the features of Jewish American literature, Sanford E. Marovitz in the Encyclopaedia of American literature is of the opinion that “the internecine conflict” (590) between the secular and liberalized uptown German and Sephardic Jews of earlier immigrant generation and the mostly orthodox Eastern Europeans who settled downtown on New York’s lower Eastern side, is an often discussed topic among the Jewish
American writers. The fading familial bond and associated problems faced by the immigrant community such as a partial relinquishing of Judaism remained a major concern of Jewish American literature. The rapid assimilation of the younger generation into the free and highly secular American society and culture send shocking waves to the mind of Jewish American intellectuals. The general tendency seen among the younger generation to abandon the elderly, disregard for Jewish orthodoxy in search for freedom etc., becomes the rallying point of the literary intellectuals. Anizia Yezierska, the first woman to write notable Jewish American fiction, embraced the New World in the late nineteenth century in an attempt to get out of her father’s authoritarian and orthodox rule over “an impoverished ghetto home” (Marovitz 590) in Russian pale.

Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), details how an immigrant family in pursuit of the American dream relinquished Judaism and a subsequent breaking up of Jewish family status quo, an example of which Philip Roth mentions in his *Portnoy’s Complaint* as the “Patriarchal vacuum” (42). Antin, in her autobiography, *Promised Land* gives a nostalgic representation of her life in Polotzk, where she says that “we had been trained ...and watched our days ... had been regulated and our conduct prescribed” (270). She goes on to describe the sudden change they experienced in America where “we were let loose on the street” (271), a situation in which they found themselves in, where the father having renounced his faith and mother uncertain of hers, had no creed to hold the children together. The Judaic inability to conceive ethics independent of religion, led to a laxity of domestic organization and an inversion of normal familial relations leading to friction and break up of family.

The opening lines of *The Adventures of Augie March*, wherein Saul Bellow made the public literary profession, “I am an American, Chicago born,” (1) echoes the historical moment of Jewish American literature’s trajectory from an esoteric ethnic marginality to
the mainstream American Literature and culture. It marked the emergence of the Jewish
decade of American literature, wherein the stalwarts of post-war Jewish American
literature, like Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok
along with Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow (two Jewish American Nobel
Laureates in Literature), beautifully portrayed the existing tension between tradition and
assimilation in the context of post-war prosperity and unprecedented suburbanization.
This trajectory into the mainstream could be attributed, to a great extent, to the historical
moment characterized by an overarching post-war ‘Shoah guilt consciousness.’

But it is to be noted here with a certain amount of historicity, that this mainstream
acceptance was by default, as Ruth Wisse, in “Jewish American Renaissance,” an entry in
the Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature observes that the “American
Jews were not only spared the holocaust, they unwittingly drew from the moral credit that
accrued to its victims” (190). This historical moment in the words of Ethan Goffman,
was the result of a larger American effort to “widen the circle of dominant culture” (1) in
the post war era, and the coming into prominence of Vietnam literature, Italian American
literature, Irish American and African American writings to mention the prominent few,
reflected the attempted cultural enrichment. Though post-war America was split by all
most all conceivable differences, differences of class and colour, of wealth and position,
race and ethnicity, presence of mutually opposing ideals of socialism and communism,
the era was dynamic, characterized by an abounding creative energy.

Christening 1950s as the ‘golden age’ of Jewish American Literature does not
actually repudiate the quality or the quantity of Jewish American writing prior to this
period. It is rather indicative of the coming into prominence and acceptance. An
Acceptance of the presentations of the tension between an intense desire of the Jewish
immigrants for assimilation, and an equally deep desire to maintain the historical and
religious traditions that were held so dear. The Jewish writers who dealt with these themes substantially are seen prior to 1950, like Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Mike Gold, and Henry Roth. But the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow, in the initial stages and that of Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, and Chaim Potok in the later stages constituted the Jewish decade of American literature. Even after five to six decades, the seminality of their literary works remains at the core of American literature. Notwithstanding the contributions of the galaxy of above mentioned Jewish American writers, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the triumvirate of Malamud-Bellow-Roth stays upfront till date as the stalwarts of Contemporary Jewish American literature. Therefore, a short preview of their life and works, along with their major concern would supply the necessary enlightenment into the golden age of Jewish American literature, which in turn would also adequately situate the historical context of Philip Roth’s writings.

The Polish-born-Jewish American, Nobel Prize winning short story writer and novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991) was raised in an overcrowded, poor Jewish quarter of Warsaw. In spite of being the recipient of the traditional Jewish education at Warsaw rabbinical seminary, where he was expected to be a trained Hasidic Rabbi, Singer immigrated to America following his brother Israel Joshua-a novelist. Beginning his career as a journalist for The Jewish Daily Forward, he published his first novel The Family Moskat in 1950. The English translation of the same was largely ignored though. The string of short stories that he wrote thereafter was highly appreciated. Most acclaimed among them being “Gimpel the Fool.”

Most of Singer’s novel has its protagonists romancing with multiple women, having contrasting temperaments and backgrounds. It foreshadows the contradictory forces at work in the immigrant psyche, of religious and secular, of Jewish and gentile, tradition
and modernity, of old world and new. In *Enemies, a Love Story*, he portrays Herman
Broder’s physical and psychological travails as he tries to negotiate with and manoeuvre
through his triple affairs. Such an existential conflict is a perennial feature of Jewish
American experience, which is taken up at various levels and at varying degrees by other
Jewish contemporaries.

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) born in Brooklyn, New York, to Russian Jewish
Immigrant parents, is considered to be part of the Triumvirate of Jewish American
novelists, along with Bellow and Philip Roth, who defined the face of post-war Jewish
American literature. It was the horrifying stories of Holocaust that propelled Malamud’s
pen to write about human condition: its struggle to survive against all odds.

Malamud’s dictum, “All are Jews; though few men know it,” as quoted in Leslie A
Field and Joyce W. Field’s “An interview with Bernard Malamud,” (10) speaks volumes
of his universal approach to the human struggle, and as such his stories of Jewish
suffering is to be seen as a ‘pointed metaphor’ for the human struggle. As Goffman says,
“We are born to struggle, although the Jews perhaps more” (4). Malamud used the term
‘Jews’ here to convey the ‘humanity’ and his fiction reflects the uncertainties and
absurdities of human life, though often his fiction had Jewish characters, Urban Jewish
ghetto settings, and Jewish details. The parabolic and deceitfully allegoric stories of
Malamud express the universal human condition, which is to suffer and cause suffering.

For Malamud, it is a postmodern condition, and true to the postmodern signature
characteristic, in the midst of such human condition, unlike the lamentations and nostalgic
mood of modernists, Malamud’s defence is a wry resigned humour, celebrating life in all
its absurdities and challenges. Most of Malamudian novels are examples of stack realism,
his protagonists, often tormented, guilt ridden and paranoiac. But what stands out in all of
his writings, is that he underscores the sufferings of his heroes, as they struggle against all
odds to endure it. This could be considered as a veiled acceptance of the Jewish immigrant situation with all its associated existential predicaments in the post-war era, which would be taken up more passionately by Philip Roth, the so called ‘bad boy’ of Jewish American literature.

Saul Bellow (1915-2005), a Canadian-born Jewish American writer, who immigrated to America in his early childhood, later became the flag bearer of Jewish American literature, combining the vitality of Chicago streets, with the hybrid energies of immigrant experiences, very specially that of the ‘Jewish experience.’ Beginning his career with a series of thought provoking novels, such as *Dangling Man* (1944) *The Victim* (1947), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Herzog* (1954), it was the popularity of *Herzog* and *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975) that propelled him to be the Nobel Laureate in 1976.

Notwithstanding his professed aversion to be labelled as a ‘Jewish writer’, all his protagonists, with the single exception of Eugene Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King*, are Jewish characters. Characters endowed with heroic potential in constant conflict with the negative forces of American society. The ‘Jewish Problem’ masterfully portrayed by Singer continues in the same vein in Bellow as he forges what Goffman considers to be a “hybrid identity, quintessentially Jewish and quintessentially American” (6).

That takes the research to Philip Roth; the third living American author to have his collected works published by the Library of America. Many in the contemporary literary world endorses the observation that Steven Milowit made in *Philip Roth Considered*, that, Roth has been a “victim of gross misreading” (ix). Even a casual perusal of the criticisms available on Roth’s early career reveals a rather divided and ambiguous opinion.
Roth’s early works, in particular, seems to have ignited anger among Jewish fraternity on certain issues related to cultural authenticity and Jewish ethnicity. For example, In Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth, Timothy Parrish, observes that Roth has been accused of having “compromised the ‘authenticity’ of Jewish American experience in an attempt to gain acceptance as an “American author” (1).

However, David Gooblar, another literary critic in his book titled The Major Phases of Philip Roth, makes an observation that the second generation of New York intellectuals that boasts of the presence of the likes of Philip Rahv, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Leslie Fielder in their ranks, praised Roth for his penetratingly sharp and unflattering presentation of the post-war suburban Jewish communities with its inner frictions and foibles, calling it “ferociously exact” (12). Though Harvey Swados in his Hudson Review praised Roth’s “fiendishly accurate eye for the minutiae of middle-class Jewish life” (358-9), it did not find favour with the Jewish Rabbinic group when they wrote to the Anti-Defamation League asking them, “what is being done to silence this man? Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him...” (qtd. in Roth “Writing about Jews” 204).

In this connection, it is to be noted that the probable reason for such a reaction from the rabbinic critics would have come from what Roth himself considers to be as ‘timidity and paranoia’ something which he later on reasons out in his essay “Writing about Jews” as something that might have come out his failure to uphold the expected ‘clannish solidarity’ while presenting the “new world of social accessibility and moral indifference” (208), which constituted the Rothian literary context then. An objective presentation of the contemporary world, which then had all the ingredients that could excite the promiscuous instincts of all, irrespective of being Jew or gentile, might have contributed such a critical antagonism.
However, For the past five decades, through his wonderfully rich and varied works, Roth has relentlessly attempted to present the destructive and disturbing elements shaping the American experience, as he believes strongly in the responsibility of a writer to present the “corruption and vulgarity and treachery of American public life,” (qtd. in Roth “Writing American Fiction” 169), and the cultural predicament facing the post-war generations with its social, religious and psychological undercurrents.

Here the basic assumption is that, fiction and fictional writing is not a platform to propagate the common principles and beliefs of any community, race, or religion, but it is a platform that allows both the writer and the reader to “respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day conduct; or, if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable, or even necessary to the business of living.” He further says that it is a platform where the writer first and then the reader, enter into “another layer of consciousness...an expansion of moral consciousness,” (qtd. in Roth “Writing about Jews” 195), going beyond the socio-religious and ethical strictures.

When the quality of fiction is measured in terms of ‘sanction’ or ‘disapproval’ of a particular cultural, ethnic or socio-religious group, or when the acceptability of it is based on the ‘affirmative’ or ‘negative’ attitude towards the clannish solidarity that the writer promulgate and propagate in through his fiction, then there comes the twin possibility of misrepresenting and misinterpreting, leading to an unrealistic and sometimes in human criticisms. McDaniel is of the opinion that the charges of anti-Semitism against a Jewish writer is not a strange phenomena, as any realistic presentation of the contemporary Jewish life, with its faults and foibles, have been one time or the other, accused of either holding attitudes and beliefs inimical to the community, or of anti-Semitism. It is this compulsive search for affirmative ethnic values that has contributed to the initial charges of anti-Semitism against most of the Jewish American writers which, Leslie Fielder, in
Looking at the extent to which the charges of anti-Semitism, that has gone beyond the ‘initial accolade’, in the case of Philip Roth, it becomes clear that Roth’s fiction with a social vision has gone either ‘under-read’ or ‘misread’ as there has been unwarranted ‘magnification’ of Jewish elements and a ‘minification’ of the underlying universal elements. In Roth’s presentation of the socio-cultural, moral and psychological predicaments facing the post-war era, especially in his early works, making use of Jewish characters and Jewish setting, the social vision is either relegated to the background or completely minimized. Norman Leer in this connection makes a pertinent observation in his “Escape and Confrontations in The Short Stories of Philip Roth,” saying:

Roth’s detractors chided him for drawing an unfavourable picture of American Jewish life. But they never bothered to ask whether the style of life that he portrayed was peculiarly Jewish, or whether it was a part of some Jewish American experience. And they never examined the values which Roth either implicitly or explicitly affirmed in his work. (133)

In reality both religious and ethnic considerations remain neutral in Roth’s fiction and his personal life. The observation that Mc Daniel had made long back in The Fiction of Philip Roth becomes significant here, as he had said that Roth does not bring a “strong sense of Judaistic heritage to either his fiction or his view of himself as a writer” (131). This concern is often voiced by Roth himself at various occasions where he wants his readers to focus on the ‘catholicity’ or ‘universality’ of his personhood and his fictional writings. In his 1963 symposium, later published in the Congress Bi-weekly as “Second Dialogue in Israel,” Roth unequivocally states, “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer
who is a Jew. The biggest concern and passion in my life is to write fiction, not to be a Jew.” (35) Roth’s fictional concern is a ‘human concern’ and the problematic that he deals with is a universal predicament. What his fiction tries to find out is not a ‘uniquely Jewish’ problem but rather a realistic presentation of the ‘human problem,’ presented in and through Jewish characters, due, only to his proximity and closeness with them, but with all due respect and affection to Jewish life and tradition in its goodness.

