Chapter II

Negotiating Jewish Ethnicity and American Identity: The Religious Predicament

The deaths of the gods, the rupture of traditional bonds of morals and manners, the crises in philosophy in its modern forms, the inroads of materialism—all are cause and symptom of the fractured individual, the uncoordinated soul -Israel, Charles M.

Martha Morrison and Stephen F. Brown in their book, Judaism introduces Judaism as one of the “oldest and smallest, but one of the most influential religious traditions of the world” (8). Dating back nearly four thousand years, having its roots in the ancient Near Eastern Region of Canaan, a Biblical region that fall under the present day Lebanon, Israel and Palestinian territories, Judaism originated as the beliefs and practices of a group of people known as ‘Israel.’ Judaism traces its heritage to the covenant ‘Yahweh’ made with Abraham (The English Standard Version Bible, Gen. 12.1-3) making them His “treasured possession” (Deut. 7.6), from all the peoples on the face of the earth. Over four thousand years it has played an extremely important role in the development of Western and Near Eastern civilizations, even though, Judaism as a religion has always had a relatively small number of believers. Christianity was built on the foundation of Judaism, and Islam, another great monotheistic tradition, was influenced by Judaism. Moreover the Jews have made significant contributions in every area of society.

It is important to know that the Jews have made their contributions in the face of enormous difficulties, for their history has been a struggle for survival in an often hostile world. Speaking about the religion of Israel, G.W. Anderson in The History and Religion of Israel says that “her religion displayed a remarkable toughness in surviving crises, resisting or absorbing alien influences and maintaining its own distinctive character far
more successfully,” in comparison to the religions of neighbouring countries, which, in his opinion, were, either “transformed, absorbed, or obliterated” (1) in the far reaching changes by which the then ancient Near East was affected. Only a “tenacious adherence to their beliefs, their customs, and their identity accounts for their continued existence” (qtd. in Morrison and Stephen F. Brown 5).

One of the distinguishing features of Jewish people and their religion have been the remarkable sense of adaptability and continuity that they have displayed, during their encounter with great civilizations of the world. Judaism has a history of assimilation and integration of foreign elements into their socio-religious systems so as to maintain an uninterrupted cultural and religious tradition.

Lou Hackett and Silberman speaking about ‘judaism’ in Encyclopædia Britannica Online opines that each period of Jewish history seems to have left behind it “a specific element of a Judaic heritage that continued to influence subsequent developments, so that the total Jewish heritage at any given time is a combination of all these successive elements along with whatever adjustments and accretions have occurred in each new age (Encyclopædia Britannica Online: n.pag.).

Jacob Neusner, in highly influential book Judaism: The Basics is of the opinion that any Religious communities form “cultural systems with an ethos or worldview, an ethics or, the way of life, and a theory of the origin and character of the community or an ethnos (1). Judaism is a religion like any other. In this-worldly, social perspective, any religion (or religious tradition) forms a cultural system that is comprised by three components, (1) its world view, (2) its way of life, and (3) its definition of the community of the faithful. “Ethos” refers to the worldview, “ethics” to its way of life and definition
of virtue, and “ethnos” to the social entity (“community,” “church,” “holy people”) that takes shape among the believers (Neusner 2).

Judaism is more often than not, a term denoting, in widest sense, the entire cultural, social and religious system of the people of Israel. But in a specific religious sense, it is the biblically inspired faith or belief in one God-creator and ruler of the universe-by whose divine will the Ten Commandments, Torah and precepts were given to the Jewish people through the revelation at Sinai (Ex.31.18). It is a religion that guides its adherents both in beliefs and practices, and as such it is popularly described as ‘not a religion, but a way of life’. As such it becomes a difficult proportion to draw a distinction between Judaism, Jewish culture and identity.

This faith or religion demands the individual Jew’s adherence and conformity to a wide range of laws customs and practices. Throughout the history, we find cultural phenomena that have developed which are typically Jewish, without having any specific religious characteristics. This is an easily manifested characteristic feature of Judaism manifested from the very beginning of Jewish history as early as the Hellenistic world, Europe, the Islamic Spain and Portugal, India, China and to the contemporary United States.

Exile, which is a separation from one’s country and home, either by choice or by force, and its consequential alienation and suppression, and ultimate assimilation into the alien culture, leading to a loss of self identity, is one of the focal points in the political history of the Jews. In the words of Moses, considered as the spokesperson of the Jews in their early political and religious history, “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land,” (Ex.2.22) we can hear the echoes of the plight of the early Jews in the land of Midian,
south of Canaan, exiled from both Egypt and the Hebrew community that lived there. His statement epitomizes the diasporic situation of the Jews from earliest times to the present.

Since exilic situation was one of the earliest life situations encountered by the Jews, the history of Jewish ‘diasporic’ existence is one of the longest and most complex ones in the pages of human history. It is said that with the possible exception of monarchic reign of David and Solomon, Israel was not able to maintain a fully independent national existence or effective national unity for long. In contrast to the Biblical presentation of Jews as *Segulah*-a treasure (*Ex*.19.5), the story of Jews has been a tale of rejection, isolation, expulsion and persecution. But there is also the idea of ‘chosenness’, a subject of perennial controversy among the non-Jews, exemplified in the book of *Deuteronomy*, where it says,

Now therefore if you will hearken unto my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be mine own treasure from among all the peoples... for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen you to be His own treasure out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. (*Deut*. 14.2)

This belief in the Chosen Race, or a Treasured Nation, could be used to explain a record of cultural achievement and commercial success that the Jews have attained in the midst of all these disquieting and antagonistic life situations. Understanding such contradictory situations in itself becomes an inextricable predicament for anyone who studies the Jewish history.

The term Jewish ‘Diaspora’ officially stands for the historical exile an dispersion of Jews from the region of the kingdom of Judah and the Roman Judea around sixth century B.C.E. But the history of Jewish Diaspora can be traced back to the Biblical
Patriarch Abraham himself. First Abraham and his family wandered in lands that were not their own. Then the Hebrews were in bondage in Egypt. The exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses took them to the land of Canaan. The development of kinship, division of the twelve tribes into two kingdoms and foreign captivity and exiles etc., are very well known historical facts. The Patriarch Abraham is described as a nomad who wandered from Ur in Chaldea, through Syria and Canaan to Egypt, and then back to Canaan. He led a tribe that moved with the seasons in search of pasture for its flocks. The Biblical book of Genesis describes the nomadic lives of Abraham and the other patriarchs and tells how they interacted with peoples settled throughout the lands where they wandered.

This political dispersion began in 597 B.C, when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon ended the Jewish independence by conquering Judea. He captured Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish religion and worship. Though there was a reversal of fortune for the Jews when Cyrus, the king of Persia captured Babylon and allowed Jews to return to their homeland. Though a great number of orthodox Jews made good use of the opportunity to return to their roots, many stayed back in the more prosperous surroundings of Cyrus’ kingdom. Subsequent defeat of Persia in the hands of Alexander the Great of Macedonia, introduced Hellenistic culture to the Jews, some of the practices creating outrage among the more traditional Jews there. Jagersma in A History of Israel from Alexander the Great to Bar Kochba, mentions about the decree preventing Jewish worship in Jerusalem, and pronouncement of capital punishment for the practice of circumcision and Sabbath by the then Syrian rulers generated a consuming patriotic feeling among the Jews, giving way to a combined military exploits, under the leadership of Mattathias, popularly known as ‘the hammer’ (58).
Though this initial passionate efforts fructified, as religious freedom in the form of renewed Temple Worship was granted, the corrupt tendencies for power, deceit, treachery and the general chaos that the then existing political culture created, attracted the attention of the Roman emperors, leading to the invasion of Palestine by the Roman General Pompey. By 63 B.C the Jewish territory of Judea was reduced to a Roman Province. The Romans used local rulers to carry out Roman policy in Palestine. But in 70 AD Titus destroyed Jerusalem Temple and during the reign of Hadrian (A.D.117-138) a pagan temple was erected in the place of the Jewish temple and again banned the practice of circumcision. The Jews revolted under the charismatic leadership of Bar Kochba, but after the initial success, the Romans ultimately crushed the revolt, rebuilt Jerusalem as a Roman city, and banned Jews from entering it. Then on, Jewish nation lost any significant political existence until it appeared again in 1948, with the establishment of the new state of Israel.

