

---

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

---

### THE ENGULFING CHAOS: *LETTING GO*

---

---

*Letting Go*, the first full-length novel of Roth, was published in 1962. It is similar to *Goodbye, Columbus* and Roth's other novels in its basic concerns of moral implications of individual existence in family and society, and the resultant conflicts and their resolution. But here the canvas is larger and the young novelist explores human relationships in all their intricacies and complexities. The novel evoked a mixed response; some critics hailed it as a great novel in the manner of Henry James, the unequalled master of human motives and conscience, while others regarded it as a 'mistake'.<sup>1</sup> But now when the critical opinion regarding Roth's fiction is well-established, it has generally been agreed that *Letting Go* is a serious novel in the tradition of Henry James and Leo Tolstoy, who, at that time, had a profound influence on Roth. Technically also, Roth amply demonstrates his skills in manipulating various narrative techniques to handle his fictional material. The major part of the novel is written from first person point of view where Gabe Wallach, the protagonist, is the narrator while in some sections third person narrator is employed to explore the psyche of other major characters.

Earlier many critics thought it to be a tiring, tedious and gloomy book which chronicles several years in the lives of five confused and unhappy people. Mark Shechner, for example, complained of "gray and depressive

background" of the novel.<sup>2</sup> *Letting Go*, however, should be viewed in the background of the Fifties when the young graduates tended to assume serious and responsible airs and prove their adulthood. And besides, the largest part of the novel is set in Chicago where Roth himself was a graduate student and later a part-time faculty member in the university. The novel is a remarkable study of human motives, interpersonal relationships, and moral and ethical choices. It delineates with rare profundity the predicament of modern man caught in the web of moral obligations and personal aspirations. *Letting Go*, according to Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance "anticipates Roth's next two novels, *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, not only in its emphasis on the family as a particularly powerful force but also in its ironic examination of the idea of being or doing 'good'."<sup>3</sup> Roth is preoccupied here with such issues of moral seriousness as individual desires, manipulation of others for selfish purpose, need for privacy, and feelings of responsibility and guilt. In *Letting Go*, as in all Roth's fiction, the protagonist's search for self-fulfilment passes through the maze of familial and social relationships.

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Neil embarks upon his quest for the pursuit of self-realization and spiritual harmony, but, eventually, he withdraws to his own world and tries to analyse his own motives and the true nature of the social forces. While he initiates the process of self-exploration, it is in *Letting Go* that the hero involves himself thoroughly in interpersonal relationships to achieve his objectives. George J. Searles rightly points

out: "*Letting Go* seems to suggest that conflict is inevitable in close interpersonal relationships and that human dealings are intrinsically and unavoidably enigmatic, especially within the family circle."<sup>4</sup> Through the two main characters, Gabe Wallach and Paul Herz, Roth traces the painful struggle of the individual to achieve manhood and maturity in contemporary American society in the Fifties. Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. is of the opinion that Paul is Gabe's opposite in many ways.<sup>5</sup> Outwardly, at least, they are presented in contrasting ways. Whereas Gabe is financially secure and burdened with comparatively less responsibilities except, perhaps, his lonely widower father, Paul from the very beginning is seen to be overburdened with poverty and his obligations to his parents and wife. Their reaction to the suppressive and intrusive outward forces is also different; Paul tolerates them with a rare kind of stoicism and fortitude while Gabe shows a tendency to feel embarrassed and impatient at the slightest hint of violation of his privacy. But they pass through the same ordeal in making their ethical choices.

The title of the first section "Debts and Sorrows" is important in its suggestion of the basic themes of the novel. Rodgers points out the significance of the title:

"'Debts' conveys the nature of the troublesome moral choices, complicated by the conflict between duty and personal desires for self-satisfaction, which weigh heavily on the consciences of each of the novel's major characters."<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the novel opens with the letter of Gabe's mother from her death-bed and it sets the tone of the novel. She confesses that her desire to do good to others throughout her life had been the cause of much unhappiness to others:

*Since I was a little girl I always wanted to be Very Decent to People. Other little girls wanted to be nurses and pianists. They were less dissembling. I was clever, I picked a virtue early and hung on to it. I was always doing things for another's good. The rest of my life I could push and pull at people with a clear conscience.<sup>7</sup>*

As a woman of noble character she frankly admits her human failings; still, she sticks to her moral ideals but ultimately ends up interfering in the life of other people. In her insistence on moral rectitude she does not spare even her husband who lived his life as she wished him to.

