CHAPTER V

MORAL VERSUS SEXUAL CONFLICT

Just as Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher In The Rye* is a digressor, so also David Kepesh the professor in Roth’s *The Professor of Desire* is a digressor to the core. He does not want to conform to the rules and regulations, which the society imposes on him for being a professor. He wants to digress and thus he is always in conflict not only with others but also with himself. Both the protagonists are in conflict with themselves—the only difference is that one is a professor and the other a student. The conflict that is primarily shown in relation to the environment and its inhabitants later becomes internalized and we are shown the protagonists at war with themselves. The conflict thus becomes highly internalized and towards the end we are convinced that the protagonist is psychologically affected. David Kepesh discovers that his intellectuality and his sexuality are at odds with each other. “This conflict between high-minded moral responsibility and sensuous self assertion is central to the plight of the Roth hero” (Jones: 87).

Throughout his life, David Kepesh fights a recurring battle between passion and reason, pleasure and duty, violent self-assertion
and dedication to his profession both as a teacher and a scholar. He faces a number of conflicts such as his humanitarian impulses versus determined lustfulness, Passion Versus Reason, High grade Versus Base Desires, Pleasure Versus Duty, Affectionate Instincts versus Carnal Impulses and last but not the least, the conflict between blissful childhood versus disillusioned and impotent manhood. Judith Paterson explains this conflict in terms of the Scholar–Rake metaphor.

This is seen not only in *The Professor of Desire* but also in other novels such as *Goodbye Columbus* where Neil Klugman’s public and private lives are at loggerheads with each other. For instance, at his job in the Newark library he is very compassionate and humane and this is revealed in his action when he helps a black child to escape the hardship of ghetto life. But, off duty, he is caught in a love hate relationship with Brenda Patimkin who belongs to an Americanized family. This reveals that Neil, like other Roth characters, cannot balance the dualities of his nature. One side of them responds to the ideal while the other side of their nature seeks “unrestrained-self-gratification.” It can be seen that though Roth depicts their conflicts, he never tries to resolve them fully. It is this conflict in Roth’s heroes, which gives them vitality typical of Roth’s heroes. Roth’s protagonists are always laboring to come to terms with themselves as they act in ways uncharacteristic of their own self - image. David Kepesh is in conflict between restraint and passion and high-minded moral responsibility and sensuous self-
assertion. “He tries to reconcile the serious and moral aspects of himself which are manifested in his profession with the lustful and adventuresome side, which urges him to defy restriction and convention” (Jones: 111).

David Kepesh’s character has been affected by certain incidents, which occurred in his childhood. Roth cites Kepesh’s early experiences and proves him to be a “sexual prodigy.” The seeds of Kepesh’s later conflicts are buried within the character of the innocent David Kepesh. From childhood he wants to be good, to accomplish something worth while in order to please his adoring parents but the lust of the forbidden is still there. It comes to the forefront by the “shameless feats” of Herbie Bratasky, the entertainer. Bratasky represents one of the earliest and most memorable temptations to adventure in young Kepesh’s life.

Kepesh grows up and becomes an academic moralist but at the same time he becomes aware of the other side of his character—the carnal side. As a child, he was attracted to Bratasky’s brashness now he longs for the “erotic, sexual and interpersonal adventure.” This conflicting desire in him creates for him “a dilemma of insuperable moral proportions” (Patterson: 112). Thus he proposes to become like Steele “a rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes” and he also resolves to follow the Byronic dictum of being “studious by day,
dissolute by night” (Jones: 113). In this way, he tends to have the best of both worlds and to be a rake and a scholar alike.

Thus he wants to gratify both his body and mind. Kepesh moves to London for a year of graduate study but even before he attends his first lecture, he has known the sexual pleasure of the Shepherd Market Section of London. Instead of applying himself to his study, he turns the whole year into a full time debauchery with two Swedish girls, Birgitta and Elizabeth. The trio indulges in all kinds of sexual feats. A critic Stanley affords an apt explanation for Kepesh’s behavior. He says that the Rothian hero struggles to gain through orgasm, freedom from the restrictions of society and the pressures of conventional living. Sex seems to be a release from civilized inhibitions. But the conflict between being a rake and a scholar still persists and it manifests itself as guilt and fear of impotence. Thus Roth’s heroes are caught between “sex” and “morality.” Their frenzied lust is tainted by guilt because they cannot get away from “that anguished self lacerating moral judgement, which is in essence, Judaic” (Cooperman: 207).

