Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Acclimatization or Acceptance

Jewish American Literature holds an essential place in the literary history of the United States. Beginning with the memoirs and petitions composed by the Sephardic immigrants who arrived in America during the mid-seventeenth century, Jewish American writing grew over the subsequent centuries to flourish in other genres like fiction, poetry and drama. Prominent novelists Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, with their unique themes and modes of narration enriched the fictional world of literature.

The research focused on Anti-Semitism and Myriad Reflections on Life in the select novels of Philip Roth, revolves on the hypothesis that United States with all its claims on the concept of ‘melting pot’, has in its under currents racial discrimination and the immigrants of the so called ‘dreamland’ are dominated by the evil impulses like anti-Semitism, anger, betrayal, violence, bloodshed and carnal desires.

The focus was on asserting that anti-Semitism lies dormant in the American society in addition to depicting the different evil qualities that shatter
the lives of the minority groups. This has been carried out by interpreting the novels through post-modern lens.

The first chapter Introduction is entitled *Annals of Jewish American Literature*. Jewish American Literature has chronicled and paralleled the Jewish American experience. It depicts the struggles of immigrant life, the stable yet alienated middle class existence and the unique challenges of cultural acceptance like assimilation and the reawakening of tradition. The years since World War II have been good for Jewish American writers. Irving Howe claimed in 1977 that Jewish fiction has probably moved past its highpoint as it is dependent on the immigrant experience. Leslie Fiedler asserted in 1986 that Jewish-American Literature’s dominant themes were marginality, alienation and victimization. The works of literature that depict the life of the Jewish immigrants are many. The heroes of these works tend to be young men or boys who try to establish financial viability in the New World while fighting with the demons of traditional Jewish life and family.

Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth are the masters of Jewish American fiction. They wrote about Jews rooted in America, who nonetheless suffer from alienation. In their early works, they employed Jewish literary influences and introduced Jewish history placing them in the forefront of their fictional worlds.

Roth is the great chronicler of second generation American Jewry. His characters are the children of those Jews who worked their tails off to enter the
middle class and did not intend on letting their children forget it. Roth writes about Jews who are financially comfortable yet culturally adrift. Because of their comfort, they afford to be critical of both their Jewish and American worlds. So instead of feeling safe at home in America, they feel even more alienated.

Philip Roth believed in T.S. Eliot’s concept of tradition. He believed that his works will gain significance only in the background of his literary ancestors. Hence his novels abound in references to previous authors like Sophocles, Shakespeare, Hemingway, Yeats, Bronte, Mark Twain, Tolstoy, Henry Miller and so on.

The theoretical framework used to analyze the novels is Post-Modernism. The post-modern techniques are fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, collage of disparate materials and aleatory writing. Post-Modernist writers celebrate fragmentation. They believe in incredulity of meta-narratives. Some of the most common post-modern techniques seen in Roth’s novels are inter textuality and metafiction. His Writings appear to question totality and unity.

The second chapter American Dream and Jewish Nightmare analyses The Plot Against America. The focus of this chapter is on Anti-Semitism. Roth has written this terrific political novel as a fable of an alternative universe, in which America has gone fascist and ordinary life has been flattened under a steamroller of national politics and mass hatreds. The novel imagined an
America in which the 1940 presidential election resulted not in a third term for Franklin D Roosevelt but in a victory for a Republican by Charles A Lindbergh. The science fiction form of alternate history helps to bring to light the racial prejudice of the Americans against the Jews.

Charles Lindbergh the American aviator, inventor and social activist, made the first solo transatlantic flight in 1927. He earned huge sympathy when his baby son was kidnapped and murdered which was considered as ‘The crime of the century’. To escape from constant media attention, Lindbergh decided a voluntary exile to Europe with his family. As he was awarded German Medal of honour by the government of Europe, he was called as a Nazi sympathizer in America. This created a fear in Roth and he thought what would be the condition of Jews if Lindbergh becomes the president of America.