His mother's character has a profound influence on Gabe's mind, as he is more his mother's son than his father's. After reading the letter he determines that he "would do no violence to human life, not to another's, and not to my own"(3). His determination undoubtedly testifies to his altruistic intentions and purposes. At this early stage, he is little aware of the grim and harsh realities of life and has yet to begin his struggle for attainment of maturity and manhood. Moreover, he does not realize the distinction between the idealistic desire to do good to others and an actual engagement in others' affairs without jeopardizing one's own identity.

Gabe is the pivotal character in the novel with whom all the other characters interact. His widower father is all too willing to shower his affection and money upon his son. He invites Gabe on Thanksgiving to New York as he is in need of his company to alleviate his feelings of loneliness and sadness. However, Gabe refuses the offer politely, but firmly, as he has some apprehension of an undesirable encroachment upon his personal freedom. Similarly, his relationship with the Herzes and Martha Reganhart, a young divorcee, turns out to be unsuccessful. In fact, the basic conflict faced by the protagonist in *Letting Go* is between the necessity and desire of involvement with others, and preservation of personal identity and freedom. The disparity in his lofty moral idealism and the normative values of the recognizable social world is a hindrance in his achievement of reconciliation and harmony.

Gabe meets Paul in Iowa city where both of them are graduate students in the university. He is at once attracted to this "harried young man rapidly losing contact with his own feelings" (3). Later on, his wife Libby Herz requests Gabe to help him when his car breaks down on the highway. Both of them share an interest in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* which Gabe had loaned to Paul. In this way, Gabe enters into the life of the Herzes. He comes to know that they are passing through a pathetic and sordid phase of their life. They are poverty-stricken and estranged from their families. His intention to help them is, no doubt, genuine initially but his altruism mysteriously takes the form of love towards Libby. In a weak moment, he holds Libby and kisses her, an act which proves to be a

source of much embarrassment and chagrin for both of them. Interestingly, at this point of their relationship, James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a focal point of their mutual interests and, thus, crystallizes the recurrent themes of moral consciousness and imperatives of conscience in the very beginning of the novel.

Gabe, like Neil, is much concerned about preservation of his moral integrity and selfhood, so much so that he withdraws suddenly whenever he finds his moral integrity and personal freedom threatened by any outside intrusion. Highly influenced by the literature of moral seriousness, he is morbidly conscious of the desirability of conscientious respect for individual privacy. But while attempting to do good to others he inadvertently intrudes upon others' life. He is so exasperated by the overlapping of these two motives in his mind that finally he begins the process of detaching himself from the interpersonal engagements. Nevertheless, his desire to do good and be good to others is beyond doubt. He tries his best to bring happiness in the life of the Herzes. He offers his car to Paul, arranges a job for him in the university, and, even after Libby's insulting outburst against him, he helps them whole-heartedly in their adoption of the child, Rachel. His concern for the welfare of Martha and her children is genuine. Finally, it is she who chooses to break off their relationship. He makes sincere efforts to keep his desolate father happy, although the old man makes heavy demands upon his son after the death of Mrs. Wallach. Gabe is perturbed by his persistent calls from New York asking him to visit him. Though he is not oblivious of his obligations to his father, he "was not

prepared to surrender my [Gabe's] life to his [Dr. Wallach's]" (39).