What many Jewish fraternity failed to recognize and accept, in their ‘jaundiced’ conception of a Jewish writer as a propagandist, is Roth’s “broadly humanistic rather than narrowly Jewish” (McDaniel 32) concern. His concerns are “broadly moral and social, and whose artistic vision, though rooted in the particularities of Jewish life, extents outward to the common humanity shared by all men” (32-33).

Thus, the accusations levelled against Roth as a ‘self-hating, anti-Semitic, and notorious ‘bad-boy’ of Jewish American literature, in the words of Derek Parker Royal, seem to be due to the failure of Jewish critics to go beyond the “group-specific” (10) concern, the failure to consider a ‘Jewish possibility’ from the broader perspective of being a ‘human possibility.’ Gorssbart in “Defender of Faith”, or Epstein in “Epstein”, and Portnoy in Portnoy’s Complaint, to name a few, “is not to be meant to represent the Jew or Jewry” (qtd. in Roth “Writing about Jews 201). Grossbart, for example, is depicted in the story as a ‘single blundering human being.’ Similarly, ‘Epstein is to be seen as an embodiment of the sexual laxity of 1950s, while Portnoy, “the smothered son in the Jewish joke” (PC 111), a living symbol of the guilt-stricken libidinal youths of post-war America, who struggle to liberate themselves from the suffocating parental control, whom they consider as, “outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our times” (PC 36).
Therefore, going through the early literary career of Philip Roth, one finds that his fictions have been, more often than not, marked mostly with religious and ethnic evaluations than a literary evaluation, wherein Roth’s critique of post-war humanity in the capacity of a ‘social realist’, who takes as his domain the society that he has known and experienced—which includes, but is not limited only to, Jewish life. Roth, thus, is more of a humanist, who analyses the human nature and conditions with his characteristic honesty of portrayal and authenticity of vision, looking at his characters, as McDaniel notes, “not as Jews in an ideological, traditional or metaphorical sense, but as men yearning to discover themselves by swimming into dangerous waters beyond social and familial strictures; beyond the last rope” (36).

Mark Shechner’s observation while speaking about the “Jewish Writers” in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writers*, becomes very vital to the present research, as he speaks about a general belief among Jews at large, a belief both naive and profound, that “Jewish writers are ‘their’ writers: heir to the common history, partners in common destiny, and therefore spokesman for the common will” (38).

Roth, however, is categorical in his role as a fiction writer when he says in his *Reading Myself and Others* that, “my job in a work of fiction is not to offer consolation to Jewish sufferers or to mount an attack upon their persecutors or to make the Jewish case to the undecided” (109). His concern is to explore and expose the new world of social accessibility and moral indifference that seems to tempt the pernicious instincts of human nature, with special reference to the post-war American society, which in his unromantic observation has made inroads into the Jewish minority. And Roth is not a Jewish writer who upholds the rabbinical belief that the moral crisis among Jews is to be hushed up on the basis of any timidity or paranoia, or by piously summoning up the ‘six million’ holocaust victims from 1933 to 1945.
Over five decades of cumulative literary outpourings, comprising of twenty seven engrossing novels, an autobiography, a memoir, two collections of critical essays and a number of short stories, Roth has touched upon a wide spectrum of themes, cutting across various literary genres.

His works, often an unromantic presentation of family, sex, religion and identity have become the focus of diverse academic monographs focusing on certain aspects of his writings. *The Fiction of Philip Roth* (1974) by Mc Daniel, first of its kind tries to make “inroads into the fictional world, and into the critical controversies surrounding it” (x).

Four years later in 1978, Bernard Rodger undertook yet another comprehensive study titled, *Philip Roth*, highlighting the experiments on the fictional modes so as to represent the contemporary American society, “placing his faith in realism than Judaism”(9). The study mapped Roth’s artistic odyssey, from his earliest college stories published in the literary journal, *Et Cetere* to *The Professor of Desire* (1977), all of which in his opinion had been a victim of an “over emphasis on the ethnic dimension of his characters,” (10) leading to a critical bias that overshadows his writings even today.

The idea of ‘self-definition’ as the focus of Roth’s work was the heart of the combined study of Judit Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance in the year 1981, titled *Philip Roth*, while yet another study was undertaken by Murray Baumgarton and Barbara Gottfried in 1990, *Understanding Philip Roth*, concentrating on the “moral complexities of modern experience” (7) shaped by an “awareness of the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis” (11).

Focusing on the ‘Jewish identity,’ Alan Cooper in *Philip Roth and the Jews* (1996), focuses on how Roth in his early writings grapples with Jewish past and American
identity, as his characters try to negotiate the “frustration that comes from trying to live by the myth”(8) of American dream, concentrating on the tension between survival and integration.

Steven Milowitz, in Philip Roth Considered: The Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer (2000), tries to pinpoint, what he considers as the ‘central obsessional issue,’ in Roth, which he considers as the “issue of the Holocaust and its impact on twentieth-century American life” (ix). Shuchi Agrawal, a faculty member of Amity University in one of the most recent studies on Philip Roth, A Study of Philip Roth: An American Best Seller Novelist (2011) gives an overview of Roth’s first fifteen years of literary career, beginning with Letting Go (1962) to The Professor of Desire (1977). Terming Roth’s works as “penetrating and perspective investigation,” the crux of Agrawal’s study is on the “frustrated yearnings, paralysed desires, and repressed wishes” (vii) of his characters.

Though most of Roth’s early fictional writings have been dealing with the life in, what Cooper considers to be ‘imperfect post-war world’, the literature review finds a lacunae in many of the above studies, where nothing much is said about how Roth’s penetrating and perceptive eyes have portrayed the clash of psychological forces, the socio-moral predicaments that his characters undergo as they try to negotiate their life in the post-war context.

Therefore, Steven Milowitz’s passing reference to Roth as an “intense excavator of the continuous battle between parents and children, and his disquieting focus on the terrible internal war between desire and conscience” (ix) and Shuchi Agrawals’s contention in the preface to her book, that Roth is a “relentless explorer of the deep layers of human psyche,” (vii) becomes the spring board for the present research.
The research is an attempt to explore and present Roth as a ‘social realist’ and ‘culture critic’ a champion of the art of blurring the distinction between ‘factual and fictional,’ in his impassionate and graphic representation of the existential socio-moral, psychological and religious predicaments, with special reference to the turbulently liberal post-war American society. A man who read the ‘pulse of the post-war America’ so realistically, which could be considered as a veiled revelation of the ‘pressures of the world,’ a writer who revealed through the pulls and predicaments of ‘Jewish’ characters, the angst of the post-war humanity.

On the basis of the above discussed ideas and critical assumptions, the progression of the thesis is as follows. First chapter, titled as “Disapproving Moralist versus Indulging Hedonist: The Socio-Moral Predicament,” has a double focus. It aims at, first of all, to contextualize the inherently discordant, and historically tumultuous post-war American society, and then secondly, it focuses on the predicament of the disoriented and fragmented modern man existentially situated in a world of urban anonymity, behavioural indifference and a totalitarian massing of social and religious coercion and force, in search of an existential fulfilment and self-definition. The Chapter examines how the younger generation of Jewish American characters battle it out against the familial/parental, oppression and binding forces of religious exclusivism.

The chapter then goes on to discuss how the reaction of the young generation against the malevolent and oppressive socio-moral and religious strictures leads to self-alienation, isolation which again leads to a persistent sense of guilt and emotional breakdown in the minds of those involved.

Three primary texts analysed in the first chapter, “Goodbye Columbus,” the title story from the collection of stories titled Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories.
Portnoy’s Complaint and The Professor of Desire, throws light into the quest for social mobility which leads to an ‘assimilation overdrive’, conflict between Jewish traditionalism and American liberalism, and an engaging conflict between desire and dignity respectively.

The second chapter, “Negotiating Jewish Ethnicity and American Identity: The Religious Predicament,” examines the predicament that arises, as the different strains of diasporic Judaism tries to assimilate and integrate into the mainstream ‘gentile’ culture of America. The ethos, ethics and ethnos of the traditional parents as it wages a persistent war with the values of the already assimilated or assimilation seeking younger generation forms the first part of the chapter.

The chapter aims at showing how the belief in the biblical concept of ‘chosen race’ which generated a false semblance of religious and racial superiority among the orthodox parents are being questioned by the younger generation, who seems to have learned from the exilic and holocaust past. The continuing history of diaspora, which makes the younger generation to adopt and advocate a more ‘pro-secular’ approach, leading to an intra-religious conflict becomes the focus of the second chapter.

The symbiosis attempted between Jewish ethnicity and American identity, two desirable, more importantly, two equally desirable elements in the existential context of the liberal post-war American society, and the dilemmas that arises from such a tricky negotiation is examined in the light of three primary texts, “The Conversion of the Jews,” “Eli the Fanatic,” and Portnoy’s Complaint. Implications of the Social Identity Theory, to that of, the discriminatory and prejudicial religious superiority of the Orthodox Judaism, as portrayed in the primary texts, form the concluding part of the chapter.
Through a series of compelling and engaging narrative voice, Roth has faithfully recounted the social, moral and religious predicaments as experienced by the post-war American society. In the third chapter, titled as “The Hermeneutic, Ethical and Narrative Predicament,” the research examines one of Roth’s signature characteristics, which in the words of the contemporary literary critic Royal could be termed as “the autobiographical experimentation,” (2) that attempts to blur the generic distinction between fictional and autobiographical modes of writing, which in turn seems to have ethical and narrative implications.

As seen earlier, one of Roth’s seminal remarks in Deception, that, “I write fiction and I’m told it’s autobiography, I write autobiography and I’m told it’s fiction, so since I’m so dim and they’re so smart, let them decide what it is or it isn’t” (190), forms the axis around which the chapter revolves. Beginning with the basic theory of mimesis-art as ‘representation,’ the chapter goes on to discuss how Roth’s attempt to give a realistic and objective representation of the ‘self’ often infringes the right of the ‘other,’ as ‘self’ is always ‘relational.’

Comingling of facts and fiction, autobiographical and fictional, and the literary process of ‘discrimination and selection’ along with the ethical ramifications of selecting materials for the fictions of self-exposure become the skeleton around which the third chapter is developed. To this purpose, the two primary texts that the research makes use are, The Facts and Patrimony, an autobiography and a memoir respectively.

The conclusion, which attempts to review the thesis in total, presents the major findings of the research, while presenting some of the loopholes that exist in the critical assessment of Rothian oeuvre. It also discusses how his realistic social critique has been misunderstood and misinterpreted as anti-Semitic and ‘self-hating’. The research
concludes by saying that Roth’s socio-moral indictment of the post-war Jewish American milieu, could be seen as a micro presentation of a macro-universal concern, and thus presents Roth as ‘social realist’ and ‘culture critic.’ The concluding section ends with a short discussion on certain areas for further research, avenues that are available for deeper critical analysis and research.
Chapter I

Disapproving Moralist versus Indulging Hedonist: The Socio-Moral Predicament

Americans in the ’60s are seeking to live by two completely contradictory moral codes. Maintaining their allegiance to the traditional morality of monogamy, fidelity, self-sacrifice and the sublimation of sexual energies, Americans are almost sanctimonious about those “needs” and “rights” that include the licence to experiment with every sort of sexual and sensuous behaviour dictated by the most primitive instincts and passions. Walking about in a fallen world, with these two Edens warring in their heads, modern Americans are made borderline schizophrenics.