Judaism in essence is largely a ritual and tradition-based religion as it is more concerned about the ritualized behaviour-orthopraxis than orthodoxy. In the words of Rabbi Wayne Dosick, “Jewish ritual is both a way for the Jews to connect with God, and the instrumentality through which Jewish ethics are conveyed, learned and observed” (37). Though the dedication of the first Temple in 827 BCE by King Solomon, gave rise to Temple Worship, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE brought an end to the same. This gave rise to what is known as ‘Rabbinic Judaism.’ With the destruction of their cultic centre, there were no more sacrifices, no more priests, making the Rabbis-learned teachers who were well versed in the law and its interpretations- the controlling force of Jewish life. Thus making the Jewish life more law centred.

Jewish Diaspora in the middle ages was broadly categorized into three. This was organized mainly under geographical groupings. They were the Ashkenazi Jews, the
Sephardic Jews, and the Mizrahi Jews. Annette B. Fromm, making an entry on ‘Jew’ in the *New Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture* on ‘Ethnicity,’ distinguishes the three as follows; The first group were mainly the Jews who migrated to the Central and Eastern Europe; Sephardic Jews were the ones who settled in Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and later to the North Africa, and the Mizrahi Jews who remained in Babylon (qtd. in Fromm 178). There was a large scale migration of the Jews to the United States of America in the early twentieth Century and today America has the largest diasporic Jewish population, reaching to almost 6.8 million.

Though the Jews in Diaspora had enjoyed a great deal of commercial success and financial affluence along with financial influence in the field of trade and commerce, all along they experienced a great deal of persecutions over a wide chronological periods and over a wide range of geographical locations. These came mainly in the Middle East and Europe. From the Seleucid rulers onwards they were confronted with Hellenism, enforcement of pagan practices, banning of Jewish festivals and religious practices etc., In the Middle Ages they had to face the Christian anti-Semitism, especially, regarding the religious beliefs and the Jewish culture. As far as religious practices were concerned they were accused of deicide, and as to their culture they were accused of acquisitiveness, theft lying manoeuvring and their questionable and usurious business practices.

Moving on to the high Middle Ages there were ample instances of Blood Libels, Forced Conversions, Inquisitions and Crusades, ultimately ending with the Holocaust. They were expelled from England in 1290 C.E. and from France in 1306. In 1492 Jews in Spain were forced either to become Christians or to be expelled. Jews were emancipated with the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. In an effort to gain full, equal citizenship, many called for a reform of and updating of Jewish attitudes and values to make themselves more acceptable to the new secular culture.
From the times of the Pharaohs of Egypt to the totalitarian regimes of Hitler in Germany, Jewish history was a combination of exile and exodus, migration and expulsion, inquisition and holocaust. This led to a vexing predicament in the mind of the Jews, the predicament of reconciling the Biblical promise of the Chosen Race and Promised Land and the contradictory existential exilic situation of expulsion and the mass murders and phased extinction. Since a major chunk of these were from the religious and nationalistic frontier, there have been constant attempts from the side of the Jews to reform and adapt their religious beliefs and practices on the one hand, and a conscious effort either to assimilate or to adopt the local culture by a re-interpretation of the Halakhic laws and regulations. Halakha stands for the entire body of Jewish religious laws and traditions.

This effort from the Jews to assimilate and adapt the local culture is reflected in various reform movements among the Jews having various degree of acceptance. Such difference of acceptability of the reform proposals for adoption and assimilation resulted in the emergence of various types of Judaism such as: Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Re-constructionist Judaism and Humanist Judaism.

Orthodox Judaism consist of those Jews who believe that the Torah, containing 613 commandments; inclusive of both written and oral, is divinely ordained and is binding on all Jews. Reform Judaism refers to a section of Jews who does not believe that the Torah is divinely ordained. They instead believe and propagate that it had a human origin and which was compiled later.

Conservative Judaism came to existence when a group of Jews tried to attain a middle path between the Orthodox and Reform Judaism. It was a reaction to the absolute liberalism advocated by the reformist group. The conservative group upheld that the
Torah comes from God, but it is transmitted through humans and it contains human components and therefore the laws and practices can be adapted to the predominant or local culture without losing the original Jewish tradition. Mordecai Kaplan speaks about yet another group, the Re-constructionist Judaism, that belongs to those who believe that Judaism is an “evolving religious civilization” (qtd. in Jewishvirtual library.org n.pag.) and rejects the idea of divine origin of the Torah. They rather favour incorporating the inherited Jewish beliefs and traditions in the mainstream culture.

Faced with the exigencies of secular diasporic world, Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine offered a non-theistic alternative to the Jewish life, which is today known as the Humanistic Judaism. It speaks of creating a secular Jewish life based on the humanistic values and place of a divinely ordained Torah.

However, the story behind the Jewish Diaspora in American soil is a unique one, one of expulsion and re-admission. It is the story of the promise of the Great American Dream, and its challenges. Over the centuries historians have traditionally divided the Jewish immigration history into three distinctive periods. They are Sephardic, German and Eastern European periods. Each of these periods are named not for exclusivity but based on dominance or predominance.

Gloria L. Cronin’s survey of Jewish American Literature in the Encyclopaedia of Jewish American literature, mentions about the first group of immigrants, who arrived in America as the Sephardic Jews. There it is mentioned that “fearing the Portuguese inquisition many of the Sephardic Jews fled Portugal with the plan of taking refuge in Holland where there was already a Sephardic community who fled the Spanish Inquisition much earlier” (xiii). But when they ran short of money they were forced to land at the Dutch colony of Recife, in Brazil. But when the Portuguese conquered this
colony, the Jews there forced to move to a new place, and in 1654 they moved to North America, where they could practice their religion in a relatively non-discriminatory environment.

Migration of German Jews to America in a significant way started in the 1840s. It was due to the mounting religious persecutions and socio-economic restrictions that the German Jews migrated to America, purportedly a land of economic and social opportunity and religious tolerance. They settled in and around the city of Cincinnati, which later became the seat of American Reform Judaism.

Eastern European Jews migration to America in a significant way began from 1880. It refers to the large scale migration of Jewish population from Russia, Austria-Hungary, Romania etc., this migration was precipitated by the existing overpopulation and its allied poverty coupled with the social oppression in Eastern Europe. They too were attracted by the prospect of social and economic advancement. Unlike the German migrants, the eastern Europeans settled in the cramped and squalid neighbourhood of major cities engaging themselves in factories and construction sites.

This short historical survey, gives one us a short history of Jewish predicament in general, as their history has always been a prolonged saga of socio-religious oppression, expulsion and persecution. In an attempt to extricate themselves from such situations Jews had always migrated from one place to another, seemingly better and safer places abroad. Jewish migration took place in a big way to the Americas too. It mainly took place from three different geographical locations, namely, Spain and Portugal, Germany, and the Eastern European countries.

In America, they had to face many newer social, economic and religious predicaments. Though all of them were Jews, they were all practicing different forms of
Judaism each unique to the pre-migratory locations, and unique in its interpretation and practice of *Torah*, as result of which the pressing need for them was how to reconcile these differences, or which one was truer or better etc., socially too, there was the need to reconcile the modern manners of the American life with the age old Jewish tradition. Among all these, perhaps the most difficult and engaging dilemma was to settle and reconcile the intra-religious differences among themselves first, and then the inter-religious.

Along with the socio-moral predicament that the Jewish diaspora had to face in the land of Great American Dream, which the research focused in the first chapter, yet another monstrous predicament was to negotiate the Jewish ethnicity and American identity, especially matters regarding religion and religious practices, as there existed conflicting views between the assimilation desiring young generation and their traditional parents, between differently assimilated groups within Judaism.

Judaism in America has struggled to meet the challenges of assimilation and acculturation, as more and more Jewish American immigrants, especially in the post-war period, attempted to consciously relinquish the greater part of their Jewish identity for the sake of being safe and secularized. Here what one needs to note is that in the process of being secularized and Americanized, the religious and ethnic identity, in most cases become subordinate to the more appealing American identity, giving rise to an existential conflict between Jewish ethnicity and American identity.