Gabe's total involvement in benevolent and altruistic purposes is manifest in the sixth section of the novel appropriately titled "The Mad Crusader". After knowing that Theresa Haug is actually a married woman and is now unwilling to sign the documents necessary for the legal adoption of the child, he is in a feverish state of mind. Although he has made his final preparations to go to Europe, he decides to complete the process of adoption. With a firm resolve he deals with the rough and ignorant Mr. Bigoness, Theresa's husband. He implores him, persuades him, tempts him and even intimidates him to sign the documents but to no avail. Ultimately, when he realizes that he has almost failed in his purpose, he takes the little child, Rachel, to Bigoness's house and tries desperately to evoke human feelings in him. After a lot of confusion and altercation, he finally collapses on his knees and suffers a nervous breakdown. At this stage, he has reached his final moment of revelation of truth. Ironically, the bitter reality which he had been evading all his life dawns upon him now with full force and conviction. He realizes that it is almost impossible to do good without involvement with others and that complete detachment and separation from the vast sea of mankind is neither desirable nor feasible. After fulfilling his obligations, he leaves for Europe to recuperate from the shock of his encounter with the evil hidden under the surface of normalcy. Sanford Piņsker remarks: "Only Gabe is left to drift as uncommitted at the end of the novel as he was at the beginning."<sup>8</sup> But his contention does not seem to be true, as Gabe has learnt a lot from his

experiences and he is a wiser and mature person at the end of the novel.

Though Gabe shares a number of traits with the protagonists of *Goodbye, Columbus* and the earlier short stories, the choices for him are not as simple and clear as for Neil, Ozzie Freedman or Eli Peck. His personality is shrouded in mystery and ambiguity and of all the characters in the novel he is the most difficult to define and evaluate. Despite his willingness to gain the experience of felt life and to enhance the happiness of others, he is afraid of taking a direct plunge in the process of engagement with others. His romantic notions and idealistic approach in dealing with interpersonal relationships prevent him from confronting the social forces directly and squarely.

Rodgers compares Gabe to Gilbert Osmond of *The Portrait of a Lady* "in his manipulation of others and in his tendency to take advantage of their weaknesses", and to Isabel Archer in his reluctance to participate actively in the experience of life.<sup>9</sup> Though there does not seem any overt manipulation of others for some evil purpose on his part, Gabe is certainly confused and ambiguous in his response to his immediate society, which can be attributed to his strained sense of moral idealism and his reluctance to lose his identity. His evaluation of human relationships is based on some distorted and superficial assumptions. He himself admits, "It was beginning to seem that toward those for whom I felt no strong sentiment, I gravitated; where sentiment existed, I ran" (30). He is fully aware that his response to his father's request for his company falls short of his expectations and that the lonely man deserves more in his old age. Greatly

exasperated by his attitude, Dr. Wallach says about his son, "He was just like his mother – cold. He hated them both for leaving him" (486). But evidently the old man is sad and bitter because of the vacuum in his life caused by his wife's death, who was a source of the necessary dynamic in his life. Otherwise he is tender and affectionate to his son.

Then there is Gabe's brief and dismal love affair with Marjorie Howells, a "sweet empty-headed girl" (28). After a couple of nights of sexual pleasures he decides to end the affair and asks her to leave his apartment without apparently giving any consideration to the emotional disturbance his action would cause. She leaves his apartment in his absence and leaves a bitter note for him saying, "*I gave too much to you. I don't think anybody can ever hurt me the way you have. I don't know what I'll do*" (47). But in her sexual promiscuity (there is a hint of her sexual adventure with Paul also) she appears more akin to such later heroines of Roth as Mary Jane Reed of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Sharon Shatsky of *My Life as a Man* and Birgitta Svanstrom of *The Professor of Desire*. Gabe and Howells both are aware of the real nature of their affair from the very beginning. Gabe does not display any signs of committing himself to her and, obviously, the affair appears to be nothing more than a brief carnal encounter. He retorts in the course of their argumentation: "We used each other" (40).

