After the publication of twenty-odd books, Philip Roth is still actively engaged in creative writing and is exploring new vistas of human experience. The present study undertook a detailed examination of five of his novels, namely Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go, When She Was Good, Portnoy's Complaint and The Professor of Desire. These novels belong to the early phase of his literary career when Roth's concern with the ethical aspect of human experience appears most pronounced in his fiction. Ethical and moral issues underlying individual predicaments and conflicts are probed in these novels with rare intensity. As the study shows, Roth has attempted to evaluate the contemporary relevance of these ethical dimensions with a great aesthetic integrity. Moreover, these novels have a thematic unity and continuity and are written largely in the realistic mode.

For Roth, the moral dimension of his protagonist's choice to resolve his conflicts while negotiating external pressures is of vital significance. Through textual analysis of Roth's selected novels, an attempt has been made to trace the evolution of Roth's ethical vision. The following elements mainly constitute this process of ethical growth of the Rothian protagonist: the confrontation of the individual's moral idealism with
identity and selfhood mostly through interpersonal relationships; an attempt to comprehend the true nature of nihilistic forces working outside and within the psyche; to devise strategies to survive amidst the chaotic existential reality keeping intact, at the same time, moral integrity and dignity; and lastly to achieve spiritual harmony and peace. In his later novels, though Roth explores other aspects of human experience, his essential moral vision remains the same.

Roth is fully aware that the artist should not have an ulterior motive of propagating any moral principles or doctrine. His job is to present the situation truthfully before the reader and suggest the desirability of his willing participation in the moral process going on around him. The study takes note of the fact that Roth's fiction largely illustrates this position.

The study traces the gradual and steady process of the ethical evolution of the Rothian protagonist on the basis of the study of his selected novels. The hero in Goodbye, Columbus, still in his primeval innocent state, embarks upon his quest of selfhood and identity. In pursuit of his love, he declines to stake his idealistic values on the altar of social demands for conformity. Instead of sacrificing his ethical values, he forgoes his worldly prize which, in his case, is the consummation of his love and the prospects of a higher social and economic status. After this painful encounter he makes a tactical retreat.
In the next novel, *Letting Go*, with renewed vigour and intensity the hero pursues his ethical ideals through interpersonal relationships in his surrounding society. Despite his best intentions to do good to all around him in accordance with his dying mother's will, he discovers, eventually, an unpleasant overlapping between personal freedom and the social demands. Unable to maintain a safe equilibrium, he is seen to escape temporarily from his surroundings, albeit with the firm conviction of the need to communicate with others in order to achieve his objective of spiritual harmony. In his confrontation with evil around him, the only weapon in his possession, his will and determination to do goodness, fails him. His resolve to "do no violence to human life" proves to be of no avail to him in the end.¹

But the protagonist of *When She Was Good*, Lucy Nelson, does violence to others as well as to herself. Here, Roth explicitly deals with the confrontation between the individual's own conviction of goodness and the moral restrictions imposed upon her by the community. Roth brings into sharp focus the essential relativity of ethical values as he is admittedly not on the side of either Lucy or Daddy Will, the two characters at the opposite ends of the moral spectrum in the novel. Roth seems to suggest here that the assertion of self-righteous moral supremacy without taking into consideration the social imperatives often leads to disaster for the individual as well as to the social system. Some
sort of balance and compromise, therefore, is essential for the smooth functioning of the system and the salvation of the individual himself. In the desperate assertion of her value system, Lucy loses contact with the social reality and escapes into a schizophrenic void destroying herself in the end. Roth certainly does not approve of such an escape from the recognizable social world.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the conflict faced by the protagonist is external as well as internal. Portnoy is found to be in confrontation with his Jewish family which is a microcosm of the ethnic community to which he belongs. He mistakenly believes that the root cause of his dilemma is his ethnicity. Moreover, he is tormented by the conflict between his moral values and his indulgence in sexual pleasures. Though he begins to realize the true nature of his moral dilemma, his conflicts remain unresolved up to the very end of the novel.

It is in *The Professor of Desire* that the protagonist is seen to, finally, comprehend his true nature in relation to the social and cosmic reality. Convinced of the indispensability of society for the development of full potentialities of the individual, David Kepesh realizes the necessity of some modification in the mechanism of his response to the adverse outer and inner forces. This modification involves, among other things, a certain degree of renunciation and restraint on the part of the individual as far as his romantic and sensual aspirations are
concerned. The protagonist of *The Professor of Desire* exerts his utmost strength to bring about this alteration and channelizes his innate romantic urge in the process of attaining a higher moral purpose. After suffering a painful moral and psychological dilemma, he, eventually, succeeds in reconciling his sensual desires and ethical impulses. In this way, he resolves his moral conflict and achieves self-fulfilment and spiritual harmony. Nevertheless, his happiness and peace is not absolute and permanent and like everything else in human life it is relative and tentative.