In America, the conflict has two phases, an inter-religious and a more subtle and more precarious intra-religious conflict. Roth brings out this conflict well through his characters in his stories and novels. And that is the focus of research here in this chapter.
The intra-religious and inter-religious conflict that arose between the assimilated, secularized young generation and the tradition-bound older generation came to the fore as and when the former questioned the persisting religious superiority and hypocrisy that seems to have caused the anti-Semitic uprisings in the past. Ozzie Freedman in Roth’s story, “The Conversion of the Jews” becomes the epitome of the younger generations’ inquisitive and accommodative spirit that comes in direct conflict with their parents and Rabbis. In the words of Alan Cooper, it becomes “the struggle of secular Jewry against orthodox teaching,” (32) that seems to be illogical, fanatic and grossly hypocritical.

Ozzie Freedman, “the embryonic activist hero,” (McDaniel 52) becomes the personification of the relentlessly inquisitive nature of the post-war Jewish American generation, whose probing and disturbing questions about Christology and Immaculate Conception disturbs and upsets Rabbi Marvin Binder, supposedly the absolute religious authority of the locality.

Roth’s story begins with Itzie Lieberman confronting Ozzie Freedman’s audacity in questioning Rabbi Binder. Itzie remarks, “You’re a real one for opening your mouth in the first place ... what do you open your mouth all the time for” (CoJ 108). It appears that Ozzie had earned Rabbi Binder’s displeasure by his inquisitiveness! Being raised up in a secularised American society, Ozzie questioned the veracity of Rabbi Binder’s unfound claim of Jewish religious superiority as “the chosen race, if the declaration of independence claimed all meant to be created equal” (108-09). He further wanted to clarify why some of his own relatives, including his own mother, considered a plane crash at La Guardia as a tragedy only after they had discovered that six among the diseased were Jews! When the young Ozzie questions the rationale behind such illogical attitudes being inculcated during the course of religious instructions, it brings Rabbi Binder’s
displeasure. He summons Ozzie’s mother to the Hebrew school, to negotiate what he termed as audacious behaviour.

It is to be noted that Ozzie Freedman is true to his name, a boy of his own personal convictions, who loves his freedom, but at the same time has a great deal of reverence regarding the observations of the Jewish traditions. What he questions is the inconsistence and false religious superiority that surrounds him. His religiosity is never in question. Though Ozzie had planned to “confess his latest transgression to his mother as soon as she came home from work,” being a Friday he waits for his mother, first to “light the three yellow candles, two for the Sabbath” (109), and one for his diseased father. His reverence and adherence to the traditional family rituals is very evident in how he conducts himself while his mother lit the Sabbath Candles:

When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose mind were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn’t have anything to do with his dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles. (109)

If the above shows the ritual lighting of Sabbath candles by his mother, so engrossed and involved, then, the involvement of the mother in its ritualistic adherence and the emotional depth attached to it is very well portrayed by the observation that Ozzie makes about her getting glassy. Though one candle was lit in memory of his diseased father, it was not the memory of her husband that got her eyes glassy, but her engrossing devotion to the ritualistic lighting of the candle, and it is clear from Ozzie’s recollection
that “even when his father was alive ... her eyes had gotten glassy” (109). But what is important here is the way he conducts while his mother performed the ritual;

As she touched the flaming match to the unlit wick of a Sabbath candle, the phone rang, and Ozzie, standing only a foot from it, plucked it off the receiver and held it muffled to his chest. When his mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened. Ozzie pressed the phone to his breast and watched his mother dragging whatever she was dragging, and he felt his own eyes get glassy.

(110)

It is not his lack of faith that gets Ozzie into trouble, but it rather, it is his desire to understand the real meaning of the rabbinic instructions and the Hebrew Scriptures that lands him into trouble. His reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures and the intense desire to imbibe the spirit of what is read that makes him to disobey Rabbi Binder’s petulant demand to read faster. Unlike Rabbi Binder who was worried about completing the reading of the book, Ozzie is interested to understand what he read. He voices his concern as he says, “he could read faster but if he did he was sure not to understand what he was reading” (111). To prove his point, and to show that he could indeed read faster, he reads a passage very fast, stops abruptly saying, that he didn’t understand a word he was reading.

Ozzie’s question at what is supposedly ‘free-discussion time’ and Rabbi Binder’s attempts to bypass it by explaining away “cultural unity and some other things,” irate him and he feels neglected. Therefore he repeatedly tries to rationalize with Rabbi Binder, which according many critics leads him to the “verge of being agnostic” (Cooper 31). The young Ozzie is not fully at ease with Rabbi Binder’s explanation regarding ‘immaculate
conception’, calling it as ‘impossible’. He says, “The only way a woman can have a baby is to have intercourse with a man” (CoJ 108). Binder tries to explain dogmatically but Ozzie is confused, he tries to rationalize with Rabbi saying, “if He (God) could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days ... why couldn’t He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse?” (108)

The series of events that Roth describes thereafter presents the duplicity and hypocrisy of the Jewish Rabbinic authority which the younger generation Ozzies and Itzies find difficult to accept. What Ozzie, and through him, the secularized young generation questions is the arbitrariness and fanaticism that is expressed through Rabbi Binder.

Rabbi Binder appears to be arbitrary to Ozzie Freedman “at first partly because he makes Judaism seem to grant only its own miracles while denying those of Christianity, but even more because Binder is a bully and hypocrite” (Cooper 21). Though he invites a ‘free-discussion’ on any matters ranging from religion, family, politics and sports, Ozzie’s question regarding the possibility of Christian doctrine of ‘immaculate conception’ is conveniently dogged, considered as an instance of impertinence, a crime needing his mother to appear before Rabbi, explaining her son’s recalcitrant behaviour. It is this sort of double standard, hypocrisy false religious superiority that the young generation of Ozzie, Portnoy and Heshie find questionable and non-acceptable, especially in the context of assimilation and Americanization.

Ozzie Freedman, considered to be the “youngest spiritual activist hero in contemporary fiction” (Mc Daniel 54) who wants to be free from the Binding dogmatism of Rabbi Binder and the overarching hypocrisy of his own mother and relatives, tries to rebel at the empty spirituality around him. His desire to be free, an attribute that is part of
his very name—‘free’dman, makes him at one stage to shout, that Rabbi Binder “doesn’t
know anything about God!” (CoJ 112) An incensed Rabbi hitting at Ozzie’s nose and
Ozzie calling Binder ‘bastard’ all happens in a nicely described series of self-revelatory
events. It unveils thus:

‘Stand up, Oscar. What’s your question about?’

Ozzie pulled a word out of the air. It was the handiest word. ‘Religion.’

‘Oh, now you remember?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is it?’

Trapped, Ozzie blurted the first thing that came to him. ‘Why can’t He make
anything He wants to make!’

... Binder twisted quickly to see what had happened and in the midst of the
commotion Ozzie shouted into the rabbi’s back what he couldn’t have shouted to
his face. It was a loud, toneless sound that had the timbre of something stored
inside for about six days.

‘You don’t know! You don’t know anything about God!’

The rabbi spun back towards Ozzie. ‘What?’

‘You don’t know-you don’t -’

‘Apologize, Oscar, apologize!’ it was a threat.

‘You don’t -’

Rabbi Binder’s hand flicked out at Ozzie’s cheek. Perhaps it had only been meant
to clamp the boy’s mouth shut, but Ozzie ducked and the palm caught him
squarely on the nose.

The blood came in a short, red spurt on to Ozzie’s shirt front.
The next moment was all confusion. Ozzie screamed, ‘you bastard, you bastard!’ and broke for the classroom door (112).

What was purely an instinctual reaction of escape, Ozzie flees to the roof. Being there on top of the roof, he feels empowered. He feels that he can command obedience, he makes everyone on the ground genuflect and confess the possibility of Immaculate Conception which the rabbinic authority was not willing to do. Ozzie on top of the roof by chance, now feel the meaning of the word control, there he felt peace and he felt power, and there he becomes the youngest spiritual activist hero, the victim-turned rebel, who wields his accidental power to expose the highly inflated, and empty spirituality of the Rabbinic class that suppress any quest for truth.