It is true that Gabe appears to be self-centered and casual in his personal relationships. But this is attributable to his tendency to escape his entanglements with others at the slightest hint of danger to his selfhood

and individuality. As Jones and Nance point out, Gabe is not able to maintain intimate relationships with others because "he equates intimacy with the surrender of the self, of separateness."<sup>10</sup> In the matters of human relationships, he seems to believe in the tenets of D.H. Lawrence who advocates a safe distance in interpersonal relationships to achieve perfect balance and harmony. The real and everlasting love relationship consists in, as Rupert Birkin says in *Women in Love*, "maintaining of the self in mystic balance and integrity – like a star balanced with another star."<sup>11</sup>

As far as Paul and Libby are concerned, Gabe feels genuine sympathy for them since their first meeting in Iowa. But later he impulsively kisses her little realizing that he is inadvertently igniting her wild romantic notions of freedom from her wretched life. Thus, he unnecessarily adds much pain and confusion in their already sordid life. He is much like Isabel, at least, in this respect; he fails to understand other's motives and is confused about his own. In fact, his lofty ideals of moral scruples partly inherited from his mother and partly derived from his literary background are an obstacle in his comprehension of existential reality. It cannot be denied that he is aware of his obligations and responsibilities to the other people. But he overlaps his priorities:

Soon I was worrying all over again as to the whereabouts of Marge Howells. I should have pulled over to Herz to ask ... But what business of mine was she any more? If Marge Howells wanted to run, let her run! If my father wanted to pine, let him pine! If Libby Herz wanted to weep, let her weep! (58)

His irritation reveals, on the one hand, his inability to understand his relationships with these characters and, on the other, his deep concern and anxiety about them.

In these circumstances, Martha Reganhart seems a ray of hope to him. Her stolid, extrovert and energetic personality is in sharp contrast to the sick and neurotic Libby. A young divorcee, she is grappling with hostile circumstances to bring up her two children, Cynthia and Markie. Gabe says of her: "... Martha Reganhart began to loom in my head – and subsequently in my heart too – as a green, watery spot in a dry land; I felt in her something solid to which I could anchor my wandering and strained affections" (169). While cohabiting with her, he seems to be relieved of his conflict between obligation to others and his personal freedom, as Martha at this stage assures him that she would not insist on marriage. To testify the solemnity of their relationship they invite the Herzes for dinner which turns out to be disastrous. After a lot of furore and misunderstanding Paul and Libby leave them. The ensuing interchange between Gabe and Martha brings to light her bitterness against the world and she cries in the end exhorting Gabe to marry her: "Oh Gabe, the hell with Theresa Haug. The hell with all that Armagnac. I want you to marry me or give me up. I'm too old to screw around like this" (321). In the end, the decision to end the relationship is entirely hers. But Gabe's untempered idealism prevents him in realizing the delicate balance between separateness and engagement.

Several critics have pointed out Gabe's inaction and indecisiveness. But once he realizes the presence of lurking evil beneath the shining

surface of society, he can act decisively. In the chapter "The Mad Crusader", he introspects:

The same impulse that had led him to want to tidy up certain messy lives had led him also to turn his back upon others that threatened to engulf his own. He had finally come to recognize in himself a certain dread of the savageness of life. Tenderness, grace, affection: they struck him now as toys with which he had set about to hammer away at mountains. (529)

Gabe maps out his ethical choices through the labyrinthine of social relationships. In his encounter with the contemporary social reality he discovers the existence of evil in all its manifest forms. His commitment to community and society being absolute, he realizes the necessity of some modification in his response to the adverse forces. He does not compromise with his moral ideals, rather, he remains firm and steadfast in his ethical stand. After comprehending the true nature of social reality, he acts with determination and resolve to ensure the adoption of the child, Rachel, for the Herzes. At the end of the novel, he is not able to achieve spiritual harmony, as is evident from his temporary withdrawal from social engagements. Nevertheless, he has comprehended the nature of the conflict between the ethical ideals of the individual and the normative values of society. Moreover, he succeeds in affirming his value system dauntlessly.