This is not to suggest that the process of growth and evolution of Roth's artistic genius has come to an end with this novel, the study observes. On the contrary, his aesthetic and creative energies are far from exhausted and are being utilized to explore yet other aspects of human experience. Among the contemporary American novelists Roth has earned a distinguished place. The essence of his artistic achievement is that in his portrayal of man's search for selfhood and identity, and struggle for survival amidst the existential reality, he lays special emphasis on the ethical aspect of human experience which has somehow been denied its due significance in recent American fiction. Though literature is not a panacea for all the social and moral problems, it certainly makes us conscious of the need of a set of universally accepted moral values for the smooth functioning of our social and moral
institutions. It is neither desirable nor feasible for man to exist in isolation and estrangement apart from his recognizable social world. To preserve the order and sanctity of the human world, some norms of moral conduct are essential if we accept the Platonic conception of the artist as moral guardian of society. And Roth's fiction seems fully to endorse this point of view.

This does not imply that Roth has any intention to impose any prescriptive value system on his readers. In his fiction, the virtues and values are suggested by the narrative itself, through what he calls "the manner of presentation." His fiction displays his firm belief in those ethical values which inspire the individual to become a better and truer component of his social system and for this purpose, he relies more on the potency of the heart as the infallible guide than any prescriptive value system. This is not a mean achievement in the chaos and anarchy of the modern society where man is found to shift his ethical choices frequently under the pressure of the demands of conformity. Roth's insistence on not neglecting the exhortations of the heart adequately serves his artistic purpose which is to expand man's moral consciousness, the study concludes. In this context, he remarks in *Reading Myself and Others*: "And this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to a man and to society".3
Roth has been called a "social realist" by some critics, and like other postwar American writers, he chronicles in his fiction the contemporary historical experience drawing heavily upon his personal experience in the Jewish minority community to which he belongs. Yet, like Bellow, he is totally assimilated Jewish-American writer whose fiction transcends narrow ethnicity and assumes universal significance. His fiction encompasses the vast panorama of human experience with its essential limitations and possibilities.

As far as Roth is concerned, moral values form an integral part of any kind of literary experience. Perhaps, none of his contemporaries is so much concerned about the moral aspect of social reality as Roth. The hero in recent American fiction is seen to assume different moral postures to survive in his society which demands unconditional conformity denying, at the same time, any tangible assurance of self-fulfilment and moral integrity. Not infrequently, he attempts to escape into a dark world of fantasy and absurdism. The study has emphasized the point that Roth certainly does not approve of the tendency of the individual to escape from the tangible social world. He explores the moral predicament of modern man by making his characters descend into the depth of grotesqueness and ugliness of the social reality. His hero has a firm belief in the possibilities of his growth and rejuvenation only in the matrix of family and society. Instead of recoiling in his own
self and casting aside the recognizable social world, the Rothian protagonist makes some adjustments in his own response to the hostile forces which impinge on his psyche from outside and to the demoniacal side of his own nature. In his encounters with the adverse forces, he invariably chooses to be on the positive side of the ethical spectrum. Even in most crucial situations, he neither deviates from his chosen ethical stance nor makes compromise with the forces of negation which are discordant to his own ethical ideals.

Roth is highly conscious of the importance of an effective medium for the modern novelist to express the contemporary reality which, he feels, is absurd, elusive and, even incredible by nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that he has employed successfully diverse kinds of narrative and stylistic devices in his books. He can manipulate his narrative techniques dextrously to tell a tale from different points of view. His diction has amazing flexibility and variety, and he can manoeuvre it to portray any character and his specific milieu. The apparent spontaneity of his narrative is, actually, the outcome of a highly polished and skilful use of diction and syntax. In his adaptable vernacular language, choice of words and manipulation of sentence structure, Searles rightly links him with the native American tradition of such writers as Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway.5

In short, Roth is fully aware of the vital connection between the fictional
material and the form. Through an appropriate and effective fictional medium, he has successfully probed the modern man's predicament in the contemporary society and conveyed his affirmation in his latent capabilities to overcome the forces of negation and annihilation. Since the stylistic and narrative devices are vital to our understanding of the full import of Roth's ethical concerns, they find ample mention at the relevant places in the discussion of the different novels.

The present study undoubtedly had a limited scope and did not set out to undertake a comprehensive analysis of all of Roth's fiction. Roth is certainly a prolific writer, as is evident from the large number of novels, short stories and critical essays written by him over a span of nearly four decades. Much can be said about the problematic issue of his Jewishness in relation to the secular American society in which he grew up, and much more about his political and social satires. In fact, his fiction offers an interesting range of themes and technical experimentations for further study. Moreover, he is still engaged in creative activities and it is difficult, and even hazardous, to summarize the artistic vision of a living writer in absolute and conclusive terms. The present study has merely attempted to critically analyse a few of his early novels to expound the evolution of his ethical vision.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Roth, *Reading Myself* 151.


5 Searles 118.