What becomes clear here is the genuineness of the younger generation’s attempt to attain assimilation into the secular world, a world of equality, a world devoid of hypocrisy and false religious superiority, comes in direct confrontation with the adult sophistications and “clichéd theological responses” (McDaniel 55). This narrow and sterile religiosity of Rabbi Binders, Rabbi Warshaws and others prevents them from having an absolute integration into the secular America.

The young generation of Ozzies and Portnoys and Heshies, aware of the sterility of the religion as practiced by the immature and impulsive Rabbis, want to be freed from such suffocating influences of orthodox beliefs so as to be more ‘human.’ Ozzie is not convinced and satisfied with the claims and explanations by the Rabbis, as it appears to be illogical and inflated on false religious superiority.

The secularized and assimilation seeking young generation does not want what Theodore Solotaroff’s essay “Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists” considers to be a situation in which “God is... hedged in by the conflicts of Judaism and Christianity” (27).
Claims of God’s omnipotence, in the opinion of Ozzie Freedman, should not be discriminatory, favouring only what is ‘Jewish’ while denouncing or by passing similar claims by the gentiles. Suppressing the Christian doctrine of Immaculate Conception as ‘impossible’ by Rabbi Binder verbally and even using physical violence, considered to be unacceptable.

The predicament of the young generation assumes great significance as they are not able to sustain this mode of rebellion over a sustainable period of time, as they are either consumed by guilt for going against the tradition, or, they are soon over-powered by the system, which has the backing of the religious orthodoxy. Therefore, even when he is fully aware that the ‘momentary power’ that he wields over his mother and Rabbi would come to an end as soon as he descends the roof, he makes a valiant attempt to be secular and validate the claims of Christianity.

After having brought Rabbi Binder, Yakov Blotnik along with his mother and the entire crowd, down on their knees, Ozzie begins his catechising, the scene is very poignant. Looking around he calls out to Rabi Binder:

‘Rabbi?’

‘Yes, Oscar.’

‘Rabbi Binder, do you believe in God?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you believe God can do anything?’

‘Oscar, I think-’

‘Tell me you believe God can do ‘Anything.’ Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse.’

‘He can.’
‘Tell me!’

‘God,’ Rabbi Binder admitted, ‘can make a child without intercourse’ (120).

After having made Rabbi Binder to accept that ‘God can make a child without intercourse,’ which actually was the bone of contention between him and the Rabbi, Ozzie frenziedly makes his mother to do the same. He does it with the old man, and the entire assembly.

Ozzie, as we have mentioned earlier, taking the flights leading to the roof in a moment of utter confusion and fear, ironically feels peace and power atop the roof. He commands everyone to kneel, making them to say that they believed in Jesus, “first one at a time then all together” (120). The end of the story becomes very crucial, as Roth is trying to make a point here. The boy who finds himself in a position of power by default, is able to wield enormous power over the orthodox, demanding and domineering Rabbi Binder, his accusing janitor, punishing and overbearing mother etc, only because of the compromising and hypocritical nature of the religious beliefs in his time. Roth is very categorical in saying that some of the orthodox teachings and practices of his age were more of a fashion than conviction. The compromising nature of the religious leadership for the sake of convenience and temporary gains is also ridiculed here.

In the story, young Ozzie is painfully aware that his position of power is temporary and that once he is back to the ground, there would be a complete turnaround, a return of the status quo. He is very much alive to the hypocrisy and fickle mindedness of those kneeling bellow, and therefore he attempts to safe guard himself. He does it by making them to promise that they would not hit him about God, nor would they hit anybody about God. The tenets of this kind of fundamentalism, this kind of false religiosity and uncritical dogmatism which did not find favour with the younger
generations, who actually were trying their best to be more secular and adaptive to the changing situations of the post-war existential reality. Therefore, such a duplicity and double standard even in matters as intimate as their religious convictions, constantly irritated and confused Ozzie, who wanted clarifications from the Rabbinic leadership. This duplicity and double standards are further taken up by Roth in his Portnoy’s Complaint, where the young Portnoy and Heshie challenge what they consider as false religiosity and exclusivist mentality of the traditional Judaism.

Portnoy, for example, does not approve of the religious bigotry practiced by the older generation Jews who try to instil in the minds of the young a false sense of religious superiority. The first distinction that Portnoy seems to have learned from his parents is, “not night and day, or hot and cold, but goyische and Jewish” (PC 75). He was consistently told that, “anything that is bad it’s the goyim, if it’s good it’s the Jews.” All these ‘disgusting and useless categories’ in the opinion of Portnoy is “barbaric,” (76) and height of hypocrisy.

Portnoy is very categorical when he says to his parents, “just because it’s your religion doesn’t mean it’s mine,” (60) as religious convictions cannot be forced, and any religion, whether Jewish or gentile, that goes against the principles of equality, that which is not humane and genuine, has to be rejected out rightly. It is the reason why Portnoy is so categorical in exposing the bigotry and discriminatory policies of the Rabbis saying, “I don’t believe in the Jewish religion” (61), but reading between the lines it would mean that he does not rather believe in the type of religion that the Rabbis were preaching and perpetuating. Portnoy condemns the rabbinic class, the likes of Rabbi Warshaw, who earns his living by the synagogue. When he says “That’s all there to it” (73) regarding the religiosity of the Rabbi Warshaw, he hints that all that the Rabbi does is only to earn his living, and not out of any religious conviction. He is of the opinion that their false
religiosity is only a means of livelihood, and beyond it they are, “pompous, impertinent frauds with an absolutely grotesque superiority complex ... who stinks to high heaven of cigarettes” (73).

Portnoy, with all his desire for sexual freedom and liberation, is also desirous of a freedom from what he considers a ‘narrow-minded religiosity’ as practiced by his fellow Jewry, including his parents. The contempt for such narrow-mindedness is vocally expressed when he exclaims, “Oh God, if you’re up there shining down your countenance, why not spare us from here on out the enunciation of the rabbis! Why not spare us the rabbis themselves! Look, why spare us religion, if only in the name of our human dignity!” (74) The young generation comprising Portnoy and Ozzie vouches the clichéd saying that ‘religion is the opiate of the people’ which in fact often fails to uphold the dignity of humanity in the name of false and narrow-minded religiosity, which they struggle to oppose. Portnoy narrates the story of his own cousin, Harold, lovingly called as Heshie, who becomes a victim of narrow religiosity of his parents.

Heshie, before being grafted to the army in 1943, wanted to get himself engaged to Alice Dembosky-a non-Jewish woman, the head drum majorette of the high school, who could twirl two silver batons simultaneously, pass them over her shoulders, glide them sneakily between her legs, toss them fifteen to twenty feet into the air, catching one, then the other behind her back. She could have been an ideal partner for Heshie who was equally athletic, agile and one of the leading stars of the track team. But, she being a Gentile woman causes great troubles in the life of Heshie, the false religious superiority enrages his parents, who try to coerce him with the help of Rabbi Warshaw, saying his decision to marry a gentile woman is equal to taking his life and giving it to his worst enemy.
It is his father’s crafty lie to Alice, which narrated a fabricated story of an incurable blood-disease to the prospective wife that ends the relationship. She is informed that the doctor has warned Heshie not to marry, as the longevity of his life is not known to anyone. Uncle Hymie, expresses his false solidarity with Alice as he says that, “he did not want to inflict the suffering that was to come, upon an innocent young person,” (PC 59) like Alice and that therefore she would do well to find out somebody new. Here Roth presents the false religious superiority, fanatic ethnicity of the Jewry as well as their aversion towards the gentiles. As he goes off to war, he is killed. But what is significant to note here, is the reaction of his relatives, who were secretly pleased that he died without leaving a non-Jewish wife and children. This reveals the deep-rooted religious superiority that the older generations had, which came in direct conflict with the new generations of Heshies and Portnoys.

If in the case of Ozzie Freedman, Portnoy and Heshie, it is the inter-religious and inter-group discrimination that becomes the bone of contention between the traditional parents and secular minded young generations, it is the intra-religious and intra-racial conflicts that becomes the focus of Roth’s investigation in “Eli, The Fanatic,” where there emerges an engaging conflict between the secular Jews of Woodenton and the traditional Yeshiva community. The conflict between the old-world practices and the new-world accommodation can easily be drawn-out from the conversation between Rabbi Tzuref, the director of the Yeshiva community and, Eli Peck the attorney who goes to broker a compromise on behalf of the Woodentons.