Roth skilfully manipulates his narrative techniques to examine the ethical conflicts of his characters from different perspectives. The second

section of the novel entitled "Paul Loves Libby" is narrated in third person and here his whole focus is on Paul and Libby. Paul is a sort of counterpart of Gabe who traverses an alternate trajectory, though both of them reach the same point in the process of mapping their ethical choices and attaining selfhood and identity. Paul and Libby have married against the wishes of their parents; consequently, they are totally estranged from them. Libby's parents never forgive their daughter for marrying a Jewish boy. When out of sheer financial necessity she writes a letter to her father for help, his reply is sarcastic and venomous:

Surely to one with an inspiration so inhuman, I can only reiterate that neither aid nor good wishes can be expected, now or in the days to come, from this quarter. Obligations are reciprocal, and when one party has failed another, the cessation of obligatory feelings from the injured can be designated with no word other than Justice; certainly with none of the words you suggest. My obligations, Mrs. Herz, are to sons and daughters, family and Church, Christ and country, and not to Jewish housewives in Detroit. (141)

Evidently, Libby has nowhere to turn to for help and sympathy except Paul, who, unfortunately, is barely able to support her. It is but natural that in Gabe she sees a kind of saviour who can deliver her from her wretched circumstances. Despite Paul's solicitude and concern, her wish for a contented and happy life remains unfulfilled. John N. McDaniel is of the opinion that Paul does not feel love for Libby; rather he feels the "same

duty that he believes he owes his family."<sup>12</sup> In fact, Libby herself complains to her psychoanalyst that Paul does not love her. On some occasions he even encourages her to commit adultery with Gabe so that the latter can save her from her miserable life and provide her some happiness and joy. Though she always tries to keep her husband happy, she is a constant source of anxiety and tension for him.

Given her temperament and circumstance, Libby naturally discerns a ray of hope in Gabe and commits the mistake of succumbing to her weaker impulses. Gabe is mysteriously attracted to her. In her apartment he gives way to his instincts impulsively: "I sat down on the edge of the bed and without too much confusion, we kissed each other. We held together afterwards, but for only a second" (57). Later on, this simple kiss proves a source of much embarrassment and confusion for both of them. But her fidelity to Paul is as unshaken as ever.

In a way, the pathetic situation of Libby can be attributed more to her own temperament than her choice of marrying Paul. She is so confused that she is herself not sure of her yearnings. Initially, when she gets pregnant she is of the opinion that they cannot afford a child and gets an abortion. Afterwards when she needs a child, it is not medically advisable for her to get pregnant due to her bad kidneys. In her miserable state she desperately wants a child. Her aimlessness and mental vacuity are explicit in her utterance: "Oh I want a baby or something. I want a dog or a TV. Paulie, I can't do anything" (246). After they adopt the child, Rachel, there seems a ray of hope and happiness in their life.

Paul's circumstances are different from Gabe's. Once having decided to marry Libby, he remains firm in his commitment whatever be the consequences. His parents never recover from the shock of their son's marrying a Catholic girl. He, like Libby, is alienated from his parents and expects little help from his father. Over a long span of suffering and misery, he has developed a kind of stoic attitude and appears to have accepted unhappiness as an essential condition of life. In his rigidity and self-righteousness, he is more like Lucy Nelson of *When She was Good* than Gabe. He nourishes some misconceived opinions about himself and thinks that "he was of another order of men" (408). Even his uncles Asher and Jerry, despite their best efforts, fail to dissuade him from marrying Libby.

Asher, in his characteristically rude and obscene language, exhorts him to conform to the normative values of society:

Things come and go, and you have got to be a receptacle, let them pass right through. Otherwise death will be a misery for you, boy; I'd hate to see it. What are you going to grow up to be, a canner of experience? You going to stick plugs in at either end of your life? Let it flow, let it go. Wait and accept and learn to pull the hand away. *Don't clutch!* (83).

What Asher does not realize is that in his own peculiar and funny way he is presenting the image of modern man caught in the whirlwind of absurd forces. He himself is a typical victim-figure in contemporary society for whom all values have lost their meaning and significance. He frankly

admits; "I don't bottle experience. I'm interested in the flow. I'll take the shape the world gives me" (83). Ironically but definitely, he is evoking the image of "jelly-fish" as suggested by Tony Tanner in relation to the predicament of modern man.<sup>13</sup> In the bar they see a drunken youngster in the arms of a seventy-year old alcoholic saying, "Nothing in the world is irretrievable" (83). The words are highly suggestive and meaningful. Roth seems to suggest that the illusion of escape from social involvement is the root cause of much unhappiness and misery in this world. One is so lost in the maze of the confounding elements of experience that to start all over again is not feasible for an ordinary human being. The lonely traveller of Robert Frost knows better, when he is convinced that choices are irrevocable and a wrong decision makes "all the difference."<sup>14</sup>