-Albert Goldman, (1969)

It is said, that one of the most dubious conventions of literary thought is the use of historical categories or periodisation. Such periodisation in the words of Robert Kiernam in his American Writing Since 1945 is akin to the practice of positing an age as, a “monolith neatly circumscribed and of unified character” (1). However, the reflective and often fictional rendering of lived experience of an age by an author, time and again, depends on the point of view that he/she assumes, on the national life of a country or a community, than its suitability to the literary categorization of a particular period. Therefore, more often than not, what gives texture to the intellectual response of a writer, is the social, political and cultural development of the contemporary context, than the period itself. Often the predominant mood of the socio-cultural entity will find its expression, be it the glorification of the socio-cultural ethos or the symptomatic socio-cultural disarray, depending upon which dominates the other, in the literature of the time, leading to the nullification of any strict compartmentalization and monolithic characterization.
In this context, Kiernam, places Philip Roth to a generation of American writers, more concerned with the emotional dynamics of the Jewish rearing, and thereby giving a realistic but fictional voice to the “Jewish libido as it wages a losing battle with guilt, sexual confusion and thraldom to the family,” (35) with special reference to the post-war America. The formal end of wartime hostilities among the world countries actually saw the emergence of a new conflict that shaped the socio-political life in the United States of America, beginning with the decade long political and ideological battle with Russia, popularly known as the ‘Cold War’.

The post-war era brought about dramatic changes in American society and culture, the rapid and extensive growth of the suburbia being one of the most outstanding developments. The movement of white residents to the newly built suburban ‘Levittowns’, an attractive alternative for the cramped central city locations and apartments of New York City, for example, saw an increasing number of immigrants replacing them in the cities. The ‘publishing revolution’, the rapid expansion of educational system, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, to mention a few agents that equally contributing to the socio-cultural change in their own respective area.

The dark shadows cast by the Great Depression of the 1930s, the utter dismay of the World Wars etc, were partially replaced by the growing prosperity of the late 1940s, which saw the publication of many popular self-help manuals, asking Americans to ‘stop worrying and start living,’ relying on the ‘power of positive thinking’. Though it promoted the idea that prosperity, success, and happiness were within the easy reach of all Americans, writers and playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer etc., presented a realistic, not so rosy picture of American life. The Glass Menagerie (1945) by Williams for example, dramatically presented the forlorn world of
unfulfilled promises and lost hopes, while *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller dramatized the hollowness of the ‘American Dream’ of success and prosperity for all.

The explosion of rock ‘n’ roll, popularised by television, profoundly affected the social fabric of the post-war era, which in the opinion of Susan Belasco and Linck Johnson in *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature* created “tremors of restlessness and discontent” (1048), which shook the American life and culture in the mid-1950s. Allen Ginsberg’s poem, *Howl* (1955) often called the “manifesto of the Beat Generation” (Belasco and Linck Johnson 1050) and the graphic depictions that Jack Kerouac and William S. Burrough, the self proclaimed voices of Beat Generation, presented of an urban underworld of crime, drugs and homosexual activities, paved the way for the ‘hippie’ counter culture of 1960s. Discontents in upper-middle class suburbia, presented by John Updike and the biting satires on American family and its consumerist tendencies by Edward Albee, completed a realistic picture of the post-war American life and culture.

The World War II with its attendant horrors of holocaust and atom bombs forced the contemporary writers to develop a language, literary forms and styles capable of representing the reality of a radically altered modern life and experience. The post-war American fiction in general underwent a sea change in comparison with its pre-war counterpart. It profoundly affected the intellectual ambience of America, showcasing a tremendous change in themes and attitudes, forms and techniques, revealing a confusion of purpose, uncertain identities and an extensive abandonment of traditional authority. The fluidity and formlessness of the post-war society, giving no traces of the comforting assurances of stability and order, makes the artist incapacitated in giving exact expression to the chaotic and bizarre existential experience constantly bombarding his artistic
imagination. Philip Roth makes the following observation regarding the incoherent and discordant nature of the post-war reality in *Reading Myself and Others*, where he writes,

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meagre imagination. (120)

An ever present vulnerability and precariousness being the only certainties, the post-war writers including Philip Roth tried to explore what Malcolm Bradbury in *The Modern American Novel* regard as “the predicament of disoriented modern man in a world of urban anonymity, behavioural indifference, and the totalitarian massing social force” (131). The normative values that are imposed on the individual by the repressive society and religion with its multifarious modes of coercion, an intimidating force institutionalized right from the family, forces the young generation to react against the dehumanizing environment around him. The modern man in search of what Hassan considers in his *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* as the search for the “existential fulfilment, that is freedom and self-definition” (31), finds himself / herself in quagmire of unintelligibility and helplessness.

The predicament is made very clear by Philip Roth, wherein he presents his characters in search of freedom, individuality and self identity, attempting to, “cut loose from what binds and inhibits them, battling against the oppressiveness of family feeling and the binding ideas of religious exclusiveness” (RMO 8). What often happens in such self assertion against the malevolent and oppressive strictures, be it familial, social or religious, is alienation and isolation, leading to an emotional breakdown in the character.
This imbalance in the protagonist can take two forms, either, an excessive verbalization, or a non-verbal awareness. Both this leads to the formation of guilt and a consequent withdrawal. An example of this excessive verbalisation tendency, as a vent for the emotional and psychological imbalance that the post-war individual experiences, can be seen in Bellow’s *Herzog* where the excessive verbalization takes the form of a series of “never-to-be-send letters to news papers, friends and relatives, people in public life, and even to the dead” (1). These letters which he never intends to be either send or read by anybody, speaks volumes of the imbalanced psyche of Herzog, which Usha Mahadevan’s essay, “From verbalization to non-verbal awareness: a study of Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*” considers as reflection of a “torn sensibility—a sensibility in conflict with itself” (18). This torn sensibility and a kind of psychological stress, is clear from Herzog’s remarks about his scribbing, wherein he fearfully acknowledges that “there is someone inside me. I am in his grip” (2).

This verbalization, caused by often by a turmoiled reminiscence of the past, which Mahadevan considers as a “self-devised strategy,” (18) from the part of the protagonist to find a relief, a release from the state of psychological stress and remorse he feels about his self-assertion, search for individuality, and freedom, reveals the characteristic nature of what Hassan calls a “victim-hero” (31). Whereas, in Bellow’s *Adventures of Augie March*, we have the example of the second mode of heroic response, the ‘self-asserting’ hero, refusing to be victimised by the external forces that binds him. But in general, what we find in Bellow is that, his characters either are the ‘victimised’, who indulges in excessive involuntary verbalization, or a ‘self-asserting’ hero who fights tooth and nail against the dehumanizing elements, representing the deepest fears and strongest hopes of contemporary world, respectively.
On the contrary, what we find in Roth is an intermingling or a blending of the two, the victimized and the self-asserting, which Hassan describes as the “rebel-victim” (31), a typical post-war American fictional hero who, according to Mc Daniel “combines in one single paradoxical figure both the victimized hero and the self-asserting hero” (9).

Roth’s Portnoy, for example replaces the excessive verbalizational tendency of Herzog with ‘excessive masturbation’ and a ‘licentious life with Shikses,’ - often a derogatory term used by the Jews to refer to non-Jewish woman - taking the role of a ‘rebel.’ Portnoy, for instance, masturbates constantly, down the ‘toilet bowl’, into the soiled clothes in the laundry hamper, on the corridor to the lavatory, distant balcony seats, on a cored apple, and to empty milk bottles, and even on a piece of liver that his family will eat later. By the end of “[his] freshman year of high school”, (PC 18) he becomes a master of masturbation, setting new records for himself, “before meals, after meals, during meals” making himself “Raskolnikov of jerking off” (PC 18, 20). His licentious life with Shikses apparently signifies his rebelling nature, as he seeks escape from the suffocating familial coercion through entertaining fantasies about sex with Gentiles, and indulging in it on a regular basis. However, both are done in constant fear and guilt, and this fear and guilt makes him what it means to be a ‘victim.’

What is to be noted here is, at the end of all the rebelling and self assertive indulgence, the combined forces of fear and guilt leads even the rebel-hero, Portnoy to the couch of Spielvogel, for a psychological session. He goes to the psychologist with a torn sensibility, exacerbated by a sense of persistent guilt, leading to a sense of ‘falling apart’, a sense of powerlessness, rootlessness, loneliness and alienation, typical of what Mark Shechner’s essay “Jewish Writers” considers as “the modern condition” (198). In almost all of Roth’s early characters, one can find a combination of ‘active self-assertion’ and a ‘passive victimization’ in dealing with the incomprehensible existential reality, which
Balbir Singh in his book *The Fictions of Philip Roth* regards as example of those characters who in his opinion are “refusing to be victimized and striving vehemently to assert themselves even after being thwarted by the hostile outside forces” (10). In the process of negotiating their existential condition, the characters find themselves in a quagmire of reconciling the desire for individual freedom, and a more compelling desire to observe what Singh consider as the “familial and social,” (10-11) leading to an utter psychological breakdown, needing recourse to Freudian Psychoanalysis.

Across the wide spectrum of his early novels and short stories, Roth portrays an array of somewhat homogenous characters that are in the midst of emotional, spiritual, sexual and cultural predicaments, characters who are victims of debilitating sadness and frustration, leading to isolation and alienation. *Portnoy’s Complaint*, is a lengthy monologue uttered by Alex Portnoy, a thirty-three year old Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities, to his psychoanalyst, Dr Spielvogel, reflecting upon the people and events that have shaped his disconcertedly unhappy life. Here he seeks a release from his ‘endless childhood’ when he makes his passionate and emotionally charged outburst saying:

> Doctor, I can’t stand anymore being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me whole!

> Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publically pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough! (PC 37)

In the early works of Roth, one finds Roth satirizing the excess of Jewish parents, especially of the smothering mothers, who consider their aspiring and secularized sons as fifteen-year-olds, regardless of their age and accomplishments, presenting a glaring generational divide culminating in conflicts and rebellious behaviour among the younger
generation. The excessive parental control, interfering even in their private spheres, leads to rebellion followed by guilt. Portnoy’s recollections of his mother’s instructions on “pissing standing up” (PC 132) and having a mother who patrols the six room apartment the way a guerrilla army moves across its own countryside, saying, “there’s not a single closet or drawer of mine whose contents she hasn’t a photographic sense of,” (PC172) is expressive of his extreme disapproval of such parental interferences. He confides to his psychoanalyst what he considers to be the root cause of the existential predicament that he is in. He says:

Listen, this may well be the piece of information we’ve been waiting for, the key to what determined my character, what causes me to be living in this predicament, torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience, and a conscience repugnant to my desires. (PC 132)

This cycle of excessive parental control, coupled with a religious sanctioning of such familial coercion leads the aspiring young generation to reactionary indulgence in prohibited territories with its accompanying guilt consciousness which again is caused by a metaphoric ‘private pulling of putz’ (PC 37) by Portnoy, an attempted entry to ‘suburban Short Hills’ (GC 49) by Neil Klugman and running after “behemoth breasts and a no less capacious behind” (PoD 28) by David Kepesh. Here what one finds is an improbable co-existence of a ‘disapproving moralist and an indulging hedonist’ in Rothian characters who are in a perennial Shakespearean predicament of ‘to be or not to be’.

This predicament manifests itself in the individuals, within the family between individuals, and in the society between groups, and each of these are mutually inter-related and one leading to the other. It has socio-moral and religious implications. These
three components express itself in the post-war generation caught between the highly 
hypothetical ‘American Dream’ with its promise of freedom, success, equality, and the 
assured identity and solidarity assured by the ‘tradition-bound ethnic affiliation.’ The 
young generation in search of the American Dream of individual freedom, success and 
prosperity finds themselves caught between two equally desirables, the desire to maintain 
a delineated sense of identity and the desire to blend oneself into the mainstream 
American society that promise a life of freedom and unmatched opportunity.

In the family, The generational divide that existed between the young and old 
assumes a peculiar status as the young generation finds that a sense of American identity, 
accompanied by the American dream, is extremely desirable, and for some it appeared 
even as or more desirable as the Jewish identity itself. But the conflict arises when the 
young Klugmans and Portnoys tries to hold on to both the ‘Jewish’ and the ‘American’ 
identities, when they try to blend ‘tradition’ and ‘freedom’ leading to a dodging situation, 
of either the adoption and assimilation of one, or an absolute rejection of the other. It is 
ironic that an absolute assimilation of either of the two mutually exclusive identities leads 
to an unavoidable alienation from the other, creating a sense of guilt. The conflict 
pervades each and every sphere of their lives, as they are unable to resolve the conflicting 
desire, to make a definitive choice between the desire to assimilate and the pressure to 
assert their ethnic and religious identity.