The anti-Semitic citations in this novel illustrate the racial prejudice of Americans. Examples are Winning Poster of Sandy, experience at Douglas Hotel, abusing Herman as a loudmouth Jew, comparison between Herman and Mawhinney and Homestead 42 act. Roth links his imagined story of anti-Semitism to the true history of American racism against blacks. Roth stands as a model, as an Afro-American child when Sandy draws a picture for a contest. This shows the kinship between the Jews and Blacks, the sufferers of racism and discrimination in America. When Roths went on a trip to see the sights of Washington, they found their pre-booked hotel room has become mysteriously unavailable. They were thrown out of the Douglas Hotel as they were Jews.
When Herman Roth addresses the Schism between Lindbergh’s and Lincoln’s respective Americas, he was abused by an old woman as a loudmouth Jew. The Gettysburg principle that “All men are created equal” was violated.

Roth shows how swiftly the rights and democratic customs of American life are lost under the auspices of a scheme called ‘Just folks’ program. It sets out to break up Jewish families and neighborhoods by scattering Jewish children into the Christian land. The narrator’s brother Sandy spends a while in Kentucky through this program and comes home with sympathy for Lindbergh. The anti-Semitism Roth describes in the 1940s springs mostly from an antiwar resentment – from the belief that the Jews bear responsibility for the war to advance their own interest at everyone else’s expense. Anti-Semitism is clearly proved when the American government creates a new Homestead 42 act to scatter Jews from America. These citations from the novel clearly give us the picture of anti-Semitic that lies dormant in American society.

The ‘Plot’ in the title can be interpreted in two ways. One is that the plot can be a story spun out of Roth’s imagination, to the enduring anti-Semitic accusation of how Jews plot against their host societies. The plot can also refer to the plot against America’s Jews. These aspects are scrutinized using the post-modernist baseball and the peculiarities arrived at are, science fiction forms of alternate history, younger narrative voice, variety of texts: newspaper accounts, cinematic Newsreels, gossip columns, history text books, congressional legislation and literary narrative, historiographic meta – fiction.
The Third chapter is *A Look Back in Anger* analyses the novel *Indignation*. The novel set during the Korean War in a small, conservative Ohio College. It evokes a nasty period of America’s social history. Like Roth’s two previous novels, it is also ruthlessly economical and relentlessly death bound.

Roth writes about Marcus Messner, the only child of a Kosher Butcher who goes to college in Ohio with the hope of escaping the family business, an excessively protective father and the draft. His fate is an illustration of the incomprehensible way that one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result. Marcus Messner relates how he tried to fend off his butcher father’s sudden obsession that Marcus would die: “He manifested his fear by hounding me day and night about my whereabouts”, which led him to flee home and matriculate at Winesburg. It reveals no secret here to note that Marcus does die unexpectedly, at age nineteen fulfilling his father’s prophecy and fear that in life the tiniest misstep can have tragic consequences. He says “At the heart of my ambition was the desire to be free of a strong, stolid father suddenly stricken with uncontrollable fear for a grown up son’s well-being”. This parental attitude is one of the reasons for Messner’s indignation.

The other reason for Messner’s indignation was the fraternities in his college. Messner was compelled to join any of the religious groups in college. Being an atheist, he was not willing to join in any group. Marcus becomes
infatuated with a fellow student, Olivia Hutton, a survivor of suicide attempt. The sexually inexperienced Marcus is bewildered when Olivia performs fellatio on him during their one and only date.

Bloodletting is a major motif of *Indignation*. Roth teases out in multiple ways and uses to connect various threads of the novel, from Markie’s youth, where he had been taken to slaughter houses and seen hundreds of chickens killed, to Olivia whose vivid wrist scar attests to a former suicide attempt. Marcus required an emergency appendectomy while at Winesburg and his mother’s visit to him as he recovers. To Marcus’ dismay, his mother raises the idea of divorcing his father, something unknown in their Jewish neighbourhood and urges him to avoid Olivia.

Marcus has an adversial relationship with the Dean of men, Caudwell. In a meeting in Dean Caudwell’s office, Marcus objects to the chapel attendance requirement on the grounds that he is an atheist. In this meeting, he quotes extensively from Bertrand Russell’s essay ‘Why I Am Not a Christian’. Later, the Dean finds Marcus guilty of hiring another student to attend chapel in his place. When Marcus refuses pay double the amount of chapel services as punishment, the Dean expels him. Messner was also mistakenly blamed by the Dean for making Olivia pregnant.