But Asher is a different kind of man. Like Leo Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus*, he is a typical Jewish failure. However, Leo can still travel distances to sell bulbs and maintain his wife and child. Asher, on the other hand, lives a sterile and meaningless life. His degradation is complete and he is past any hope of regeneration. Roth purposely shows us a glimpse of his life of moral depravity and waste. In a way, he is a point of reference to highlight Paul's firm belief in his ethical tenets. Instead of being convinced by his exhortations not to marry Libby, Paul is disgusted with Asher's obscenity, indignity and moral turpitude. He is shocked that Asher cannot understand his simple human instinct of love for Libby. His uncle Jerry is more experienced and mature. He strikes the right note when he says, "We're not dealing with the mind, with the practical senses

anyway. This is the mysterious, spontaneous choice – the choice of the heart. The unencumbered heart .... The heart, Paul, *knows*" (92). The words are highly suggestive and show that Roth's ethical tenets originate from the instinctive truth of the heart.

Paul's ethical choice is larger and is determined by his heart-felt convictions rather than any metaphysical principles. In this connection, Rodgers pertinently points out that Paul Herz's last name means "heart" in Yiddish.<sup>15</sup> In *Letting Go* like *Goodbye, Columbus* and the short stories Roth puts his emphasis on instinctive and spontaneous moral attributes like compassion, sympathy and love which are a true measurement of moral consciousness and not on any artificial and logical principles. Despite Paul's harrowing circumstances, he is never oblivious of his duty and obligations to Libby and his parents. He pays a visit to his ailing father in Brooklyn. In the railway station in New York, he contemplates his predicament and gives vent to his feelings of failure and exhaustion:

He had only to climb aboard and get off in Wilmington, Baltimore, or Miami Beach. Washington ... get a little room somewhere, get a job in some government office, and disappear. Start making a life not on the basis of what he dreamed he was, or thought he was supposed to be, or what literature, philosophy, friends, enemies, wife, parents told him he must be, but simply in terms of his own possibilities. (412-13)

Thus, the conflict in his soul is between letting go and hanging on, between the convictions of the heart and the demands of the surrounding society. Halio is of the opinion that in case of many of Roth's protagonists "moral conscience conflicts with hedonistic inclination."<sup>16</sup> But his observation appears to be more appropriate in the case of Roth's later protagonists like Portnoy and David Kepesh.

In *Letting Go*, the whole emphasis is on the problem of social involvement and its ethical ramifications. Here the conflict is between the need for the preservation of personal freedom and the necessity of social engagement. Paul chooses the arduous course of fulfilling his responsibilities and stifles his urge for freedom and escape. On the occasion of his father's funeral when he passionately embraces his mother, his emotions get the better of him and he realizes his actual place in the larger scheme of things. In this brief moment, as if in an epiphany, truth is revealed to him through intense imaginative experience. When his mother kisses him, all of his conflicts, frustrations and sorrows dissolve in that small instant and he achieves peace and harmony, though temporarily. His predicament is exactly similar to that of Tommy Wilhelm of Bellow's *Seize the Day*. A typical victim of circumstances, Tommy comprehends the working of existential forces through emotional experience at the end of the novel. Paul is able to comprehend, at last, the social and ethical compulsions of the individual in the midst of a wider cosmic design:

While his mother kissed his neck and moaned his name, he saw his place in the world. Yes. And the world itself - without admiration, without pity. Yes! Oh Yes! What he saw filled him for a moment with strength .... For his truth was revealed to him, his final premise melted away. What he had taken for order was chaos. Justice was illusion. Abraham and Isaac were one. His eyes opened, and in the midst of those faces – the faces of his dream, the faces of the bums, all the faces that had forever encircled him – he felt no humiliation and no shame. Their eyes no longer overpowered him. He felt himself under a wider beam. (452)

He apprehends the mysterious forces of the world and the individual's situation amid these forces not through the rational mind but through heart. He gracefully accepts life as it is, and his own role and place in it. Apparently, he passes through his moral ordeal triumphantly and is better equipped to face the existential reality at the end of the novel.