Eli presents the matter as one related to zoning laws. He says, “you cannot have a boarding school in a residential area” (ETF 188). Tzuref in return rather sarcastically asks whether or not a house in a residential area is allowed, as he considers the Yeshiva as a house for the orphaned children. The inner struggle that goes on in the mind of Eli as he
listens to Rabbi is very evident. Though he had presented the matter as something related to zoning law, he knew for sure what made him to confront the Yeshiva was actually the inner, emotional fear and insecurity that the Woodentons had at the presence of the orthodox Yeshiva Community. The ambiguity, the inner wavering and the subsequent predicament is evident in the following:

Too often he wished he were pleading for the other side; though if he were on the other side, then he’d wish he were on the side he was. The trouble was that sometimes the law didn’t seem to be the answer; law didn’t seem to have anything to do with what was aggravating everybody. (190)

Roth presents the predicament as something that emerges between two world-views, between the old-world view of the Yeshivas and the new world-view of the Woodentons. Conflict is between the adherence to the heart and the adherence to the law, without understanding the intention of the law-giver. The conversation that goes on between the Rabbi and the lawyer is revealing the conflicting perspective:

‘Mr. Peck, who made the law, may I ask you that?’

‘The people.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘Before the people.’

‘No one. Before the people there was no law.’

‘Wrong.’ Tzuref said.

‘We make the law, Mr. Tzuref. It is our community. ...without law there is chaos.’
‘What you call law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is law! God!’ he announced (ETF 198).

Tzuref’s reasoning from the above discussion seems to be metaphysical for Eli, as he has been overpowered by the spirituality of the modern world. It is to such kind of worldly overpowering, even to the extent of forgoing once own cherished identity and ethnicity, that Roth gives a realistic rendering in his stories and novels. “Eli The Fanatic” becomes an apt example in this regard.

Roth begins in medias res, Leo Tzuref welcoming Eli at the sagging old mansion where the Yeshiva is located. At the very outset, there is a comparison between the two places. The Yeshiva campus is portrayed as having jungle of hedges and dark untrampled horse path while the Woodenton Street is lit with yellow lights.

The pursuit of total assimilation as an attempt to negate the possibility of a repeat of the European past and the trauma of the Holocaust is evident in the story of the modern Jews of Woodenton. Their desire to be secular and social, safe and sensitive leads to conflicts within two communities of Woodenton, and this conflicting situation and the unsuccessful effort of an attorney, Eli Peck in evacuating the Yeshiva school-an orthodox Jewish institution for the religious and secular education of children, mainly focusing on the study of the traditional religious texts, primarily The Torah and The Talmud.

The Yeshiva that houses around eighteen dispossessed children from Eastern Europe seems to have threatened the existing peaceful and harmonious existence between the Jews and the Protestants. And this becomes the focus of “Eli the Fanatic,” the second story that the research analyses in this chapter. Here the conflict occurs between the traditional Judaism as practised by the Yeshivas, and the assimilated Judaism or the modern Judaism, as professed and practised by the Jews at Woodenton. The first chapter
of the research focussed on the attempted Americanization of the suburban new-rich upper-middle-class, primarily concentrating on the materialistic appropriation of American secular world values, at the expense of the traditional Jewish specificities, whereas, the assimilation of the Jewish community at Woodenton becomes peculiar as the Americanization apparently takes place at the expense of their religious identity and ethnicity.

As mentioned in the first chapter of the research, Patimkins’ attempt at Americanization leads to a surgical intervention. For instance, Brenda, has her nose ‘fixed,’ and her brother is waiting for the same in the near future. But when it comes to the Woodenton Jews, there is a three-fold alienation that they are trying to arrive at, from that of the Yeshivah, so as to “live in comfort, beauty and serenity” (ETF 195). This desire of the Woodenton Jews finds its expression in Eli Peck’s letter to Rabbi Tzuref. Eli writes:

Woodenton is a progressive suburban community whose members, both Jewish and gentile, are anxious that their families live in comfort and beauty and serenity. This is after all, twentieth century, and we do not think it too much to ask that the members of our community dress in a manner appropriate to the time and place. (195)

He continues to explain to the Yeshivah Rabbi:

Woodenton, as you may not know, has long been the home of well-to-do Protestants. It is only since the war that the Jews have been able to buy property here, and for Jews and gentiles to live beside each other in amity. For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and gentiles alike have had to give up
some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other. Certainly such amity is to be desired!” (195)

In their attempt not to threaten or offend each other, both the progressive Jews at Woodenton and the Protestants have given up, what is considered by them as ‘more extreme practices.’ Debra Shostak’s essay “Impersonation and the Diaspora Jew” in Philip Roth-counter texts, counter lives, opines that the secularization from the part of the Jews as mentioned earlier, has led to a three-fold alienation-cultural, linguistic and religious. These in the opinion of Shostak are the very same elements which they have “repressed in order to smooth their entry into American culture,” (119) labelling as ‘more extreme practices.’

Though alienation as a concept occupies a prominent place in Jewish American literature, the theme of assimilation and alienation becomes a very dear to Roth’s early career. Melvin Seeman speaking about the ‘meaning of alienation’ in the American Sociological Review identifies five alternative meanings of alienation as “powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement” (783). Among the five alternatives, the last one, namely self-estrangement, wherein a person or community attempts to separate or disengage oneself/themselves from the culture they were once part of, applies more to Roth’s Woodenton Jews. There emerges a kind of devaluation or abandonment of the Jewish ethnicity and cultural traditions so as to fit into the twentieth century WASP’ish (White Anglo Saxon Protestants) American culture. This cultural religious and linguistic self-estrangement that the Woodenton Jews have brought on themselves is supposed to have assured a peaceful co-existence so far, and that seems to be threatened by the continued presence and activities of the Yeshiva School.
The self-estrangement that the Woodenton Jews make with the Yeshiva community becomes evident when the presence of an elderly orthodox Jew, an assistant at the school, wandering in the town in an old frayed black coat, and a black Talmudic hat unsettles the hard earned secular identity there. The strange rituals, “with origins long forgotten,” (ETF 208) that the inmates of the Yeshiva practiced, which in the words of Ted Heller, one of the Jewish inhabitant, “smells like a lot of hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff,” (ETF 206) bear witness to the religious and ritualistic alienation of the Woodenton Jews. Roth brings in the linguistic alienation when Ted Heller accuses the Yeshiva of “talking a dead language” (ETF 207). Yiddish, the language of the Eastern Europeans for centuries appear to be strange and dead at the moment, for the progressive suburban Jewish community at woodenton, including Eli, who have replaced an existential strategy of aggression with a new strategy of retreat and compromise. They fear an imminent future where hundreds of little kids with Yamalkahs chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, or hundreds of Yeshiva boys going after the Woodenton girls threatening the peaceful atmosphere.

The angst of the Woodentons seems to be very reasonable and logical. As far as they are concerned they have peace in Woodenton, “incredible peace,” (ETF 208) as revealed in one of Eli’s self reflections. This peace is considered as a blessing that they want to protect at any cost. They fear a socio-economic backsliding and historical exclusion, culminating in a possible repeat of the Holocaust experience. The passage that follows is very poignant, taking the reader down through the centuries. The reflection goes like this:

have it so good! No wonder then they would keep things just as they were.

Here after all, were peace and safety—what civilization had been working toward for centuries. For all his jerkiness, that was all Ted Heller was asking for, peace and safety. It was what his parents had asked for in the Bronx, and his grandparents in Poland, and theirs in Russia or Austria, or wherever else they’d fled to or from. ...and now they had it—the world was at last a place for families, even Jewish families. After all these centuries, may be there just had to be this communal toughness—or numbness—to protect such blessing. (208)

It is this cultivated ‘communal toughness—or numbness’, that help them to protect the incredible peace and amity they have earned by a certain ‘give and take’. It is with the very same conscious self-estrangement that the Woodenton Jews has commissioned Eli Peck, the attorney, with a message of conciliation and compromise. As the attorney, though having the legal support of the Zoning Laws to evict the Yeshiva school from its present location, Eli Peck tries to work out a compromise! He too tries to negotiate! Citing the example of Woodenton Jews who have given up many of their ‘extreme’ religious practices in order to live in peace and harmony, Eli suggests Rabbi Tzuref, the Yeshiva chief to make some necessary alterations in their dressing and restrictions in their movements.