Marcus is kindled by his own self – righteousness. He remembers a Chinese nationalist song sung in some American classes during World War II, ‘Indignation fills the heart of all our countrymen, Arise! Arise! Arise!’ His
expulsion from the college allows the US Army to draft him and send him to fight in Korea where he is killed in combat. Roth has created clever conditions for the impossibility of the narrative, his narrator both dead and undead. Early in the novel, Marcus explains that he is dead and narrates the story from the afterlife, later it is revealed that he is unconscious from his combat wounds and the morphine that has been administered.

These citations from the novel clearly prove how anger, an evil impulse destroys the humanity. This chapter is Messner’s looking back on life with anger, the evil emotion that destroyed himself. The post-modern applications resorted to are intertextuality and Morphine induced narrative.

The fourth chapter is Secrecy, a Strategy for Survival and the novel discussed is The Human Stain. It is the third instalment of a trilogy devoted to postwar America. Just as 1997’s American Pastoral examined the psychic wreckage of the 60’s and 1998’s I Married a Communist delved into the mind – set of the McCarthy era, The Human Stain gets its impetus from the feverish puritanism and identity politics of recent years. The themes of ethnic identity and sexual compulsion dominate through this entire novel.

The opening pages of the novel introduces the pre-impeachment summer of 1998. The author Nathan Zuckerman, Roth’s alter ego writes about his recent friendship with Coleman Silk. Silk was a former classics professor whose life was destroyed after students took his utterance of the word ‘spooks’ as a racial slur. Silk noticed two students who were missing in his class past
few days, and he referred them as spooks or ghosts who do not exist. This made a riot in the college, the students and the teachers blamed Silk as a racist.

The proud Silk battled his persecutors vigorously until his wife died of a stroke and he resigned in raving indignation. But the irony in the novel is that the protagonist, the accused racist is himself black. His life is a text of secrets and lies. The light skinned Silk, a sheltered youth in East Orange, after a few infuriating months at Howard university, decides to join the army. But he was rejected as he was black. This shows the racism in American Society. Silk choose to cast off his family and to let others believe that he is white. He desires to be free, which is unimaginable to his father.

Silk then married a white woman and fathered four children. But he never revealed the truth even to his wife and children until the death of his wife. Since then, the seventy one year old Silk has been consoling himself with the company of Faunia Farley, a thirty four year old janitor whose personal history of abuse seems to have damaged everything. Even she keeps a secret within her and reveals herself as an illiterate woman. Their affair arouses the ire of Faunia’s deranged ex-husband and the condemnation of the one of Coleman’s former colleagues, the girlish French professor who let the witch-hunt against him.

Delphine Roux has taken upon herself to harass and spread lies about Coleman. She who was behind the rumour that Coleman forced Faunia to have an abortion and Faunia attempted suicide. Delphine was the author of an
anonymous note Coleman received regarding Faunia’s attempted suicide. Faunia’s ex-husband, Lester Farley is a Vietnam Vet who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Lester beat Faunia brutally during their marriage and has stalked her since the divorce. Lester decides to kill Coleman for having a secret affair with his wife. He drives in the wrong lane on a river road to force Coleman’s car into the river, unaware that Faunia is in the car with Coleman. Coleman dies as a Jew without revealing his true race as a black man to anyone. This is revealed when his son Mark tells in Silk’s grave that ‘a Jew is dead’. Coleman Silk’s secrecy of his true race as a black brought his life to a tragic end. Retaining the secrecy till his death is also one form of Coleman’s betrayal of his family.

The fifth chapter is *Every Soul is its Own Betrayal Factory*. The chapter begins with the master story situation of the Bible – Betrayal. “Adam-betrayed. Easu-betrayed. Judah-betrayed. Moses-betrayed.” The novel analyzed is *I Married a Communist*. Philip Roth’s *I Married a Communist* uses a narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, as a stand-in for the author. Roth uses this novel to give his feelings about the witch hunt days of the 1950s and to fire a shot at his ex-wife Claire Bloom.