Judaism, over the centuries had a history of assimilation at various levels and 
degrees, but the post-war America saw a widespread abandonment of the ‘tradition-
bound’ Orthodox Judaism by the second generation Jewish Americans who were in 
search of the American Dream. This led to a three way conflict; between Americanized 
Jews and his/her traditional parents, between the believing Jews and the secularized Jews, 
and finally between the young assimilated Jews and their insular parents.
In all these what we see is that, the two focal points where the predicaments or conflicts arise mainly, is in the context of family and of religion, and it leads to an isolation which the protagonists tries to surmount either by sublimation or by reaction formation, akin to some of Freudian defence mechanisms. This isolation from family and religious community leads to psychological dysfunction and social maladjustment, leading them to Psycho-analytical sessions, a signature characteristic of the post modern world of fractured identity and sensibility. Except Neil Klugman, both Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh, two other major characters who become the victims of such predicaments ultimately take recourse to such sessions to bring them back to normalcy. Roth’s own personal experience with psychoanalysis becomes one of the reasons for the critical implication of self-referencing, a major contributory factor of Roth’s fictions being branded as ‘autobiographical,’ an area that would be taken up in the third chapter of the research.

However, the adaptation of American identity with its pleasures and privileges, which the younger generation immigrants attempts, in the opinion of the elders, entails a subversion of ethnic identity and traditional values. This creates a conflict in the mind of the younger generation Rothian heroes, who yearn and aspire, a persisting feeling that they are either denied of their life, or have become the victims of a truncated range of lives. In the words of Alex Portnoy, they are “living in the middle of a Jewish joke” (PC 36), even at the age of thirty-three, “sinking beneath an ocean of parental relentlessness” (PC 111) struggling against the odds to be ‘the centre fielder’ of one’s own life.

In the present chapter, the research focuses on the socio-moral existential predicament that the post-war Jewish American generation faced, as portrayed in some of the early works of Philip Roth. In Albert Goldman’s, essay “Portnoy’s Complaint” by Philip Roth looms as a wild blue shocker and the American novel of the sixties,” he is of
the opinion that the early works of Roth focuses fiercely, “as intimate as the mirror on the bathroom wall,” on the life of middle-class America in the post-war years, for the most part, in the American Jewish community where “all the traditional values were being submerged in the scuffle to obtain the good things of material prosperity” (61).

Such a predicament assumes significance in the wake of an all out effort from some of the orthodox Jewish sections to embrace the materialistic and secular culture of the post-war era. One of the distinguishing marks of the era being, a tangible rise in the number of upper-middle-class families, coupled with the surging tendency among the young Jewish American immigrant generation, that many critics consider as an ‘assimilation overdrive.’ In most such cases, more often than not, it necessitated an outright abandonment of traditional Judaism in favour of social mobility and individual freedom.

The Americanized upper-middle-class families with its characteristic materialism, class consciousness, feeble morality and luxurious living on the one side, and the young generation aspiring socio-economic upward mobility, yet rooted in Judaist adherence and strict ethnic affiliation on the other, provided the perfect setting for the emergence of this quagmire, which becomes the raw-material for Rothian realism and social critique. The socio-moral predicament occurs mostly when a physical, psychological and geographical movement is attempted from the middle-class to the upper-middle-class, as it has social and moral implications.

Most cases the vociferous inclination for secularization and assimilation is seen more among the younger generation and it mostly clashes with the values held by the more traditional parents. Often, the tension that arises from the desire for assimilation and Americanisation, and the pressure exerted by the traditional parents against it, leads to a
generational conflict. The over-suppressed young generation’s anger and angst gives way to subversive and hedonistic indulgences. But being brought up in an orthodox Jewish morality and ethnicity, even the reactionary proclivities of the younger generation is often accompanied by a lingering sense of guilt, making the conflict emotionally intense and psychologically engaging.

The research in this chapter focuses on two aspects of the socio-moral predicament. Firstly, the conflict arising out of the attempted social mobility and its moral implications, and secondly, the powerlessness and alienation that the younger generation experiences at the hands of the traditional parents, and the hedonistic tendencies which the younger generations indulges in as a counter-act. What is to be noted here in both cases is the overarching sense of guilt that troubles the characters in question, as they often vainly try to reconcile idealism with materialism, moralism with hedonism, and dignity with desire.

The predicament arising out of the attempt to embrace the materialistic culture of the upper-middle-class, as in the case of Neil Klugman in “Goodbye Columbus,” the generational divide and the consequential reactionary hedonistic indulgences as a means of self assertion as seen in the case of Alexander Portnoy in Portnoy’s Complaint, and the psychological breakdown resulting from the conflict between dignity and desire as portrayed in the case of David Kepesh in The Professor of Desire provide the basis for the research in this chapter.

Roth’s first book, Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories, comprising of an eponymous novella and a collection of five short stories, was a great critical success, and Joseph Epstein, editor of The American Scholar, vouches for Roth’s brilliance by saying that his literary debut was “second in modern America perhaps only to that of Delmore
Schwartz” (qtd. in Epstein 62). The sharpness of perception with which Roth details the nature and texture of social scenery of the post-war era, with a dangerously funny sense of mimicry, has in the past elicited both harsh criticisms and enthusiastic commendations, in plethoric abundance.

Timothy Parrish, in his essay “Introduction: Roth at mid-career” is of the opinion that Roth’s portrayal of Jewish characters in “Goodbye Columbus” has “excited the anger of many Jewish readers who accused him of exploiting Jewish-American culture in order to gain acceptance as an American author”(1). Critics such as Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe applauded Roth’s great talent. Howe in his Critical Essays on Philip Roth for example, says that Goodbye Columbus “bristled with a literary self confidence such as few writers two or three decades older than Roth could command” (229).

However, what many considers as his moral realism-a tirade against the emerging Jewish Bourgeoisie with their socio-moral and religious values, a realistic response to the human existential condition as it is manifested in the contemporary America, has not gone down well with the more traditional Jewish authorities and critics. In Reading Myself and Others, Roth quotes one of the protesting Rabbis, asking the anti-defamation league, “what is being done to silence this man?” (160) The Rabbi is quick to propose the solution too as he continues, “Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him” (RMAO 160). Here the rabbinic solution gives insight into the anger and angst of the post-war generation orthodox Jews who were threatened by Roth who held a realistic mirror to their hitherto unquestioned socio-religious masking.

But what emerges from these simplistic rabbinic accusations and emotional outbursts seems to be more of an ethnic and religious nature than that of any literary concern. It becomes evident in the words of Samuel Osherson, a Jewish scholar, when he
opines in his Rekindling the Flame: the Many Paths to a Vibrant Judaism, that, “such stories were OK as long as they were confined to a Jewish audience, Roth’s sin was that he wrote a best seller, and showed our dirty laundry to the goyim” (32). Even when he accepts it as a best seller, rabbi is offended because it presents the Jewish foibles to the gentile audience.

But given the socio-cultural background of post-war American life, a religiously and ethnically neutral reading of Goodbye Columbus and other stories reveals that it is more of a realistic presentation of, and an unflattering indictment of, the nouveau riche Jewish-upper-middle class assimilation overdrive. Neil Klugman, an ordinary Jewish boy’s valiant effort to associate himself with the Patimkins, an Americanized Jewish family, its initial pleasures and the ultimate self-realization of his lower-middle-class roots, the incompatibility and the moral predicament associated with it forms the subject of ‘Goodbye Columbus’, the novella. His effort-taking association with the ritzy ‘Short-Hills’ requires a more painful disassociation with ‘Newark’. For Roth it is symbolic, having social, ethnic and moral overtones, than mere geographical dimensions.

Neil Klugman, a resident of the lower-middle-class neighbourhood of Newark, educated in Newark colleges of Rutgers University, employed at the Newark Public Library, has everything to do with Newark. It is a pleasant surprise for Neil, when he is introduced to the suburban materialistic world of ‘Short Hills’ through his eventful summer romance with Brenda Patimkin, in the words of Halio, a “rich, spoiled and smart, if somewhat short-sighted...” (14), Radcliffe student, who appears to be a “practical girl,” (GC 14) right from the start.

The Patimkins, a typical post-war nouveau riche middle-class, materialistic and consumerist family, which in the words of Alan France makes all out effort to “distance
themselves from their ethnicity and lower-middle-class roots in Newark” (84) in their
desire to identify themselves with the national, largely gentile elite, symbolized by the
suburban Short Hills, that rose hundred and eighty feet in altitude above Newark,
becomes the focal point of Roth’s perceptive eyes. This conscious distancing from the
lower-middle-class status of Newark is evidenced when Brenda disassociates herself from
Newark when she says, “we lived in Newark when I was a baby” (GC 17) and thereby
openly saying that they (Patismkins) have moved on socially, and that they have already
achieved the geographical distancing from their past.

Over and above the geographical distancing, The Patismkins have achieved or are in the process of achieving, a certain level of physical and ethnic distancing. This is very clear from the conversation between Neil and Brenda in the sidelines of a tennis game. It is very revealing:

‘I’m afraid of my nose. I had it lobbed.’
‘What?’
‘I had my nose fixed!
‘What was the matter with it?’
‘It was bumpy.’
‘A lot?’
‘No,’ she said, ‘I was pretty. Now I’m prettier. My brother’s having his fixed in the fall.’ (GC 18)

Here what becomes clear is, that the young and assimilation aspiring generation of Brenda, have all become the prey of blind assimilation, and this desire has distanced them ethnically, socially, and culturally from all that distinguished them up until now. During the conversation between herself and Neil regarding Jewish affairs, Mrs Patismkin affirms herself as orthodox, her husband as conservative, and when it comes to Brenda, she quickly adds, “Brenda is nothing” (GC 71) meaning that the younger generations, the
likes of Brenda, has totally distanced themselves from traditional Judaism and its rituals. Mrs Patimkin lamentation is very revealing, the nostalgic past reverberates when she says with a sense of loss, “she was the best Hebrew student I’ve ever seen, but then, of course, she got too big for her britches” (GC 71-72).

The culmination of this distancing is to be seen in the fact that the young generation is not only desirous of a ritualistic distancing, but even from their racial resemblance with their parents. What Brenda says when Neil asked the reason for her brother’s nose-surgery, is very much revealing, see the conversation;

... ‘Why is he doing it?’
... ‘We all look like my father’ (GC 72).

In the opinion of Jessica G. Rabin what Roth tries to expose here, is the younger generation’s attempt to make the “inscription of ethnic identity” (288) and background as ambiguous as possible, so that the absolute assimilation that they attempt would lead to unhindered social mobility and success. The image of ‘refrigerator’ which Roth makes use to indicate the level of material alienation and consumerist culture that has taken hold of the ‘Patimkins,’ is symbolic. The “tall old refrigerator,” reminded Neil of the “Patimkins’ roots in Newark” (GC 38). Though it has retained its place even in the Short-Hills, the contents as well as the purpose have drastically changed, from that of Newark. The difference that is to be noted is that if in Newark the refrigerator was a means to preserve necessary items; the contents in Patimkin’s fridge shocked Neil, for “No longer did it hold butter, eggs, herring in cream sauce, ginger ale, tuna fish salad, an occasional corsage” (GC 39) but it demonstrated the opulence of American commodity culture, to which the Patimkins were representatives.
Roth is very graphic in his description, where he exclaims, it was as if fruit grew in their refrigerator, as it was heaped with fruits of every colour and texture. He writes:

there were greengage plums...black plums, red plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches, long horns of grapes, black, yellow, red, and cherries, cherries flowing out of boxes...and there were melons – cantaloupes and honeydews - and on the top shelf, half of a huge watermelon, a thin sheet of wax paper clinging to its bare red face like a wet lip. (GC 39)

The hollowness of the opulent Patimkin family and the *nouveau riche* middle-class that they represent, is further exposed by Roth, when he describes the basement that has a “mirrored bar that was stocked with every kind and size of glasses, ice bucket, decanter, mixer, swizzle stick, shot glass, pretzel bowl” (GC 38). The irony is that all the bacchanalian paraphernalia, that were plentiful and orderly, were actually untouched. The aluminium sink “that had not seen a dirty glass,” and over two dozen un opened bottles of ‘Jack Daniels’, a “freezer big enough to house a family of Eskimos,” (GC38-39) showcases the upper-middle-class affluence and commodity culture of 1950s, to which Neil is attracted and tries to reach out in an eventful a summer romance with Brenda Patimkin. In his effort to bypass the socio-economic boundaries that existed between himself and the Patimkins, for the purpose of consummation of his summer romance with Brenda, he has to content with a clash of value system, between that of the fragile, opportunistic and consumerist Patimkin facades with that upheld by the affluent Patimkins.