In his letter to Tzuref, he lays down two conditions of the proposed compromise. First, “the religious, educational, and social activities of the Yeshivah of Woodenton will be confined to the Yeshivah grounds.” Second, “Yeshivah personnel are welcomed in the streets and stores of Woodenton provided they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the twentieth century” (ETF 196).
The pressure exerted by his fellow Jews to broker a compromise in such a way that would stop the emergence of an inauspicious old-world form of Jewish life, leads Eli Peck to his third nervous breakdown. It is a signature characteristic of the post-war society which Roth tries to emphasize from time to time. Eli’s attempt to function as the representative of his community, which constantly complain about the discomforting presence of the *Yeshivah* on the one hand, and the sympathetic feeling that he has for the *Yeshivah* on the other, cuts Eli into two and consequently he loses his composure. As the spokesperson of the Jews of Woodenton, he does not allow Rabbi Tzuref to cloud the issue with issues, as he is very clear when he says, “Simply, you can’t have a boarding school in a residential area,” and in the same vein he shows his sensibility by saying, “we thought it better to tell you before any action is undertaken” (ETF 188). His firmness doesn’t cloud his sensitive nature. What he intends to do is to work out a compromise which would calm the paranoia that the Woodenton Jews have about a probable restoration of hostilities between the Jews and the gentiles, with the presence of the Hasidic Assistant in his ‘disturbing dress’ in the streets of Woodenton. In his letter addressed to Tzuref he writes, “I am not a Nazi who would drive eighteen children who are probably frightened at the sight of a firefly, into homelessness” (ETF 204).

Eli seems to be very sensitive, sometimes over sensitive. His wife is very categorical when she says, “you go overboard, Eli. That’s your trouble. You won’t do anything in moderation.” Her words, “that’s how people destroy themselves” (ETF 203), proves to be prophetic in the case of Eli later. He is sensitive to his paranoiac fellow Jews who feel their suppressed identity and ethnicity would be revealed by the presence of the *Yeshivah*. He is equally sensitive to the feelings and emotions of *Yeshivah*.

The irony that Roth presents here in the story is that Eli’s attempt to extricate his fellow men from an existential predicament; he himself becomes the victim of the very
same predicament. As he returns after placing two suits, a pair of shoes, shirts, cap and all that is required for Tzuref’s assistant to be dressed in clothing “usually associated with American life in the 20th century” (ETF 196), he feels a strange intense feeling creeping into him, “for whose deepness he could feel no word” (ETF 205).

Sensitivity to his fellow Jews at Woodenton, and the sympathy he felt for the 18 dispossessed children and their Hasidic Rabbi, deprives Eli of his mental balance. Eli who appears to be a fanatic at the beginning of the story, becomes a ‘neurotic’ by the end. The inner tension that he undergoes reaches its culmination, when he dresses himself in the Hasidic Black dress, which ironically is the same Jewish dress which he along with the Woodenton Jews, detests. When he visits the Yeshivah school dressed in black, he finds the elderly assistant wearing the green Brooks Brothers suit, and there his identity crisis becomes very evident. It becomes very telling:

‘Sholom,’ Eli whispered and the fellow turned. The recognition took some time. He looked at what Eli wore, up close; Eli looked at what he wore. And then Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits. The greenie looked to be suffering from a similar confusion. They stared long at one another. Eli’s heart shivered and his brain was momentarily in such a mixed-up condition that his hands went out to button down the collar of his shirt that somebody else was wearing. What a mess! (215)

His encounter with old man in green suit, leads Eli back to the Coach House Road, where he walks the length and breadth of the town in his newly attained Hasidic dress. The townspeople assume that Eli is having his third nervous breakdown. The inner struggle and pain of deserting what was so dear to him, for the sake of the external peace
and serenity of Woodenton, the secular America, Eli loses his serenity and mental balance. He becomes the victim of the opposing claims of orthodoxy and secularism. He becomes the victim of trading conviction for convenience. He becomes yet another living example of what Nadel calls the “conflict between old-world practice and new-world accommodation” (69).

Through Eli Peck Roth portrays the post-war human being, trapped by what Rodgers calls the “numbing secularism” (27) of the contemporary American society, considered as a case of ‘wanting yet not wanting’, a Woodenton Jew who has sacrificed his Jewish ethnicity and identity on the altar of secular identity, but still yearns for the ‘fleshpots of Egypt.’ Here if Woodenton Jews in common, stands an example of a convenient negotiating of Jewish ethnicity and identity for a skin-deep secular identity, which seems to assure peace, security and social acceptance, Eli stands for the inherent internal conflict that is associated with such unwieldy negotiations.

For the Woodenton Jews, and by a universal extension, any one, desirous of an absolute assimilation, it is a matter of survival. Their commissioning of Eli Peck to negotiate with the Yeshivah demonstrates what Rodgers considers as their fear of losing the healthy relationship they have fostered by way of “anonymity and assimilation” (28).

Roth here presents two predicaments related to ethnicity and religious identity. First one emerges among the modern Jews of Woodenton who, feel that they have been able to build a healthy relationship with the protestant neighbours only by way of common sense and moderation. In the words of Ted Heller, the most vociferous of the Woodentons “there’s a good healthy relationship in the town because it’s modern Jews and protestants ... the way things are now are fine-like human beings. There’s going to be no pogroms in Woodenton” (ETF 206).Therefore, when the newly established Yeshivah,
with their orthodox rituals, Hasidic dress and strange language, which the Woodenton Jews have given up long back, threatens that healthy relationship, they take recourse to the existing Zoning Laws so as to preserve the so called peace and security, which their compromising existence has assured so far. An imagined opposition from the Protestants that could arise from the presence and activities of the Yeshivah, perceived as ‘fanatic,’ makes the modern Jews to press the panic button. Though the Woodenton Jews have suppressed their cultural, religious and linguistic identity for the sake of donning the garb of secularism, they fear that at any instance of religious fanaticism from the Yeshivash’s may lead to a repeat of Holocaust history.

As a compromise broker, Eli, first feels that there is no ‘insurmountable obstacle’ in bringing a compromise. As a mutually palatable solution Eli proposes for a change of dress for Tzuruf’s assistant. He feels a change of dress would do the trick. But it is met with objection from Tzuruf who says, “his dress is all he’s got” (ETF 197). Now Eli explains to the Rabbi that what he proposed was not to ‘take away the one thing the man’s got,’ but to ‘replace’ his present dress with another dress that befits the secular culture of the twentieth Century America! This seemed to be a very easy solution to the problem, as the Woodenton Jews have already achieved it, a blissful replacement of their cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic identity. He advises the Yeshivahs to follow the suit. Woodenton Jews have compromised the problematic Jewish identity and ethnicity for a safe and peaceful secular American identity, and it seems to be the only possible way open for the Yeshivah if they want to “live peacefully and satisfactorily with the Jews of Woodenton” (ETF 196).

It is Eli Peck the Attorney who represents the second and a more crucial predicament. It emerges from his inner struggle as he tries to negotiate a compromise. His encounter with the Yeshivah and its inmates unconsciously revives in Eli, what he had
consciously suppressed. He is unable to conduct a dispassionate negotiation with Tzuref, leading to their eviction from Woodenton. A life of moral sympathy, justice and integrity, the very same traditional Jewish values which he had suppressed in the sub-conscious realms of his mind comes to the fore, and Eli is disturbed. He is moved with the desire to ‘walk the talk.’ The events that unfold, when Eli reaches back home, after his encounter with Tzuref, throws light to his troubled mind.