At one end they want to satisfy their physical lust while at the other end they want to adhere to the teachings and moral preaching of their religion. The teachings of their religion are ingrained deep into their consciousness and it manifests as guilt. Philip Roth says that the
“sexual transgressions” of his heroes are aimed at breaking “that barrier of personal inhibitions and plain old monumental fear” (Roth: 165).

It is seen that the Rothian hero wants to break sexual inhibitions yet their frenzied lust becomes tainted with guilt. That is why their perverted attempts to gratify their physical lust ends in “sterility and nervous exhaustion.” Thus not a single one of Roth’s protagonists ends up being a father which is in opposition to the first positive command of the Bible which says “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1: 28).

Again the Talmud says, “He who is without a wife dwells without a blessing, joy, help, good and peace.” This does not apply to any of Roth’s characters for whom marriage is a psychologically crippling and physically emasculating experience” (Singh: 19).

It is only David Kepesh who comes closest to having a satisfying relationship with a woman among all of Roth’s heroes. While at college he gets a reputation as “a dirty minded Romeo, a dean’s list Bluebeard, a budding Don Giovanni and Johannes the Seducer” (P.O.D: 24).

Though Kepesh has pleasurable moments with Birgitta and Elizabeth, he suffers from guilt and fear of impotence. Impotence is a specter that continues to haunt Kepesh. When he returns to the U.S.A and marries Helen Baird, a beautiful adventuress, he suffers from
impotence and neurosis. Although he is physically captivated by Helen, Kepesh from the start is too conscious of the "deep temperament al divide" (P.O.D: 56) between them. He spends three years "doubting- hoping-wanting and fearing" (P.O.D: 55) so that the affair has already reached an impasse before he throws himself "headlong and half-convinced into the matrimonial flames" (P.O.D: 87).

That Kepesh will not be satisfied with anything in life is proved by the above stated actions. He will never be fully satisfied in any position and he would always want to regress. For instance, first he had sexual relationships with Elizabeth and Birgitta. Later he moves on to a marriage with Helen Baird, even though he is aware of the differences between them. After the divorce, Kepesh finds himself totally emasculated.

He becomes "a man with a crater instead of a heart... without a man's capacity and appetite and strength and judgement, with the least bit of mastery over my flesh or my intelligence or my feelings" (P.O.D: 126).

It is at this point that he meets Claire Ovington, the "most loving and benign of feminine spirits" (P.O.D: 163). And she rehabilitates him emotionally and sexually. This is a great turning point in the life of Kepesh. He, who is surrounded by a sense of guilt and impotency
because of his past "sexual experiments" with Bergitta and Elizabeth, is finally redeemed by his savior, Claire. She is "as tender within as without!" (P.O.D: 120).

She does not have the tumultuous nature of Helen and Kepesh regains his peace of mind. He finds in her a new strength and hope and contentment. Kepesh feels at last that he is at "home" and living in discord with his "true spirit." But this feeling of contentment and security lasts only for a short time because Kepesh being a digressor wants to digress from this point of safety and peace. Being filled with a sense of well being, Kepesh perversely experiences a waning desire for Claire. Thus Kepesh’s internal conflict cannot be resolved, because he, like any Rothian hero, is at war with himself.

He foresees the day when the "lovely blandness" of a life with her will begin to pale and he will have had a bellyful of wholesome innocence" (P.O.D: 251).

Kepesh had actually dreamt of a life with a girl like Claire. But once his peace and potency are restored, he is troubled with lascivious longings for Birgitta. Towards the end, Kepesh feels that perhaps his relationship with Claire is merely a part of "the ever-lengthening saga of all that did not work" (P.O.D: 197).
Thus Kepesh's last moments are spent fearing a relapse into sterility and neurosis. We find that he has come a full circle. There is no development in the life of the protagonist. The same fears of impotency and sterility haunt him even towards the end of the novel as it was in the beginning. Unlike the traditional novel where we find either a progression or a downfall in the life of the hero, we find that Kepesh becomes "the butt of a ridiculous vicious, inexplicable joke!" (P.O.D: 204). "Roth refuses to grant his drolly miserable characters with the boon of redemption" (Singh: 23).

He is also impatient with writers who do so. According to Roth, American reality "stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination" (Roth: 120).

We find that the Rothian hero does not give in to this hyperreality. Rather Roth portrays them in their fight against this kind of hyper-reality. They do not resign themselves to their fate but they are shown as putting up a good fight. In the process, they provide a critique of themselves.

In the Professor of Desire too, Kepesh puts up a good fight. Though he is in a perennial conflict, he does not end his life rather he is collecting all his hopes against his "fear of transformations yet to come."
Thus Roth’s heroes do not run away from life but they fight against all the absurdities of life with hope in their hearts. “Roth’s characters never resign themselves to the unheroic lot but continue kicking and screaming” (Singh: 23).