But as indicated earlier, Paul can be viewed as a point of reference in the novel to bring in sharp focus the complex personality of Gabe. Paul, seen in this perspective, might as well represent the alternative course of Gabe's choices. It can be safely assumed that Gabe has reached a higher level of ethical evolution since he chooses to act resolutely in order to bring about necessary modifications in his response. Obviously, Roth intended Gabe to be the centre of his major themes and concerns in the novel.

Roth firmly believes that man's quest for salvation essentially passes through his family and society. For his protagonists the ethical choices are inseparably linked to human relationships. McDaniel convincingly argues that in *Letting Go* Roth is exploring "the genuine difficulties of active self-assertion *within* the community."<sup>17</sup> Besides the primary relationship of man and woman, Roth deals with the vital relationship of parents and children in his books. As far as parents-children relationship is concerned, the basic issues involved are mutual faith, respect for each other's individuality and reciprocal expectations and demands. In *Letting Go* Roth has tried to explore all these issues through different sets of parents and children. This conflict surfaces very early in the novel when Gabe's father, out of sheer loneliness, craves for his son's company. He passionately pleads his son to visit him in New York on Thanksgiving and on his refusal accuses him of running away intentionally from him. Though tender and affectionate to his father, Gabe considers his father's insistence as an unjustified demand on his part. He wants to preserve his personal freedom and is "not prepared to surrender" his life to his father (39).

Like most of the father-figures in Roth's fiction, Dr. Gabe is an assiduous, self-sacrificing and affectionate person though he fails to understand his son's feelings. His mother categorically admits in her last letter to Gabe: "*Whatever unhappiness has been in our family springs from me. Please don't blame it on your father however I may have*

*encouraged you over the years."* (2) In fact, Gabe's mother is on the extreme end of the moral spectrum inasmuch as she vehemently adheres to her higher ethical ideals. After her death Dr. Gabe feels loneliness and craves for his son's company. But fortunately for Gabe, his emotions divert to an alcoholic, Fay Silberman, whom he decides to marry. He has somehow reconciled to the fact that "all sons leave their fathers" (487). Outwardly, though, he enjoys with his friends and even undertakes a tour of Europe, yet he feels lonely and sad.

Through intimate filial relationships Roth explores the germination and the evolution of the value system of his protagonists. In his fiction the children more often than not display a lack of communication with their fathers in spite of their love and reverence for them. Portnoy, for all his regards for his father, not infrequently gives vent to his feelings of discontent and resentment against him. Similar in the case with Zuckerman, Lucy and Paul. This may be attributed to their apprehension of total control of their life by their fathers. Leonard Herz, though on his death bed, is never able to reconcile to the marriage of his son, Paul, with a Catholic girl. In a frantic effort to prevent his marriage with Libby he asks Asher and Jerry to dissuade him. But Paul is acutely conscious of his responsibility towards Libby with whom he has had premarital sexual relations, and so he remains committed to her. At the same time he is always aware of his duty and obligation towards his parents. Completely

opposed to these Jewish fathers is Mr. DeWitt, Libby's Gentile father. His sarcastically vindictive attitude is clear from his letter to his daughter in response to her request for help. He has not forgiven her for marrying a Jewish boy. Naturally, Libby feels nothing but hatred and disgust for her parents.

The problem of parent-children relationship is analysed in a different perspective in the case of Martha Reganhart. In the majority of Roth's novels, the filial relationships are evaluated by the offsprings; but here they are examined from the point of view of the young mother. Martha is a young divorcee who is struggling alone in the world to bring up her children. She sacrifices her personal freedom for her children and has no intention of marrying any of her suitors. But when her former husband suddenly comes back to claim his children she allows Cynthia and Markie to live with him. Unfortunately, Markie dies tragically in a minor accident. Thus, through this episode Roth seems to hint at Martha's nemesis. He firmly believes that virtues like affection, self-sacrifice and generosity are indispensable for vital and lasting filial bonds.