Even on a day his wife, Miriam is expecting their first baby, Eli does not reach home in time. Her anxious queries about his wellbeing and whereabouts is not answered, rather it is countered by another question that preoccupies his mind, he asks her, “where are my winter suits?” (ETF 200) When she tries to affirm her love and concern for her husband, by saying, “Eli, I love you in that suit. But not now. Have something to eat. I made dinner tonight-I’ll warm it.” Eli’s reply, “you’ve got a box big enough for this suit?” (ETF 201) is Roth’s way of presenting Eli’s perturbed and turbulent mind. His frantic effort to supply the Hasidic Jew with his own secularized dress meets with a shocking response from the Yeshivah, as the very same dress he tried to replace is found at his door step on the following morning. Though the “shock at first was the shock of having daylight turned off all at once,” (ETF 212) Eli’s soul is stirred with memoires of traditional Judaism. His instinctual affinity to what he ‘really is’ comes to the fore as he dresses himself in the Hasidic dress, walking across the woodenton town, greeting everyone on the way with the traditional ‘Sholom’ instead of the secular ‘Hello’.

Here Roth becomes poignant and his lines become pregnant with crucial reflections on Jewish ethnicity, Jewish identity and Jewish predicament. Beyond all the cosmetic and ornamental changes attempted either by the Woodentons or by the Patimkins, the fact remains! The Jewish ethnicity, the Jewish identity that is deep in every Jew, longs to be unmasked, though it is kept under ‘suspended animation’ due to what
David Gooblar’s *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, considers to be a fear of threatening the “delicate balance of assimilation” (15).

Victoria Aarons, in “American Jewish identity in Roth’s Short Fiction” is of the view that the secularized Woodenton Jews, along with Eli Peck, who defiantly “dissociates himself from the defining and static markers of Jewish identity and history,” fears an imminent marginalization and probable repeat of the devastating Holocaust, and therefore, they want to free themselves from the “restricting weight of a legacy” (8), that the establishment of the orthodox *Yeshivah* community has resurfaced. The Woodenton Jews, in their paranoid fear and anxiety have conveniently put on themselves a manufactured self, having a customized secular identity, so that their precariously peaceful existence there at Woodenton, would not be threatened. They have redefined themselves by negotiating their Jewish ethnicity for an American identity, and therefore, consider the presence of the *Yeshivah* as an infiltration that needs to be checked at the earliest, so as to avoid a premature and untimely revelation of their manufactured selves.

Therefore, the Woodentons en masse volunteers to evict the Yeshiva so as to avoid the repeat of what Aarons calls the “shackles of a Jewish past” (12). The identity that the woodenton Jews have masked so as to don the garb of secularization, stands in sharp contrast to the European refugees of the *Yeshivah*, who valiantly champions their essential Jewish identity. The Woodentons who have negotiated their identity both culturally and ethnically, exemplified by the Young Patimkins who have ‘their nose fixed’, has, in the words of Timothy Parrish, undergone a “radical transformation of their sense of themselves as Jews”, and have become more “hellenized and hedonized” (132).

The problematic of assimilation and secularization here lies in the fact that in the process of attaining an ‘extrinsic Americanness’ the Woodenton Jews have compromised
their ‘intrinsic Jewishness’ and ethnic past. Roth has successfully captured in his short stories the intricate and delicate psychological tensions that accompany any such ethno-cultural blending of identities. In “Eli, The Fanatic,” the Rothian irony is very prominent, as the Woodentons who have traded their ethnicity and cultural identity for the sake of serene and peaceful existence, does not actually enjoy it as they are in constant fear of losing it at any moment. The fragile nature of the peace and security they have attained at the cost of such their ethnic and cultural identity, speaks volumes of the unwieldy compromise.

The Yeshivah community is presented as a counter witness to the feigned ‘gentileness,’ of the Woodentons. The secularised Woodenton Jews, who have conveniently dispensed with the public practice of orthodox religious rituals and customs have actually worn a mask, in their attempt to achieve a complete assimilation to the American culture, they seems to have feigned an identity that is foreign to them, that of the ‘Gentiles’ that of the protestants in Woodenton.

The plight of Eli Peck, who legally tries to “disband the offending presence” of Rabbi Tzuref and the Yeshiva community that “threatens the precarious coalescence maintained only by benign neglect on the one hand and cautious acquiescence on the other,” (Aarons 14, 15) is the same. Eli too is divided! His Loyalty oscillates as he is confronted by Tzuref. Though the safety and security provided by the progressive suburban community at Woodenton allures and attracts Eli, however, the verbal confrontation with the Hasidic Jew unnerves him, as he oscillates between being an apostate who uses his professional competence to drive away the Yeshiva, to a fanatic who frantically dons the very same Hasidic dress, the very source of vehement opposition and fear.
In a confused state of consciousness, Eli, who once exchanged his Jewish identity and history for the sake of a secular American identity, tries to regain it by a symbolic exchange of clothes. This is seen as an attempt to regain his real self—his Jewish ethnicity and identity. His effort is thwarted and suppressed by the rest of Woodentons. His voice becomes the voice of the subaltern, whose perturbed mind was calmed down by an intravenous sedation. Rosalind Morris in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, considers subalternity as the “consciousness of being obstructed, contained or simply misread” (8). It seems to be vindicated in the person of Eli Peck, as the drug could calm only his soul, “but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached” (ETF 221).

The experience of Eli Peck here resembles the experience of a subaltern, as the attitude of the mainstream Woodentons towards Eli Peck seems to be similar to what Gayatri Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* considers as the “constant and self-righteous shaming” (2) of the colonized, wherein a restorative attempt by Eli Peck is branded as a nervous breakdown, and therefore, something to be suppressed immediately by an intravenous sedation.

There is something common in both the stories, the protagonists are divided, and they become a sort of split-personalities. There is a kind of discrimination of one individual against the other, one group against the other. For example, the negotiation of identity that Neil attempts can be partially ascribed to his desire to attain a socio-cultural mobility, though Roth presents it in the sidelines of a summer romance. When the core issue of making a choice emerges, either for or against, both Neil and Brenda, the two frontier players of the assimilation game, backtrack. Though bit undecided in the beginning, both seem to be withdrawing to one’s own comfort zones, Brenda returns to the safety and security of Short Hills, while Neil takes the train to Newark, well in time to
begin his work at the Newark Public Library, the actual location prior to the attempted upper-middle class alignment. The conflict vitiates as Neil tries to negotiate and blend the two intrinsically diverse socio-cultural identities, as he tries to align himself into the upper-middle-class psyche of the Patimkins. The attempt fails, and he feels himself to be a mere “substance... those limbs that face I saw in front of me,” (GC 103) an utterly divided personality, the outside of whom gave little information about the inside.

Speaking about Neil Klugman’s attempted flight from Newark to the promised land of Suburban Short Hills, Victoria Aarons remarks that Klugman finally, rather “uneasily discovers, it is not the gentiles, but the Patimkins (secularized Jews), who have reinvented their cultural lives as crypto Jews, and for whom Neil Klugman represents everything they have abandoned and everything that they fear” (13), who prevents his entrance to the Upper-middle-class. It is this inherent anxiety of being crypto Jews in a dominantly protestant area of Woodenton, and the fear of being unmasked of their real ethnic identities, forms the baseless rationale for the pre-emptive evacuation attempt of the Yeshiva, which Henri Tajfel in Social Identity and Intergroup Relations, considers to be the problem of “social categorization” (503) leading to intergroup discrimination.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) as proposed by Henri Tajfel (1978) and John Turner (1979) held that the three cognitive processes that create prejudicial and discriminatory behaviour between distinct social groups are social categorisation, social identification and social comparison. As a social-psychological theory, Tajfel made use of what he termed as the ‘Minimal Group Paradigm.’ This he used to reach the conclusion that a “mere categorization to one group or another makes people to discriminate against the designated out-group and favour their in-group” (qtd. in Trepte 256). It is the methodology employed by the Proponents of Social Identity Theory, to find out the minimum conditions required for the inter-group discriminations.
The experiment that they used to arrive at the conclusion is popularly known as ‘Klee/Kandinsky Study’ where in forty-eight students were randomly allocated to either to a ‘Klee group’ or to a ‘Kandisky group’, where both group professed their preference to the particular group they were randomly assigned. The Theory is based on the assumption that there is a tendency of group behaviour among humans such as, in-group solidarity and out-group discrimination, which is a constitutive element of the cognitive “social identity process that aims to gather positive self-esteem and self-enhancement” (Abrams &Hogg 317).