Here, Brenda becomes the representative of the Upper-middle-class value system, with its pragmatism, consumerism, sexual liberation and freedom from parental control, and all that the younger post-war generation was seeking. Stephen Wade. In his
Imagination in Transit: The Fiction of Philip Roth considers Brenda as “amazingly open, frank and receptive” and it is “her direct, untroubled ability with words and her uncomplicated showing of affection,” which attracts Neil Klugman. In Wade’s opinion, Brenda appears to Klugman as a person who is capable of saving him from the “negating world of the past, of denial and of communication through sub-texts,” (29) of the traditional Jewish family values of Newark.

Brenda’s frankness is evident when she says to Klugman, “just stating the facts... I like you,” and her matter of fact nature comes to fore when in a later episode she says, “I like the way you look... I like your body.” Not only that Brenda is open and frank, but she also expects the same from Neil when asks him, “you like mine, don’t you?” (GC 21) Neil’s answer in the negative apparently gives the impression that what he loves is not her ‘person,’ but what ‘makes’ her-her upper-middle-class status, her wealth, her American-ness, and what Wade considers to be her “open sensuality and the free and unburdened relations in leisure and sport” (29). Though Neil says, “I’m not a planner,” the conversation that they have immediately after this incident betrays his wavering and drifting nature. The conversation goes like this:

‘Do you love me, Neil?’
I did not answer.
‘Do You?’ She Said.
‘I’ll sleep with you whether you do or not, so tell me the truth.’ (GC 45)

The hedonistic and carnal desire that motivates Brenda’s Upper-Middle-class value system that confronts Neil is very clear here, and Neil is in a quagmire, whether to say yes to the pursuit of sensual gratification of the romantic proposal, or be content with his present status of being a Librararian at the Newark Public Library.
Though Neil answers in the affirmative second time, it was only with an assurance of a bright future that he affirms his readiness to love her. In answer to Brenda’s statement, “when you love me, there’ll be nothing to worry about,” Neil says, “then of course I’ll love you” (GC 45). What comes to the fore here is Neil’s preoccupation with his safe passage to a higher level of the social ladder which he expects to achieve through Brenda and the Patimkin family, though he does not approve of all that they stand for. Neil falls in love with her instinctively, much before he has a firsthand experience of the dazzling life with all its “hypocrisy, artificiality and lack of emotional depth which she has in her personality,” (qtd. in Balbir 35) an epitome of the false values which is at the heart of the contemporary American society. The weeklong stay at the Patimkins, reveals both the hollowness of the upper-middle-class values, and the “pampered and irresponsible personality of Brenda,” (Balbir 33) but by then, his emotional attachment with her has deepened to such an extent, that it becomes very difficult for Neil to extricate himself from the alluring love.

There is a lingering fear in Neil, of loosing Brenda, even at the edge of the pool, each time he dove in the water; he feared that, “Brenda would be gone” (GC 45). It is this unconscious fear of losing Brenda that makes him to wish that, “I had carried her glasses away with me, so she would have to wait for me to lead her back home” (GC 46). It is this fear that remains a motivating factor in Neil’s adapting to Patimkin’s life styles, jogging in the morning, dressing like the Patimkins, wearing, “sneakers, sweat socks, khaki Bermudas and sweat shirts” (GC 58). The association with the Patimkins not only changed his dress, but also his character and outlook. The way he conducts himself when he returns to Newark library, shows that he had learned to bully, though unwittingly. He himself is surprised at this transformation as he says, “my bullying surprised me, and I wondered if some of it had not been learned from Mr Patimkin” (GC 92).
By now Brenda has become Neil’s preoccupation even as he drives back to Newark, everything, even the objects of nature, the trees, the clouds, the grass, the weeds, reminds him of Brenda. The quick change of season is symbolic, “autumn came quickly ...leaves turned and fell overnight” (GC 92). Roth brings in the symbolic autumn fall, signalling the impending end of the summer romance. As Neil return to Newark library, he finds ‘Gauguin’-the book that he had safeguarded for the sake of the Negro boy had been “charged out finally by the jowly man” (GC 93). This is Roth’s way of presenting what is to come-Neil is going to lose Brenda, Neil’s worst fears have come true, the Diaphragm-‘the surrogate’ which he asked Brenda to procure in his dilly-dallying of a marriage proposal to her, becomes the very cause of their immediate break-up.

The series of arguments and counter arguments, Brenda’s decision to “go back to home” (GC 103) and Neil subsequently taking a train that got him into Newark, brings curtains down to the eventful summer romance with short-hills, Neil’s final thoughts, “if she had only been slightly not Brenda, ... but then would I have loved her” (GC 104), proves the assumption that though he loved Brenda the person, consciously or unconsciously, he had difficulty in accepting all that Brenda stood for, what Alan Cooper in his Philip Roth and the Jews qualifies as “the suburban leisure values of the post-war generation” (43).

In the words of Jessica Rabin, in Neil one finds a “young man who is embarking on the path of Americanization and achievement of the American dream through his association with a woman who has already made the journey” (13). Neil, though embarks upon a physical and geographical journey, assuming that the “hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven” (GC 15), does not know the socio-moral and psychological implications, and therefore is not “ready to take the responsibilities of his involvement with the Patimkin way of life.” (qtd. in
McDaniel 72) Though he struggles to cut loose, Cooper is of the opinion that he is still “restrained by his moral upbringing and cultural values” (47), and thus his life at Short Hills, and his association with Brenda, a representative of the post-war new generation, turns out to be an ‘ill-fitting suit’ like that of ‘Eli, the Fanatic,’ yet another Rothian protagonist who becomes the victim of the assimilation over-drive.

Though Klugman makes an effort to become “an insider” (GC 74), even to the extent of denouncing his family, saying, “my cousin Doris could peel away to nothing for all I cared, my aunt Gladys have twenty feedings every night, my father and mother could roast away their asthma down in the furnace of Arizona, those penniless deserters-I didn’t care for anything but Brenda” (GC 20), he realizes well before the Jewish New year that “Brenda’s or Patimkin way of life is not the answer he has been searching for” (qtd. in McDaniel 76).

Though the exotic lushness and lavishness of Short Hills promises the potential for an intellectual, economic, and sexual fulfilment, Neil’s words, “I felt like Carlota, no, not even as comfortable as that” (GC 37), betrays the socio-moral predicament that the aspiring young post-war generation undergoes. Though he embarks upon the American dream, Neil remains tentative and ambivalent in his decisions, non-committal in his relationships and thereby fails to attain the status of a ‘rebel-victim,’ a status attained by a more decisive, and more committed Portnoy, the ever controversial hero of Portnoy’s Complaint.

In Portnoy’s Complaint, a purportedly revolutionary Roth overturns hereto traditional representation of the Jewish male as repressed and crippled by various psychological imbalances. If “Goodbye Columbus,” presented a repressed, hesitant and wavering and psychologically perturbed ‘Klugman’, in contrast we find ‘Portnoy’, after a
similar initial ‘hide and seek’ approach, finally going against the traditionally sacro-sanctum ‘good Jewish boy’ image, not afraid to be ‘bad’, not afraid to be aggressive, and not afraid to be ‘Jewish’. Portnoy becomes a symbol of ‘a universal desire to be free’ at the same time painfully aware of the need to be ‘morally acceptable’. He becomes the living example of the modern man’s existential conflict between, a ‘universal desirability’ and a ‘universal morality’.

The title of the first session of the novel, “The most unforgettable character I’ve met”, speaks volumes for the fact that Portnoy, the protagonist, a psychological patient at the chamber of Dr. Spielvogel, pouring out an uninterrupted confessional monologue, has an subconscious mind which is embedded with an image of an ‘overbearing Jewish mother figure’, who is and who has been the most unforgettable and influential figure in his entire life. As far as Portnoy is concerned the smothering of his mother has conditioned him to such an extent, that he confesses, “I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise” (PC 3).

In Portnoy we have the progress of the ‘victim’ to the status of the ‘rebel’. The novel is about Portnoy, growing up in the predominantly Jewish Weequahic neighbourhood of Newark, where the “suffocating family drama” (qtd. in Brauner 44) at home leads to what Nadel qualifies as an “obsession with sexuality in various forms,” (213) an adolescent response with masturbation and adult unbuttoning of sexual adventures with Shikses. In the course of the Psychological session with Spielvogel, Portnoy pours out the causes and effects of this ambivalence toward his parents, especially towards his prying mother. Cooper is of the opinion that through these Psychological sessions that Portnoy has, he expresses the “adolescent’s defining need for separation and privacy (101), which has consistently, either been, denied or suppressed.
Neil Klugman’s predicament was caused by the ambivalent position he held regarding the socio-economic and material values that he came across during his association with the upper-middle-class household of Patimkins, and his inability either to fully assimilate or fully reject the mutually opposing claims of American materialism and Judaic morality. Whereas Roth’s more controversial hero, Portnoy’s predicament as an young boy arises from his mutually exclusive desires to be a ‘nice Jewish boy,’ of an overbearing mother, and to be “the Rashkolnikov of jerking off” (PC 20). The irony here in the case of Portnoy is that, neither of it gives him happiness, as he is plagued by a sense of guilt, a sense of “sinking beneath an ocean of parental relentlessness” (PC 111). Even his compulsive masturbation as a boy and his obsession with sexual indulgence as an adult, both his own self-manufactured way of getting over the repressions, his own way of expressing his personal freedom and self determination, all happening under the pricking surveillance of his superego, which has been ill-defined by a smothered upbringing.

It is to be noted that a conflict between the individual’s desire for freedom, and the socio-moral prescriptions of adherence and normalcy, is present everywhere. What makes Portnoy’s predicament unique is his ‘ethnicity,’ and his strict Jewish upbringing, which always comes in conflict with his attempt at gaining individual freedom, freedom from familial and ethnic supervision and control. It is this that makes Portnoy to exclaim, “Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year old boy till they die!” (PC 111)

What differentiates Portnoy from Neil Klugman, is Portnoyian aggressiveness; his attempt to get out of the smothering parental control and the binding forces of socio-moral prescriptions. His aggression and his displeasure at such smothering is expressed in
his compensatory masturbation and the sexual indulgences with gentile women, making use of them as mere object of his pleasure. But throughout his life, as he confides to his psychoanalyst, he is haunted by a sense of guilt, as there is in him a ‘cultivated sense of morality,’ as indelible mark of his Jewish upbringing. It is the same concern voiced by Balbir Singh where he notes, “through out his long uninterrupted ‘complaint’ Portnoy seems to be haunted by a gnawing sense of guilt and repression at the hands of his parents who doggedly persuade him to cultivate those ethical values which are supposedly the exclusive attributes of ‘the chosen People’ ”( 93).

The basic predicament originates when the individual’s yearning for personal freedom comes in direct conflict with the ethical compulsions that surrounds him, be it from the family or society. In Portnoy’s case, the combined forces of familial coercion and the socio-moral pressure for adherence and normalcy play havoc. The familial pressures exerted on the young Portnoyian psyche by his overbearing mother, who reminds him three times a day, “that life is boundaries and restrictions if it’s anything” (PC 79), becomes the cause of the psychological imbalance in him.

The taboos and the repressions, the hysteria and the superstitions that are constantly imparted by his mother, in her smothering love to make him a ‘nice Jewish boy’, the ever reverberating “watch-its and the be-carefuls! You mustn’t do this, you can’t do that, hold it! Don’t!” (PC 34) etc., increases the severity of his predicament, making him feel a sense of being a helpless wretch, incapable of knowing and doing anything good on his own. His conscience that has been moulded by such taboos and repressions has caused irreparable damage to his sexuality, spontaneity and courage. He is very expressive and vocal when he confides to Spielvogel, “I am marked like a roadmap
from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear” (PC 124).