The popular Russian song Dubinshku “Many songs have I heard in my native land – songs of joy and sorrow. But one of them was deeply engraved in my memory: It’s the song of the common worker” highlights the theme of the novel. The novel is based on betrayal and it revolves around the McCarthy era.
It serves as a series of musings on failed marriage, communism, isolation and relationships.

The protagonist of this novel is a raging Newark tough named Ira Ringold, a man who proudly champions communist ideals. He is unable to reconcile his beliefs with the comfortable upper-middle class life he lives with Eve Frame, a famous actress. Ira Ringold is a well-known radio personality, is described through the words of Nathan, a young student of Ringold’s brother Murray. Murray, who is a high school English teacher in Newark, also suffers as a result of his brother’s communist beliefs.

After spending time in the Army, Ira Ringold was introduced to communism by Johnny O’ Day. Roth aims to condemn the tactics of those who helped destroy the lives of other people during the 1950s the failure of communist movement to improve the working class in society and the misguided idealism of the movement’s followers. Ringold works in a number of places before meeting the thrice – married Eve Frame, who is in search of validation of her own existence. The only constant threat to her is the daughter named Sylphid who knows her mother’s insecurities and uses them to her every advantage to get what she wants.

The main focus of this revenge drama is Betrayal. Eve turns informer against Ira. Ira betrays Eve by having an affair with another lady Pamela, when he did not get back the love and care from Eve he expected. Knowing Ira’s affair, Eve turns as an informer against Ira. Eve Frame tells an anti-communist
journalist that her husband Ira Ringold is a communist and also gives the evidences to prove it. Ira Ringold is betrayed by his own wife. Sylphid always feels that she is betrayed by his mother at every turn. Sylphid considers her mother Eve as one who had abandoned her to the nannies. Johnny O’Day feels Ira had betrayed the communist ideals by marrying the bourgeois woman. Every character in this novel betrays each other.

McCarthyism is another focus of this novel. McCarthyism is the practice of making accusation without proper evidence. During McCarthyite era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists. Ira is one among them. He is not a spy or menace to America. Not only in his shows but also in personal life, he champions the cause of the working class, the proletariat. Roth touches upon a crucial issue the Jews and socialism. Anti-Semitism also finds its way into the plot. Roth’s Jewish characters face discrimination both politically and ethnically.

Betrayal of the characters in this novel reveals this evil impulse will destroy humanity. The betrayal of Ira Ringold and Eve Frame is due to their anger for each other. Anti-Semitism is also revealed in this novel where Ira Ringold, a Jewish husband is betrayed by his American wife Eve Frame. She hates her husband mainly because he is a Jew. The irony of the novel is revealed in the end when Eve frame herself is known to be a Jew and betrays the society as a white American woman.
The different aspects of betrayal, have been analyzed using the post-modern approach of inter-textuality from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Bower’s *Young Jefferson*, Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and Non-linear narrative is also highlighted.

The sixth chapter is *Old Age Isn’t a Battle, It’s a Massacre* and the novel taken is *Everyman*. *Everyman* is about death and is based on a grim medieval morality play in which an ordinary man is summoned by Death to appear before God’s judgment seat. *Everyman* is a parallel strand of Roth’s career, the stylistically inventive novella. The novel has many of the typical Roth ingredients, it involves Jews and sex and takes place largely in New York and New Jersey.

Robert Browning, a poet of optimistic thoughts through his poem insists the people to welcome the old age with fortitude but Philip Roth in his novel *Everyman*, exhibits a bleak aspect of old age. The novel features the hardworking immigrant parent and a rebellious young son who forges a different kind of life for himself. The protagonist is never named and the title suggests, it can be any humanity. Philip Roth’s intention was to tell the story of a man’s life through his illness. The imperishability of the diamond is neatly contrasted with the mortal flesh, the beauty of the gem with the disease, decay and death of a human animal.

The epigraph of the novel is taken from Keats ‘Ode to Nightingale’. The story can be described as a medical biography. The protagonist undergoes many treatments right from the beginning till his old age. *Everyman* undergoes
many treatments from a minor hernia operation at the age of nine through a life—threatening peritonitis following a ruptured appendix in his thirties, the quintuple bypass surgery at fifty—six and numerous surgeries in his later years to open clogged arteries.