In two of the stories “The Conversion of the Jews,” and “Eli The Fanatic,” and Portnoy’s Complaint a novel, which formed the focus of this chapter, there are ample instances that validates some of the claims of Social Identity Theory, such as the in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. In “Goodbye Columbus” for example, Roth pits the Jewish middle-class life of Short Hills against the Jewish working-class life of Newark. Klugmans and Patimkins are symbol of social groupings, where the first one stresses the values of art and knowledge, the latter is engrossed in sports and eating. The parameter that is used here to measure the in-group affinity is geographical in the case of “Goodbye Columbus.” Both Aunt Gladys and Brenda believe in such geographical markers. When informed about his decision to go to Short Hills for a week on vacation, Gladys can’t believe it, she exclaims, “since when do Jewish people live in Short-hills?” Further, she expects all Jews should belong to Newark, and anybody out of Newark doesn’t belong to the group, therefore, she says “They couldn’t be real Jews believe me” (GC 49).

If Aunt Gladys has expressed a kind of in-group affinity, Brenda becomes an example of out-group derogation. When Neil revealed that he lived in Newark, Brenda immediately distances herself from that place, her comment, “we lived in Newark when I
was a baby” (GC 17), evidences her attitude towards Newark, as it seems to be a symbol of a low status of life, which she has transcended and does not want to associate herself with anymore. Speaking about her mother’s frugal attitude Brenda sarcastically comments that, “she still thinks we live in Newark,” (GC 27) which again speaks volumes of such group specific identification and identity. She wants herself to be identified as belonging to the Rich, luxurious Short Hills and does not want to be associated with the working class-life of Newark.

Similarly, coming to the “The Conversion of the Jews,” the plane crash at La Guardia, where fifty eight people had been killed becomes a ‘tragedy’ for Ozzie Freedman’s orthodox mother, only when she locates eight Jews among the list of those diseased. Here we have the manifestation of in-group affinity. Similarly, Rabbi Binder, who vehemently upholds the Jewish belief in God who created Heaven and Earth in six days, out rightly rejects the Catholic doctrine of Immaculate Conception saying, “the only way a woman can have a baby is to have intercourse with a man” (CoJ 108). This demonstrates the trait of out-group derogation.

Mrs. Freedman’s considering the plane crash as a tragedy is only because of her in-group affinity and affiliation to the ‘Jews’. Similarly, Rabbi-Binder’s passionate rejection of Ozzie Freedman’s attempt to validate the Catholic doctrine of Immaculate Conception, yet again is an instance of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. It is ironic, that had, Rabbi Binder, been arbitrarily categorized into a group labelled as ‘catholic’, as per the assumptions of Social Identity Theory, then Binder would have held a diametrically different opinion about the very same issue, as he here becomes a mere victim of what Tajfel in his “Individuals and Groups in Social Psychology” considers as the “in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination” (183).
In “Eli The Fanatic,” the secularized Woodenton Jews, who is threatened by the continued presence of the Yeshivah, symbolizes the ‘social-group’ which Tajfel and Turner defines as consisting of number of people who “feel and perceive themselves as belonging to this group and who are said to be in the group by others” (Tajfel & Turner 40). The Woodenton Jews feel and perceive themselves as belonging to an in-group, having a positive evaluative and emotional component and they categorize themselves as a “modern community” (ETF 192), who have given up their some of their extreme practices-ritual, cultural and linguistic, in order to maintain the domestic happiness and amity.

The evaluative and emotional components of a social group can be positive and negative. What we see in the case of the woodenton Jews is that they utilize the negative evaluative and emotional component of their in-group as a means to discriminate the Yeshiva community, which they consider as the out-group, and thus enhance their in-group esteem and identity. Based on this they evaluate and consider the traditional Hasidic presence as threatening, their dress as outlandish their language as mysterious and their religious rituals as magical “hocus-pocus, abracadabra.” (ETF 206) such group categorization which actually accentuates the inter-class differences and underestimates the intra-class differences finds its expression in the discourse of “Eli The Fanatic”, as an opportunistic categorisation as ‘secular Jews’ make the Woodentons to consider the Hasidic Yeshiva as an Out-group, Yiddish as an archaic language and orthodox Jewish rituals that they practiced once with great enthusiasm, prior to their secularisation, as “practicing customs with origins long forgotten” (ETF 208).

By a favourable consideration and appreciation of the in-group, members of a social group, in the opinion of Tajfel and Turner, tries to either enhance or ensure their social identity and position. In Portnoy’s Complaint too, there are various instances where
this phenomena occurs. The orthodox Jewish parents try to enhance and ensure the purity of their ethnic and religious identity by a negative evaluation, which Portnoy considers as ‘trifle barbaric’. It is indeed discriminatory as they; the Jewish in-group arbitrarily assigns everything bad to *goyim*, while everything good is favourably assigned to the Jews. The young generation of Portnoy and Heshie is told, “if it’s bad it’s the *goyim*, if it’s good it’s the Jews” (PC 75). Portnoy recalls with a sense of utter disgust how even the pathetic record of Jewish high school at football, was favourably presented by the parents in the Newark neighbourhood, prejudicially considering football as “ridiculous pleasures and satisfactions,” (PC 55) meant for the *goyim*.

The out-group derogation is by the Jewish crowd’s response when Alice Dembosky: the head drum majorette of the High school band performed the ‘piece de resistance’. Instead of paying tribute to the girls’ daring and concentration, the Jewish section of the crowd showed what Portnoy considers to be a “certain comic detachment,” symbolic of the group-bias, that “this was precisely the kind of talent that only a goy would think to develop” (PC 54, 55).

The plight of Eli Peck, who legally tries to disband the offending presence of Rabbi Tzuref and the Yeshiva community which in the words of Victoria Aarons “threatens the precarious coalescence maintained only by benign neglect on the one hand and cautious acquiescence on the other,” (15) is the same. Eli too is divided! His Loyalty oscillates as he is confronted by Tzuref. Though the safety and security provided by the progressive suburban community at woodenton allures and attracts Eli, the verbal confrontation with the Hasidic Jew unnerves him, as he oscillates between being an apostate who uses his professional competence to drive away the yeshiva, to a fanatic who frantically dons the very same Hasidic dress, the very source of vehement opposition and fear. In a confused state of consciousness, Eli, who once exchanged his Jewish
identity and history for the sake of a secular American identity, tries to regain it by a symbolic exchange of clothes. This is seen as an attempt to regain his real self—his Jewish ethnicity and identity. His effort fails. Though his perturbed mind was calmed down by an intravenous sedation, the drug could calm only his soul, “but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached” (ETF 221).

Through the individual characters of Ozzie, Portnoy and Eli, what Roth has done is to explore the extraordinary variety and extremely complex Jewish life in the post-war American culture, which was evolving at a pace unheard before and in directions which was uncharted. In this connection, Bonnie Lyons’ observation in “Philip Roth and Jewish American Literature at the Millennium” that Roth focused on some of the “radically assimilated Jew,” (168) with its psycho-social implications, with special reference to their religious and ethnic identity and culture stands vindicated. But the negotiation of ethnic identity and assimilation into the American society had a religious tone as far as the Jews are concerned. This was explored with naked eyes by Roth and that made Roth the victim of gross misreading.

The political history of America in the seventeenth and eighteenth century reveals that the great wave of Jewish migration that took place from Europe, took place with a professed agenda to practice some form of religious life which they were not allowed to practice without fear. Jolyon P. Girard in Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Daily Life in America, mentions about the existing “ferment of America’s open religious climate” (121) which Herberg’s popular book Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology qualifies as “religiousness without religion,” (3) that attracted the angst-ridden immigrant Jewish community to assimilate without a second thought. This tendency of assimilation overdrive, especially among the younger generation, came in conflict with the traditional parents, leading to the generational conflict.
The young assimilation seeking generation tried to assert their individuality and freedom, by way of subversive behaviour and hedonistic indulgences. Philip Roth’s realistic mirroring of the erring generational tendencies, were perceived as “informing on the Jews” (RMO 161) while forgetting the fact that he was making a conscientious effort to caution the perils of human nature, that might catch the Jewish community unawares, had they not refrained from some of their promiscuous instincts, and restrained from their blind religious assimilation. His intention was misunderstood; his fiction was taken out of context. The hidden universal human consideration was minimized so as to magnify the failure to advocate the clannish solidarity.