Even the least deviation from any of the respectable conventions cause such inner hell in Portnoy, as his “most castrating mother” (PC 118) constantly lashing him with reproaches even for the boyish deviations from the Jewish code of conduct which she upholds, and in turn insists her son to uphold, as sacred and unquestionable. There are a series of ‘the dietary laws’ which Portnoy describes at various times during his monologue, which he considers as repressive and questionable. In the words of Portnoy one can find the guilt consciousness, and hysteria that was created even by the superstitious dietary laws, wherein, a Jew was prescribed what to eat, and what to eat with what, and what not to be eaten with what etc. These for him are ‘meshuggenesh’ – a serird of crazy and senseless laws and regulations “on top of their own private craziness.” And such laws, recounts Portnoy, “could not even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offence to God Almighty” (PC 34). The ‘milchiks’-dairy or any other food products containing milk was not to be eaten with ‘flaishiks’-food products made out of meat! As an adolescent, Portnoy feels all these dietary laws repugnant, while it is considered wholesome among the gentile counterparts. Eating French fries, in the company of his gentile friends, for example, was the cause diarrhoea, as Sophie confronts Portnoy saying, “if all you ate was what you were fed at home, you wouldn’t be running to the bathroom fifty times a day” (PC 23).

What Roth tries to do here is to show the over simplistic and superstitious explanation that the mother tries to impress upon the young Portnoy, in her attempt to keep him away from any instance of eating the ‘non-kosher’ food. Her exhortation to Portnoy, “there are plenty of good things to eat in the world, Alex, without eating a thing
like Lobster and running the risk of having paralyzed hands for the rest of your life” (PC 94), reveals the extremity of superstitious dietary laws which is imposed upon the young Portnoy, failure of which is considered to be a crime. The overriding parents, whom he considers “outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our times”, consistently created a fear and guilt conscience in Portnoy to such an extent where he says that drinking a glass of milk along with a salami sandwich “bred terror into my (his) bones” (PC 35). He goes on to say that “the fearful sense of life” that his parents constantly infused into his conscience makes young Portnoy to a secret exercise of his freedom and individuality by grabbing that “battered battering ram to freedom,” as he feels that his “wang was all I (he) really had that I (he) could call my (his) own” (33).

Portnoy recounts a humiliating incident wherein his legitimate desire to have a bathing suit with a built-in athletic support—one with a jockstrap was put down by his mother’s humiliating comment, “For your little thing?” (PC 51) What we find in the early part of his confession to his psychoanalyst is that he had a very repressed childhood, wherein his moralistic and traditional parents, especially his overbearing mother, in her over enthusiasm to make him a ‘nice Jewish by’, actually making him a rebel-victim; a rebelling youngster whose rebelling, again is under the shadow of constant sense of fear and guilt.

Roth through this presents in an unequivocal terms the post-war generational conflict that existed in the Jewish community in America; the intra-personal and inter-personal conflict, arising out of the refusal to be bound any longer by taboos which rightly or wrongly, he (Portnoy) experiences as “diminishing and unmanning” (RMAO 19). The predicament, which Roth considers as a joke (a Jewish Joke), is that for
Portnoy “breaking the taboos, be it religious, social or moral, turns out to be as unmanning in the end as honouring it” (RMAO 19-20).

Here, the research focuses on this twin conflict, the inter-personal’ and the ‘intra-personal’ conflict that goes on in the Portnovian psyche. The inter-personal conflict focuses at first on the conflict between Portnoy the ‘Jewish boy’ with his Jewish parents, and later on as a ‘Jewish adult’ with the Jewish traditions and moral prescriptions. There is a ‘conflict within the conflict’ which is a conflict which Bernard Rodgers considers as taking place between Portnoy ‘The Disapproving Moralist’ (34), and Portnoy ‘The Indulging Hedonist’, making it the ‘intra-personal’ conflict. The examination of this twin conflict is based on the hypothetical assumption that the above is actually a micro-presentation of a universal social reality, and thus the so called Jewish predicament is actually the post-war American predicament, a predicament having universal ramifications, the predicament between a universal ‘eros’ and a universal ‘thanatos’ that becomes an existential reality of the postmodern man.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) identifies two drives in humans that both coincide and conflict within the individual and among individuals. They are ‘Eros’ and ‘Thanatos.’ Eros is the drive of life, love, sex and creativity while thanatos is the drive of aggression, destruction, violence, sadism and death. Eros is associated with all the positive emotions and pro-social behaviour, while thanatos is associated with all the negative emotions and anti-social behaviour. Freud held that the conflict between eros and thanatos is an existential fact and a balancing act. What Roth presents in his characters is the predicaments that arise while performing a balancing act between these two opposing elements.
The novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* is narrated in six sections, employing a totally hitherto unchartered literary terrains of a psychological monologue, addressed to Dr. Spielvogel, by Alexander Portnoy, a thirty-three-year old Jewish lawyer and Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the city of New York. The mock definition placed at the beginning of the book as an encyclopaedic entry gives a clue to the content of the novel. The entry is about a psychological disorder named by Dr. Spielvogel as “Portnoy’s Complaint”, which is a “condition, in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature” (PC 1). The fact of the matter is that all the “instances of sexual aberrations such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto eroticism, oral coitus etc., offers no genuine sexual gratification, as there is an overriding sense of shame and dread of retribution” (qtd. in Nadel 214), all caused and precipitated by the ‘generational divide’ that came to the forefront both in the familial and societal spectrum in the post war America.

“The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Ever Met”, describes the earliest impressions Portnoy has of his Parents, growing up in the Weequahic neighbourhood, as it is narrated in the sidelines of a session with his psychologist. Portnoy sums up his best recollection of his parents in two characteristic words, “her ubiquity and his constipation” (PC 5). Here what he does is to give an experiential description, reflectively recollecting the combined memories of his childhood and adulthood relationship with his overbearing, smothering and ubiquitous mother Sophie, and down-trodden and constipated father-Jackie. To cite an observation from Shuchi Agarwal, in *A Study of Philip Roth: An American best seller Novelist*, it “represents portnoy’s adolescent discovery of masturbation as a king of rebellion from the suffocating drama of his home life” (41). What Portnoy does during his psychological session is to impress upon Spielvogel is that,
all the clichés of spoiled Jewish boyhood are veritable; that of the overpowering, overindulgent and smothering mother and an ineffectual father.

Though there is a postmodern tendency of intra-textual vacillation and alternation between childhood and adolescent memories, ‘Whacking off’, the second session of the novel is predominantly a conscious retelling of his adolescence. He confides to Spielvogel that during his adolescence he was setting new records for himself, whacking off in the school corridor to lavatory, distant balcony seats in the Saturday afternoon movies, on the orifice of cored apples during the family association meetings, in to the empty milk bottles in the basements, on to a piece of liver from the butcher shop, on to the dirty socks as receptacles upon retiring and awakening. His adventures, reaching to new heights, and as we have seen earlier, he calls himself, “the Rashkolnikov of jerking off” (PC 20). The irony here is that all these are done perpetually in dread that his “loathsomeness would be discovered” (PC 18).

Portnoy’s confession to his psychologist, that, in the midst of all these repulsive laws and parental supervision, the only thing that he could call his own was, his own penis and therefore he grabbed that “battered battering ram to freedom”, as he could not stand any more being frightened like this over nothing. He prayerfully implores Dr. Spielvogel to extricate him from this “Jewish joke”, and “bless him with manhood, make him brave, strong and whole” (PC 37). He is disgusted with the hypocritical way he conducts his life and says, it is “enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz!” (PC 37-38). Roth seems to explain the underlying cause of the reactionary behaviour of his protagonist, as portnoy’s finds that the only thing that is under his control is his penis, even though he was constantly watched.
Roth further opens up the generational divide, especially in the socio-religious sphere and the family tensions that emerge from such a gap that has not been bridged, though the times have changed. It appears as though the process of assimilation and acculturation has not gone down well with the Sophies and the Portnoys. The indelible marks of Jewish orthodoxy and traditionalism still keeps them separated and disassociated from goyim, as they strongly believe in their own version of the “chosen race” story, while constantly reminding the recalcitrant younger generation who are desirous of assimilation and complete identification, of the “wonderful history and heritage of the saga of his (your) people” (PC 63), even in America, the land of individual freedom and opportunities.

The kind of social, religious and ethnic maladjustment that caused anger and reaction among the younger Portnoy is further explained by what happens to Harold, fondly called as Heshie, a handsome Jewish athlete who was everything for everyone. To quote the words of Sophie, Portnoy’s mother “if a girl had Heshie’s dark lashes, believe me, she’d be in Hollywood with a million-dollar contract” (PC 53). While being one of the stars of the track team, Heshie was drafted into the Army. He decides to become engaged to a blond goyische beauty named Alice Dembosky, the head drum majorette of the Weequahic high school band, whose faculty and student body were about ninety-five percent Jewish. The prejudicial Jewish parents of Heshie brought calamitous happenings in the household, all because Alice was a Shikse! There emerges a civic jealousy that Alice a goyim could have assumed a position of such a visibility in a school predominantly Jewish.

The Jewish parents always tried to cultivate a general idea in the Jewish boys that athletics, football etc., were meant for the goyim, and such ridiculous pleasures and
satisfactions should make only the gentiles happy. Heshie’s love affair with Alice is thwarted by his scheming father, Hymie, when he dissuades Alice from the affair with a fabricated story of blood cancer for Heshie, and a consequent unsuitability for a married life. Though Heshie is resilient, even to the extent of raising his hands against his father, so as to break the wall of ethnic prejudice, fatefully he is killed in the Korean War! Death of the first rebel-victim! Roth through the story presents a martyr of the highly ethnocentric Orthodox Judaism. It is very evident in the words of the Jewish sympathisers who consoled the grieving family with the following words: “at least he didn’t leave you with a Shikse wife. At least he didn’t leave you with goyische children” (PC 60). In the words of these Orthodox Jewish Sympathisers we have an instance of What Henry Tajfel considers to be the ‘In-group’ favouritism and ‘Out-group’ derogation, which forms one of the basic assumptions of the Social Identity Theory, and that would be taken up in detail in the Second Chapter.

Heshie’s attempt to break the ethnic barrier which meets with a fatal end is taken up by the new generation protagonist Portnoy, who questions the hollow orthodox religious superiority, as he doesn’t allow himself to be cornered by such unreasonable religiosity or ethnic superiority. He becomes the voice of the younger aspiring generation as he confronts his father, questions the credibility of their claims and proclaims that he would rather be “a communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue” (PC 74). Portnoy is sick and tired of hearing goyiche this and goyiche that! If it’s bad it’s the goyim, if it’s good it’s the Jews! Calling such an attitude as barbaric, he contends that it is rather the expression of Jewish insecurity than Jewish superiority. The Jewish narrow mindedness is such that the “very first distinction I (he) learned from you (them), I’m (he is) sure was not night and day, or hot and cold, but goyiche and Jewish” (PC 75). His contempt for
such false hypocrisy and false religiosity finds the ultimate expression in his words calling them, “narrow minded Schumcks (PC 76).

Here comes the emergence of a generational conflict. The older generation Jews represented by Sophies and Hymies, take undue pride in the ethnic and religious distinctions to the exclusion of others, (Gentiles) while the new generation Jews such as Heshies and Portnoys feel such distinction as disgustingly useless categories. What the new generation Jews wants is to be an acculturated and assimilated human being, sans religious and racial prejudices that actually had become the cause of the holocausts in the past. This outrageous tone in Portnoy is actually the expression of the angst of the new generation Jews, that seeks religious toleration and ethnic equality which alone, in their opinion will change the saga of the suffering Jews.

The generational divide and the acrimonious discord that exist between the two, the orthodox and the liberal, assimilated and the unwilling, the pure and the contextualized becomes the locus of Portnoy’s Complaint, while it serves as a perfect setting for the exploration of new generation tendency of extreme sexual indulgence as the sole means of letting go off their pent up feelings against the ultra-orthodox Jewish upbringing, Jewish taboos and Jewish religious bigotry. A series of masturbatory vignettes and sexual adventures that Portnoy employs, first as an adolescent and later as an Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities, as a means to assert himself, always under the shadow of his mother, lands him at the couch of Spielvogel, trying to get out of the conflicting claims of a ‘disapproving moralist and indulging hedonist’. Portnoy, like Neil Klugman in Goodbye Columbus is caught up in between two desirables-the Jewish morality and the indulging and alluring American liberalism.
The recurring image of his mother Sophie, with a long stainless steel bread knife, with saw like teeth, ready to castrate him for the slightest non-compliance or deviation in any form, makes Portnoy incapacitated to stand against the matriarchal domination, which, in the words of Cooper remains as a stumbling block in the “adolescent’s defining need for separation and privacy,” (101) leave alone the superstitious and discriminatory dietary laws. Portnoy finds himself in “the suffocating labyrinth of guilt and fear of retribution searching desperately for any redeeming light,” (Balbir 104) incapacitated, smothered and monitored, the young Portnoy learns to “substitute masturbation for assertion,” (Cooper 101) as he confides to Spielvogel that “half of my waking life spent locked behind the bathroom door, firing my wad ... perpetually in dread that my (his) loathsomeness would be discovered” (PC18). But the series of hilarious masturbatory indulgences in his adolescence as an effort to assert his manliness, or the impersonal sexual indulgences with Sikshes in his desire to overcome the castrating fear of his mother figure, does not give him any solace but rather makes him more dejected and disheartened.