Striving for what they can neither have nor even imagine but only desire is their comic predicament. Jay L. Halio points out that in The Professor of Desire, David Kepesh is a bright young Jewish male who early in life falls into a disastrous marriage, later painfully extricates himself and then finds a somewhat voluptuous lover who provides peace and contentment and apparently everything a man can possibly want. But he finds a dissatisfaction and an ebbing passion, “a sense that the enormous fulfillment, he has experienced is somehow not fulfilling enough. Perhaps it is a quixotic longing after a wholeness, which cannot be attained in this world” (Halio: 44).

This can only be the possible explanation for David Kepesh’s reaction; he is neither satisfied with the “sex games,” the trio engage in, nor in his peaceful life with Claire Ovington. Elizabeth too cannot take up the way of life, the three leads and she attempts suicide. Recovering, she returns home while David and Birgitta continue their sexual adventures. But after some time he too feels he must go home and decides to resume his “serious education” as a graduate student at
Stanford. Birgitta leaves without arguing but asks, “why did I like you so much? You are such a boy” (P.O.D: 49).

This shows that Kepesh is cyclically either a scholar or a rake but not yet an amalgam of the two. The professorial Kepesh gets attracted to Helen Baird because the sensuous side of him cannot resist falling for her beauty. He knows he should avoid her but he cannot resist her. She prefers life to literature and she even goes to the extent of challenging the “illusions” he has created because of being involved with literature.

“Look, she says to Kepesh early in their relationship, So there is no confusion let me only mildly overstate the case: I hate libraries, I hate books and I hate schools. As I remember, they lend to everything about life into something “slightly other” than it is.” That is exactly what she thinks literature has done to Kepesh-turned him into something “slightly other than he is, a little bit of a lie” (Paterson: 115).

For sometime, Kepesh finds her company a titillating experience. It also provides him a kind of escape from scholarly boredom. But their relationship is only short lived, since the ‘scholar’ instinct in him takes the upper hand of the ‘rake.’

Thus, he begins to take refuge in his profession. He spends sixteen hours a day taking classes and writing a book on “romantic
disillusionment in the stories of Anton Chekhov.” Meanwhile Helen, who fully stands for the physical aspect, spends most of her time at the toilette, subjecting it to body lotions and moisturizers. There arises a conflict between the two of them. She hates the “smugness” and “prissiness” of his profession and he dislikes her “utter mindlessness” and “idiotic wastefulness.” As is expected, both of them settle for a divorce and after the divorce, Kepesh rushes to the psychoanalyst to find a relief from the mental sufferings he has experienced at Helen’s hands.

Only after his sessions with the psychiatrist does he realize that love and intimacy are time bound and also that one cannot solve the conflict between the intellectual and the sexual so easily. But after his mother’s death he comes to realize that everything is time bound. And he becomes aware of the reality of the human condition, in the conclusion of a composition on Chekhov by one of his students.

“We are born innocent... we suffer terrible disillusionment before we gain knowledge and then we fear death ... and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain” (Paterson: 117). Kepesh associates this “fragmentary happiness” to his relationship with Claire. Though the professor is comforted by Claire’s kindness yet the ‘rake’ in him finds this life dull and monotonous. So, he begins to think of Birgitta and his sexual adventures with her. But this is only a temporary
feeling for he again renews his relationship with Claire. But when expressing his relationship with Claire, he says,

“I feel I am being sealed up in something wonderful.” This shows that inspite of his liking the situation in which he is in and describing it as “wonderful” yet there is that inner sense of being trapped. He does not experience the same kind of freedom as he had in his relationship with Birgitta and Elizabeth. He feels he is being “sealed” and all his evil instincts are put under chains. But at the same time he is not ready to lose her as he admits towards the end of the novel. The conflict still persists between physical longing and mental or intellectual gratification. At one point, he pines at the loss of desire. For he thinks,

I will be without desire. Oh, it’s stupid! Idiotic! Unfair! to be robbed like this of you. And of this life, I love and have hardly gotten to know! And robbed by whom? It always comes down to myself! (P.O.D: 261).

Hence the conflict is within him and Kepesh cannot blame anyone for it. It is as if he has passed from ‘Innocence to Experience’ and learnt that nothing can ever change because it is not the outside world which is erroneous, but it is he who is in conflict between conformity and freedom. He gains an insight into these problems by reading Chekhov’s story “Man in a shell.”
Eric Solomon in his “The gnomes of Academe,” argues that Kepesh does achieve a kind of synthesis between his schizoid halves. This is evident in Kepesh’s address to the imaginary students whom he says, he is going to meet next semester. For he says that he is going to talk about his personal life, because no where else can the students talk of this subject without any embarrassment.