In *Letting Go* Roth seems to suggest that family as the most vital source of strength for the individual is disintegrating in contemporary American society, and the individual is left with his own meagre resources to face the outer forces. This unpleasant development is closely related to the ethical choices of the individual. The most intense demonstration of this phenomenon is found in *When She Was Good*, where Lucy Nelson

takes on the whole society single-handedly to prove her moral superiority. There are other instances of the severance of domestic ties in his novels. In *Zuckerman Unbound* the protagonist, rejected by his brother and separated from his wife, is haunted by the curse of his dying father. Far from celebrating this loss of interpersonal communion in the modern society on any moral ground, Roth laments the dissolution of familial bonds.

In Roth's fiction father-figures are, for the most part, portrayed in warm and congenial terms. Dr. Gabe, Jack Portnoy, Abe Kepesh and Roth's own father in *Patrimony* are all loving and sincere fathers. When there are no real fathers Roth presents father figures or the surrogate fathers who give guidance, encouragement and consolation to the protagonists. For example, Mr. Patimkin in *Goodbye Columbus*, Uncle Jerry in *Letting Go*, E.I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*, and Tarnopol's brother Moe in *My Life as a Man* are elderly father figures giving assurance and solace to the protagonist at a critical juncture of his life. But at the same time, Roth is never oblivious of the fact that tensions and conflicts in interpersonal relationships are inevitable and unavoidable. Unlike some of the heroes in contemporary fiction, his characters try to resolve these conflicts in the ambience of family and society instead of escaping into the void of absurdism. Whenever a character is isolated from his familial and social moorings he is burdened by a sense of rootlessness and guilt. This is a measurement of his strong emotional ties with his family which is a source of moral and psychological strength.

In *Letting Go* Roth earnestly deals with the complex issues of human relationships and their moral and psychological implications. All the ethical and moral choices of the protagonist are mapped not in isolated human conditions, but in the course of his actual participation in the familial and social intercourse. The basic conflict in the novel is between the protagonist's inherent ethical ideals and the moral demands of the community. His choices are determined by his moral convictions notwithstanding the pressure of the society to conform to its normative values. The protagonist makes tremendous efforts to preserve his selfhood and moral integrity trying simultaneously to reconcile with the adverse outer forces. He gains a deep knowledge of and insight into the true nature of the constituent elements of the social reality. Despite the pressure of existential forces, he sticks to his ethical values and does not deviate from his humanitarian course. The process which Neil has initiated in *Goodbye, Columbus* continues in *Letting Go*, but is still incomplete. In his ethical evolution Gabe, however, appears to be at a higher level than Neil. The Rothian protagonist, at this stage, has realized the necessity of involvement in the social process but has not succeeded in achieving reconciliation and harmony. It remains for Lucy to resolve the dilemma of self and society in her own self-righteous manner and face the inevitable consequences in *When She Was Good*.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Jay L. Halio, *Philip Roth Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1992) 21.
- <sup>2</sup> Mark Shechner, "Jewish Writers," *Harward Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1981) 233.
- <sup>3</sup> Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance, *Philip Roth* (New York: Ungar, 1981) 51.
- <sup>4</sup> George J. Searles, *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 38-39.
- <sup>5</sup> Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne, 1978) 53.
- <sup>6</sup> Rodgers 48-49.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Roth, *Letting Go* (London: Corgi, 1972) 2. All subsequent citations will be to the text as given in this edition and the page numbers will be indicated in parentheses appearing immediately after the quotation.
- <sup>8</sup> Sanford Pinsker, *The Comedy That 'Hoits': An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1975) 42.
- <sup>9</sup> Rodgers 57.
- <sup>10</sup> Jones and Nance 45.
- <sup>11</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976) 170.
- <sup>12</sup> John N. McDaniel, *The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Haddonfield, NJ.: Haddonfield, 1974) 118.

<sup>13</sup>Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper, 1971) 18.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken", *Robert Frost: Selected Poems*, ed. Ian Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 77.

<sup>15</sup>Rodgers 52.

<sup>16</sup>Halio 49.

<sup>17</sup>McDaniel 84.