What is highlighted in his behavioural digressions is Roth’s presentation of the ‘rebelling’ or ‘asserting’ hero, making valiant attempt to break the ethnic taboos and matriarchal overbearing. Ironically, he is in constant dread of being caught and subsequent retribution. This fear of being found out exacerbatates his mental agony, making him ‘victim’ of socio-moral pressures.

The adolescent desire for self-identity, self-assurance, poise and self-control is very well brought out by Roth, by the image of softball game. Portnoy is good soft ball player, playing as a centre fielder for Seabees. Portnoy asks a poignantly pertinent question, “why can’t he (I) exist now as I existed for the Seabees out there in the centre
field?” (PC 72) He knows well the significance of a centre field, it is “like some observation post, a kind of control tower, where you are able to see everything and everyone, to understand what’s happening the instant it happens, ...you call, “it’s mine,” and then after it you go; for in centre field, if you can get to it, it is yours” (PC 69).

But at home there is a reversal, so, soon he adds it is unlike his home, where everything of his is appropriated by somebody else, for he says, “Oh, how unlike my home it is to be in centre field, where no one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is mine” (PC 69). What worries him is his incapacity to replicate the freedom, the self control, the self assurance, the poise with which he conducts himself in the centre field, when he is back home. Now Portnoy is at the couch of Spielvogel, imploring him to give him back the “ease, self-assurance, the simple and mental affiliation with what is going on in his life that he used to feel while being the centre fielder for the Seabees” (PC 72).

His angst is why can’t he be the centre fielder for his own life? When he can be a good centre fielder for Seabees, why can’t he be so in his life? His attempt to be the centre fielder of his own life, which is thwarted by the socio-moral coercion, exerted jointly by his own parents and the orthodox Jewish ethnic and religious prescription that Portnoy tries to resist, unsuccessfully though, by his hedonistic sexual indulgences with gentile women. Ironically, even this does not give him pleasure or satisfaction, as the motherly repressions comes to the fore, making him guilty for being bad, the disapproving moralist in him emerges every time to suppress the indulging hedonist in him. This gives an intra-personal dimension to the conflict.

Throughout the novel Portnoy’s Complaint, Roth depicts Portnoy as a ‘rebel-victim, ‘a young adolescent victim of a smothering and dominating mother, who in the words of Charles E. May, attempts to use “sexuality as a weapon to rebel against
repression” (1282), though at the end he become the victim of the very same sexuality. Sexuality which he uses as a means to assert his masculinity in his escapades with gentile women turns out to be his undoing, as he becomes the victim of guilt-feeling. His affairs with Kay Campbell, ‘the Pumpkin,’ or Sarah Abbot Maulsby, ‘the Pilgrim,’ or Mary Jane Reed, ‘the monkey,’ all contributing to his fear and guilt. What is to be noted here, is that all of these relationships are impersonal and all these are “punctuated by rebellious outcries against the guilt he feels for his sexual obsessions, as he continues to try to be ‘mommy’s best little boy’” (May 1281).

If Neil Klugman postpones the marriage proposal with Brenda Patimkin, and tires to secure it safe by a surrogate-diaphragm, Portnoy is of the opinion that marriage is “a contract to sleep with just one woman,” (PC 104) for the rest of one’s life, and as such he is adamant that he will not enter into such contract. But at the same time he feels sorry and ashamed that he “hasn’t made grandparents of his mommy and daddy, while everybody else have been marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children, and buying houses, and putting down roots” (PC 100). His guilt, for not marrying and not perpetuating the family name is evident when he reports his father’s concern, ‘while all other sons have been carrying forward the family name, what he has been doing is chasing cunt.’

In the midst of his indifferent sexual indulgences with women, making use them as mere objects of his reactionary assertion, while having the responsibility as the Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities, he is in the grip of constant fear of possible newspaper headlines revealing his “filthy secrets to shocked and disapproving world” (PC 175). The fear and guilt that becomes a sand in the shoes of Portnoy, constantly pricking his conscience, is revealed in a series of imaginary and probable newspaper headlines which may read as: ASSISTANT HUMAN OPP’Y COMMISH FOUND
Mary Jane Reed, the embodiment of all his sexual fantasies, lady with whom he has most of his sexual fantasies acted out, later expresses her desire to be sexually liberated by getting married to him. He immediately abandons her. He leaves her in an Athens hotel threatening suicide. But the ‘victim’ in the rebelling Portnoy emerges no sooner than he leave the hotel, he imagines the worst, he fears yet another headline in the morning newspaper reading, “model slits throat in amphitheatre,” with a suicidal note saying, Alexander Portnoy is responsible. “He forced me to sleep with a whore and then wouldn’t make me an honest woman. Mary Jane Reed” (PC 249). Portnoy the disapproving moralist expresses his disgust at being an indulging hedonist by his derogatory self address as ‘commissioner of cunt,’ or ‘commissioner of human opportunists!” (PC 204)

Portnoy who used is sexual libido as a means to rebel against various forms of repressions he experienced within the rigidity of Jewish upbringing, as noted by Charles E. May is actually “victimised by sexuality itself”. May further observes that the journey that Portnoy makes to Israel at the end is a “sort of pilgrimage to atone for his transgressions and to come to terms with his cultural roots” (May 1282). There he falls in love with Naomi, a young Israeli Army Lieutenant, but she rejects his proposal to settle down with her. It seems to be an instance of ‘poetic justice’ as his first proposal to have sex with a Jewish woman, in Israel, turns out to be a double setback, as his proposal is turned down first, and then, when he forces himself on her, he finds himself impotent. He finally becomes the victim of the very same sexuality which he used as a means to victimise the gentile women, and thus proving himself too, to be a ‘rebel-victim.’
At the end of the novel we find Portnoy wailing for freedom from his “endless childhood” (PC 271). His problem is that he is not able to free himself from his dilemma of being torn between his moral desire to be good and his physical body’s obsession with carnality. Portnoy had a childhood that was dominated and suppressed by a Jewish woman—Sophie, making him helpless and bound. In his attempt to break free and assert himself, he begins to indulge in unbridled masturbation as an adolescent. He does it under constant fear of punishment and retribution, under the prick of conscience, having to go against the moral designs of his smothering mother, and fear of losing the cultivated image of a nice Jewish boy.

The extreme form of Jewish insistence on sobriety, moral and religious sanctions and self-control bordering extreme self-denial personified in Sophie, and the discontent that Portnoy experiences in repressing his instinctive life for the sake of perpetuating the ‘nice Jewish boy’ image tears Portnoy apart, making him a living example of the tension between the “human desire for controlled civilized behaviour and the discontent that results from having to give up impulsive behaviour to establish civilization” (May 1284).

The adult life of Portnoy is an extension of the perversity of his adolescence, as he indulges in a series of dehumanizing, love-less, and degrading sexual escapades with gentile women in an effort to assert and affirm his masculinity and power, which was suppressed by his mother in his childhood. But finally when he tries to enter into a real love relationship with he finds himself physically powerless and sexually impotent. Naomi is the first Jewish woman with whom he tries to make love with, and there the repressed memories of his ‘castrating mother’ appear making him incapable of real love. He finds himself “virtually alone” (PC 254) and alienated in Israel.
The repressed, hesitant and wavering Neil Klugman, through whom Roth initiates the presentation of the socio-moral predicament, proceeds through the rebelling but guilt-ridden Portnoy, reaching an apparent reconciliation in David Kepesh, whom Agrawal considers as “an adventurous man of intelligence and feeling, who wades his way through a world of sensual possibilities, trying to find a balance between pleasure and dignity” (148). Young David Kepesh, introduced to the world of comedy and impersonation at an early age by Herbie Bratsky an “entertainer extraordinaire” (Nadel 229), learns early on his life that the art of imitation and impersonation is the easiest way to the heart of a woman. Therefore, as against the wishes of his father, Abe Kepesh, who wanted to see him as a medical practitioner, he pursues a moderately successful career of acting, though his passion for literature replaces it sooner. At the age of twenty, even to the great surprise of his fellow actors, Kepesh abandons the stage to retreat into a rooming house, seeking the friendship of those great writers whom he considered to be the “architects of minds”. It was his desire to stop ‘impersonating others’ (acting), and to become himself, that makes him to “leave the world ...to become a man of the cloth” (PoD 12).

Kepesh’s memories of his childhood, his parents and family unlike Portnoy, seems to be totally different. It is one of affection and appreciation. His recollection of his mother as a “meticulous, conscientious young woman of astounding competence” (PoD 14), the besetting passion for impeccability that endeared her to the Patrician Wall Street lawyers, as so alluring and energetic, making her the “gentile boss’s treasure” (PoD 15). The motherly affection, dedication, innocence conviction that Belle Kepesh evoked in young David to make such categorical statements as, “no one before or since, has ever taught me anything with so much innocence and conviction,” (PoD 16) though it was said in connection to the type writing lessons that she gave him in winter. He is too happy to endorse his father’s opinion that, “she had indeed been the most flawless legal secretary
ever to work for the firm” (PoD 15). Unlike Portnoy, who concludes his recollection of ‘the most unforgettable character I’ve met’, recalling his childhood as life in the middle of a Jewish family joke, David Kepesh’s reminiscences of his boyhood winter days in Hungarian Royale Hotel household, for example, is very pleasant where he feels that the Kepeshes are like “three animals in cozy, fortified hibernation, Mama, Papa and baby safely tucked away in family paradise” (PoD 13).

David Kepesh, last of the three characters, who is analysed as the victims of the socio-moral predicament in the early works of Philip Roth, is torn between what Hermione Lee considers as conflict between the “reckless erotic ambitions and conscientious intellectual dedication” ( 65). The genesis of Kepesh’s moral struggle, the war between his moral conscience and libidinous urge, surfaces in the reading room of the Newark College campus library, “a place comparable to the runway of a burlesque house in its power to stimulate and focus his desire” (PoD 22). Like Portnoy, who went after Sikshes, Kepesh too, thereafter flirts with a number of undergraduate girls, driven by a conflicting and guilt inflicting desire to go beyond the moral strictures, becoming a victim of “high grades and base desires,” proving Macaulay’s observation of Steele as “a rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes” (PoD 17). Against his dignity as a scholar, he begins to watch with transfixed attention a girl who plays with the ends of her hair while ostensibly studying her history lesson, or another girl wholly bland tucked in her class room chair, swinging her legs beneath the library table, and a third, who leans forward over her notebook, making it easy for him to observe the breast beneath her blouse push softly into her folded arms, creating in him an earnest desire to be “those arms” (PoD 22). These sights at the reading room of the library sets in him an irresistible desire to begin what he himself calls the pursuit of a perfect strangers.
It is in London, where he begins his Fulbright fellowship year in literature at King’s College that he really feels freed from the “constraining rituals of undergraduate life and from the wearisome concern of the mother and father” (PoD 27), whose concerns had ceased to nourish him, as he begins his pursuit of passion and desire. In his attempt to escape the suffocating, airless and grim little attic room by the retired army captain and his wife, he makes his first visit to the Shepherd Market, a London Courtyard that altered his attitude towards being a Fulbright fellow, which within an hour of his arrival he had considered to relinquish and go home, saying, “they chose the wrong applicant—I’m not serious enough to suffer like this!” (PoD 27)

In Portnoy’s Complaint, the protagonist compensates his depression and disillusionment with his masturbatory indulgence as an adolescent and his hedonistic sexual escapades with Sikhes as an adult. Similarly, Kepesh in Professor of Desire, takes recourse to frequent visit to prostitutes though at first with a repulsive sort of thrill, he continues to indulge in this until he meets Elisabeth Elverskog, a Swedish girl, on one year leave off, from the University of Lund in order to improve her English, and Birgitta Svanstrom, another Swede, on leave from the University of Uppsala, for the same reason.