Everyman’s anonymous protagonist uses sex as a form of rebellion against the inevitability of aging and death. He has been married and divorced three times. This proves that he was not true to any of his wives and had importance only for carnal desires. In Everyman, there is no comfort to be found in religion, no soothing hope of redemption or an afterlife.

Religion was a lie that he had recognized early in life, and he found all religions offensive, considered their superstitious folder meaningless, childish. He has no obsolete fantasies of heaven. There were only our bodies, born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us.”

Everyman is a deeply flawed character. Not only has he forsaken God but also abandoned his good wife, alienated his children and ignored his descent and loyal older brother. Everyman dies alone on the operating table, without the comforts of either religion or earthly loved ones. Disdaining religion may provide the protagonist with a certain intellectual dignity, but it also deprives him of the inner peace available to those with spiritual certainties.

Roth after watching television news about the floods in New Orleans, while they were evacuating the old people’s homes, said aloud that ‘Old Age is
a Massacre’. In the case of Roth’s hero in this novel *Everyman*, it is a Massacre as it refers to his emotional turbulence in the face of death. The evil impulse which destroyed the protagonist in this novel is carnal desire. The protagonist gave importance to his physical body by taking proper treatment at the proper time but made his old age a massacre with no one to take care of him.

Analysing the five novels through post-modern lens, the investigator could hold up a mirror unto America. The real portrayal of this country emerges through the different pages of the dissertation. Roth’s Yoknapatwah is Newark which forms the locale for all the novels taken for analysis. Starting with anti-Semitism, the research is further directed towards Anger, Secrecy, Betrayal and Foolishness of old age. These impulses had been depicted in literature from time immemorial. Roth’s caricatures of these reflections on life point out Eliot’s concept of tradition. Eliot believed that whatever happened in the past is happening today, what is happening today will happen in the future. In other words Time past, Time present and Time future are one and the same, with some superficial differences. The present scenario in the United States is different due to the salad bowl of cultures that have emerged due to the diasporic community. Hence the occupants face discriminations of a different magnitude, that might have prompted Roth to take up age old themes and then present them from a different perspective.

The chapters of this thesis proceed as an interlinked network. Anti-Semitism is the foundation on which the arguments have been built up. The
different stages of man have been taken into account in the arrangement of chapters. Beginning with a small boy in *The Plot Against America*, the move is towards the adolescent hero in the *Indignation* and then an adult in *The Human Stain*. This is followed by a family man in *I Married a Communist* and an old man in *Everyman*.

Anti-Semitism had been depicted since Shakespeare’s time. In *The Merchant of Venice* the greedy money lender Shylock is made a Jew. But even the Jew has the same organs, senses, affections and passions as the white man. The racial superiority of the white is indeed a problem emerging from the psyche of the dominant community. Passions that dominate the mind have the power to turn the society and personal lives topsy turvy. Anger as revealed in *Indignation* and as stated by Mark Twain is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to any thing on which it is poured.

Secrecy though often believed to be a negative passion at times becomes the strategy for survival. All secrecy is not meant to deceive. The hero of *The Human Stain* assumes the role of a white man as the fear of marginalization lurks in the inner recesses of the African psyche. Betrayal, the destructive passion has annihilated and disrupted the serene flow of life. All the characters in *I Married a Communist* are merciless targets of betrayal. Literature is replete with examples of cheating - Othello is betrayed by Iago, Lear is betrayed by Goneril and Regan and Macbeth by the Witches.
William Butler Yeat’s description of an aged man goes thus:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon stick, unless,
Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing,
For every tatter in its moral dress

Yeats exhorts the old people to nourish their soul as they are moving towards death. But Roth’s hero Everyman even in his old age is totally indifferent to his soul. All his thoughts are directed towards the concept of ‘Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die’.

The investigator would like to highlight the findings of the study by quoting the lines of W.H. Auden in his poem *Refugee Blues*:

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you’ll find it there
We cannot go there, my dear, we cannot go there now.

This is quite in contrast to the ray of hope given in the poem *The New Colossus*. The country that promised protection, comfort and all privileges for the immigrant community has not kept up their promise and hence Jewish American community face the dilemma of acclimatization or acceptance.