Further he adds,

I love teaching Literature. I am rarely so contented as when I am here with my pages of notes and my marked up text and with people like yourselves. To my mind there is nothing quite like the classroom in all of life (P.O.D: 184).

He further stresses the importance of the classroom thus:

“To put it as straight as I can-what a church is to the believer, a classroom is to me” (P.O.D: 185).

This shows that first as a true believer makes confessions in the church so also a true scholar makes use of the classroom in order to vent his intimate feelings, those which he would not dare to utter in
In Kepesh’s own phrase—A classroom is “the most suitable setting for me to make an accounting of my erotic history?” (P.O.D: 185).

Kepesh wants to remove,

code terms such as structure, form, symbol and non-referential, or epiphany, persona and existential. Instead, he wants to deal directly with Tolstoy, Mann and Flaubert as well as with solitude, illness, longing, loss, terror, corruption, calamity and death (Siegel: 68).

In other words, like Chekhov, he wants to deal with the human experience. He wants to reveal like Chekhov,

The humiliations and failures—worst of all, the destructive power—of all those who seek a way out of the shell of restrictions and conventions, out of the pervasive boredom and the stifling despair, out of the painful marital and the endemic social falsity into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life (P.O.D: 156).

The “boredom and the stifling despair” mentioned above are seen in Kepesh’s marital relationship with Claire. Though he appears to be at peace with Claire yet he cannot repress the nagging feeling that there is
something too “perfect” about her. In less guarded moments, his feelings towards her are negative.

The anger, disappointment, disgust, contempt for all she does so marvelously, resentment over that little thing she will not deign to do. I see how very easily, I could have no use for her. The snapshots, the lists, the mouth that will not drink my come. The curriculum-review committee everything (Searles: 61).

Kepesh is never at peace because he is aware of the tension between the two contradictory sides of his personality. Though he wants to be a libertine as he was with Birgitta and Elizabeth, yet he will not accept the fact that he is so. That is why he seeks a conventional relationship with Claire and that is not ‘enough’ for he wants ‘more. He finds that. “‘Birgitta’ and ‘more’ are just different ways of saying the same thing, while ‘Claire’ and ‘enough,’ they too are one word” (P.O.D: 165).

Hermione Lee in the book Philip Roth termed Roth as the novelist of orifices and blockages, of frustrated gratification. He adds that Roth deals with “Women who prefer not to suck cocks or drink sperm” (Lee: 14).
Again Martin Green in his essay “Half a Lemon, Half an Egg” talks about Roth’s fascination with asceticism, with the deliberate frustration of desire. This is seen not only in the sexual process but also in the process of eating. The images of limiting and denial are seen. For instance, David Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* tells Claire how Kafka shuddered at the sight of an office-mate eating a sausage for lunch and said, “the only fit food for a man is half a lemon” (P.O.D: 168).

But though there is this deliberate limiting and restriction on the part of the protagonist, Martin Green brings out the fact that what Roth desired was “Pornographic Freedoms in art” (Millbauer: 73), which means that though restrictions are needed in real life, in art there can be a celebration of immorality. That is why he ends the novel with Kepesh rejecting Claire who stands for ‘decency’ and ‘morality.’ Baumgarten too echoes Kepesh’s feelings for he says, “Virtue isn’t my bag. Too bo-ring” (P.O.D: 130). Thus there is the celebration of the immoral.

Hence it could be said that not only is Kepesh a non-conformist but also Roth, the author. For as Martin Green says,

Roth’s ‘career’ as a whole will still form a classic link in a classic tradition, reaching back with his left he has held onto the writers who loved the ascetics and respected the
ordinary, while with his right hand he reached forward for lawlessness, abjection, and outrage (Milbauer: 81).

Roth’s protagonists thus face the same ‘academic tension’ that he faces. We have Peter Tarnopol in My Life as Man who cannot integrate the two worlds—the world of Academe and the real world. And his frustration, he quotes Flaubert by saying that regular and orderly in your life like a bourgeois, so that, you may be violent and original in your work.

Finally one could say that though digressions are permitted in literature, one has to pay heavily if one practices the same in life. Kepesh as a digressor would be admired but a real life hero will only receive scorn and contempt. In other words, only art can elevate those qualities, which are ‘gross.’ The ‘gross’ becomes beautiful in literature while in life the ‘grossness’ is intensified.