The initial romance with Elisabeth later turns out to be a “ménage a trios” (qtd. in Nadel 229), as Birgitta, more lascivious than Elisabeth, for whom “flesh was very much there to be investigated for every last thrill” (PoD 56), joins the party. In the words of Balbir Singh, Kepesh’s “voracious indulgence in erotic orgies with the two Swedish girls is reminiscent of Portnoy’s sexual adventures with his Shikses” (119). Here Elisabeth resembles the Portnovian ‘Monkey’ whom he refuses to marry despite acknowledging her “delicious sensuality and sense of sexual adventure” (Nadel 215). In her attempt to please Kepesh, Elisabeth suffers more humiliation than pleasure in their “inter-continental
ménage” (PoD 31), and she returns home after a failed attempt at suicide, while Kepesh and Birgitta indulges in an year of “erotic daredevilry” (PoD 44) in Europe.

His return to the United States after the European vacationing, he revels in sensual pleasures, as he gets involved with beautiful and exotic women like Helen Baird. The hedonistically frenzied and inexhaustible passion for each other compels him to get married to her by-passing the deep ideological differences and temperamental divide that existed between them. Helen, a physically captivating woman, a powerful sensuous enchantress, becomes the focus of all his yearning, all his curiosity, and all his lust. Their marriage, “nearly after three full years devoted to doubting-hoping, wasting-and-fearing” (PoD 66), which Kepesh thought would dwindle away the contentious side of their affair, doesn’t go beyond the sexual passion. Helen is reluctant to do the household chores as Kepesh unable to express emotional solidarity with her as he is unable to experience real love and affection due to his past history of Promiscuity. Here Kepesh and Portnoy become identical, as both are incapable of real love and affection due to their past life of promiscuity and indulgence. Their marriage is dominated by sensuality, and not by “emotion and passion” (Agrawal 151). Therefore, a visit from one of her Hong Kong friends, an English investment banker named Donald Garland, makes Helen nostalgic, and soon she leaves Kepesh in search of her former lover, Jimmy Metcalf, to be the “high priestess of Eros” (PoD 99).

Traversing four thousand miles of the exotic globe twice over, in an attempt to save Helen who was falsely implicated for possessing cocaine, a sweet revenge by the machinating Jimmy Metcalf, proves to be futile, as the reader soon finds Kepesh teaching at the State University of New York, trying to extract himself from the rubble of his divorce. He feels his new assignment as a professor teaching great master works of disillusionment and renunciation, and a few sessions with his psychoanalyst, who even
tries a “smidgen of charm in order to get him to put the faulty marriage and divorce behind” (PoD 101). Kepesh realizes veracity of what Kathie Steiner, one of his students wrote regarding Chekhov’s recurrent themes which states that the search for intimacy is not because it necessarily makes for happiness, but because it is necessary for survival. The physical and psychological vacuum that the divorce with Helen brings on Kepesh is so much that, he starts to speak to himself, talk to people who are not present, finds it difficult to smile, feels lonely, and dependant on anti-depressants. Leaning over the mirror, looking at oneself shouting, “I want somebody! I want somebody! I want somebody,” (PoD 105) Kepesh now becomes a living example of Chekhovian theme. Though the marriage between Helen and Kepesh was a loveless impasse, he longs for intimacy as he tries to reorganize his life and move on in life.

In the summer that followed, a woman-less, pleasure-less and passion-less Kepesh is introduced to Claire Ovington, a twenty-four year old tall blonde who teaches at a New York Private school, having a degree in experimental psychology and a Master’s in Education. Though it is the very same look of soft voluptuousness that once had drawn Kepesh to Helen that draws him to Claire, beyond the physical allurements and resemblances, it is the poise, confidence and determination coupled with her guileless innocence that germinates a surge of warm feeling in Kepesh. His association with Claire gives Kepesh a “renewal of desire, of confidence and of capacity,” (PoD 150) that, he had lost in the wake of the break up with Helen. Helen around, rehabilitation and reconstituting of his life takes place. He soon dispenses with the therapy session—“the professional doses of mothering and fathering and simple friendship three times a week for an hour,” (PoD 158) picks up the old unfinished rehash of his thesis on romantic disillusionment, entitled, ‘Man in a Shell: an Essay on License and Restraint in Chekhov’s Fictional World.’ It deals with the “humiliations and failures-worst of all, the
destructive power of those seek a way out of the shell of restrictions and conventions, out of the pervasive boredom and the stifling despair, out of the painful marital situations and endemic social falsity, into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life” (PoD 156).

As the novel proceeds to its conclusion Roth presents Kepesh and Claire happily renting a summer house, leading apparently a perfect life together, Kepesh back in the world of literature, Claire busy in household gardening. An ostensible harmony, peace and poise seems to envelop their summer house, even as Abe Kepesh along with his friend Mr. Barbatnik, a concentration camp survivor, beneficiaries of Claire’s hospitality, appreciates the external happiness and security that she has brought in the life of his son, there is an overarching sense of fear, doubt and misfortune that overwhelms David Kepesh. The unexpected and uninformed visit of his ex-wife Helen along with Lowery, her husband exacerbates Kepesh’s fear unravelling his unsure and divided self. A lurching sense of guilt, leading to fear of “being drawn away by a force as incontrovertible as gravity” (PoD 254) makes Kepesh to ask himself, “how long before the lovely blandness of a life with Claire begins to cloy, to pall, and I am out there once again mourning what I’ve lost and looking for my way!” (PoD 251) Kepesh fears that it is only a matter of time that the happiness that they enjoy together now will disappear and he will once again become “Herbie’s pupil, Birgitta’s accomplice, Helen’s suitor, Baumgarten’s sidekick and defender” (PoD 252), and a wayward son of his father. All these he fears as restitution for his life once “yielded to pleasure, to passion and to adventure” (253).

Kepesh’s predicament, as in the case of Neil Klugman and Portnoy, is evidenced in the way he oscillates between the idealistic and hedonistic tendencies, constantly at war with each other in his inner self. His desire to be a professor of literature, of good repute is marred by his equally strong desire to indulge in unbridled hedonistic pleasure, making
it a conflict between ‘dignity and desire!’ It is the very same disapproving moralist that is at war with the indulging hedonist that we see in Portnoy in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and to a certain extent in Neil Klugman in *Goodbye Columbus*.

The ‘hedonist’ in Kepesh searches for ‘thrills,’ while the ‘moralist’ in him longs for ‘tranquillity.’ The predicament is, as always, to make a choice, in the case of Kepesh, a choice between Elisabeth and Birgitta at first, between Helen and Claire later. We see Roth in his ironic best here, even as Kepesh makes the choice for Birgitta and Claire respectively, the disturbing desire for Elisabeth and Helen persist in him, making Kepesh incapable of really enjoying the present! The intra-personal struggle that goes on in the mind of Kepesh is evident as he is unable to make a choice between the ‘furnace’ and ‘hearth,’ between the ‘unfathomable and wonderful daring’ of Birgitta and the ‘unfathomable and wonderful love of Elisabeth. The struggle is very manifest in his soliloquy wherein he analyses the ‘possibilities of youth,’ saying, “yes there is Elisabeth’s unfathomable and wonderful love and there is Birgitta’s unfathomable and wonderful daring, and whichever I want I can have. Now isn’t that unfathomable! Either the furnace or the hearth!” (PoD 47)

The story of Neil Klugman, Portnoy and David Kepesh thus become a case study for the post-war generational divide and intra-personal conflict. The material opulence and affluence of the upper-middle-class Patimkins, personified in Brenda attracts Neil, the sexual freedom and licentiousness associated with the post-war era appeals to Portnoy, though in the heart of heart he is a disapproving moralist by virtue of his overbearing mother Sophie’s influence.

Kepesh is symbolic of what Milowitz opines as the conflict between a “conscientious dedicated life of the mind with the shameful secret life of the body” (145).
Neil is tempted to use his association with the Patimkins’ family for social climbing; Portnoy makes use of the post-war freedom and licentiousness as a launching pad to assert himself, rebelling against the suffocating and repressive prescriptions of the orthodox society. The two-week long summer romance with Brenda at short-hills reveals the hollowness and shallowness of the claims of the upper-middle-class, with its hypocrisy and impersonality. Brenda becomes the symbol of the hollowness “beneath the pretty exterior” (Milowitz 133), of mirth and affluence, paraded by the affluent Patimkins family. Neil is caught between the surrealism of ‘Short Hills’ and the stark realism of ‘Newark,’ between ‘materialism’ and ‘morality’, between ‘blind assimilation’ and ‘self-identity.’

Similarly, Portnoy, brought up under the prying and overbearing supervision of Jewish parents for whom life means only boundaries and restrictions, it becomes a back-breaking choice either to continue to be a ‘fifteen-year-old boy’ or to be a ‘commissioner of human opportunists’ enjoying the offer of uninhibited carnal pleasures!

Kepesh, the professor struggles to make a choice between dignity and desire. The conflicting claims that attracts and appals at the same time increases the intensity of the predicament of Neil, Portnoy, and Kepesh, and by extension every modern man who confronts the alluring and conflicting claims of modern life.

Neil’s attraction towards Brenda and all that she stands for, is difficult to resist, though he knows from the very beginning that she was a “practical girl” (GC 14). Too, practical to let go the safety and comforts of Short Hills for the sake an ordinary Librarian from Newark. Neil’s dilemma arises from the fact that though he is saddened and repulsed by the flaws in the world around him, represented by the Patimkins, in his desire to make an entry into the glamorously affluent upper-middle-class status, with its
comforts and freedom, he tries to “adopt roles and employ strategies” (qtd. in Rodgers 45), which are unacceptable and repulsive to his orthodox upbringing at Newark.

If Portnoy’s life was split between being a moralist and a hedonist, in Neil we have the conflict between an idealist and materialist and in Kepesh one can see an engaging conflict between desire and dignity. All of them torn between two desirables!

The predicament is to make a choice. It is aggravated in the lives of the protagonists because the choice is not between one good and one bad, as often happens, but it is between two alternatives almost equally unsatisfying and untenable. In Neil’s case it is between the hollow American materialism and traditional Judaism, while Portnoy finds himself in a precarious situation wherein he has to make a difficult choice to be either a preserver and protector of human opportunity and dignity, or continue to live in, what Milowit calls the “guiltless hedonism of the corpus” (130), enjoying the pleasures of carnality. What makes the predicament of both these two very specific, is summarized by Leo Patimkin in Goodbye Columbus when he says, “even the pleasures I can’t enjoy,” (GC 90) as both Neil and Portnoy were brought up to be ‘nice Jewish Boys.’

In his essay “The Professor of Desire: The Two Plums or the Reawakening?” Daniel Walden says that the ‘Jew’ within the Rothian corpus is an “archetype of the disjointed, disassociated modern man in America” (79). Walden also is of the opinion that the sense of rootlessness, of alienation and fragmentation, the search for personal identity and purpose, the constituent factors of the predicament of modern man, coupled with more specific Jewish problems of homelessness and rejection, the conflict between the existing trends and age-old tradition makes the post-war American situation so pressing and controversial.
Here Neil Klugman, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh, to name a few prominent Rothian characters, become the spokespersons of the modern man in the America of 1950s. What Roth does in his early works is to present the story of a Jew “who can’t have fun without feeling guilty,” (qtd. in Walden 80) a little more clearly to the readers in and through his characters.

Roth becomes more controversial and anti-Semitic due to the bold and hitherto unconventional matter of fact objectivity with which he presented his Jewish characters. In Reading Myself and Others Roth publically professes that some of the highly acclaimed Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud presented Jews only as “actors in dramas of conscience where matters of principle of virtue are at issue (RMAO 280), but in contrast to Bellow and Malamud, Roth goes beyond the conventional presentation of an ‘ethical Jew,’ “men without flesh, without desire, men defined only by questions of mind” (Milowitz 145) to the presentation of what Milowitz calls the ‘ethical Jew’s antithesis,’ “the man cut off from conscience, grounded only in desire, in the need for accumulation and pleasure.”

Therefore, the conflict between post-war American ‘trend’ and the orthodox Jewish ‘tradition’ combines together in the life of Rothian characters a conflict between trends and traditions. As a result of which his characters such as Neil Klugman, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh become the archetypes of conflict ridden, indecisive post-war American humanity, with all its accompanying angst and anxieties.