# "TO BE OR NOT TO BE?" – ON PHILIP ROTH'S JEWISH-AMERICANNESS

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*Abstract*

The paper below is meant to investigate the truth behind Philip Roth's attitude regarding the much debated topic of his "Jewish-Americanness". There are a number of facts which tie him to this ethnic denomination, also his literary territory is a small Jewish-dominated section of New-York, clearly reflected in his style, however it is shallow and unjustifiable to make constant references to Jewishness in the analysis and interpretation of his literary works.

**Keywords: Jewish-Americanness; ethnic versus literary identity**

There are a three undisputed facts that tie Roth's destiny and literature to the concept of Jewishness. Firstly, he is a second-generation Jewish-American born and raised in an ethnic (Jewish) conclave in Newark, New Jersey. Regarding this, Roth declared in a 2005 radio interview:

> My neighborhood was a Jewish village in a city that was made up of ethnic villages. 'Ethnic' is a word that was never used in those days, never used to describe ourselves with it. I never thought of myself as an American Jew […] A New York Jew – yes, as opposed by New York Italians […] Jews, Jews, Jews everywhere. 100% Jewish neighborhood and I didn't know a single soul to wear a skull cap. [His last sentence testifies for the "fierce secularization and Americanization" going on around him.]

Secondly, the vast majority of his books are of Jewish affiliation both in content and in form. They depict contemporary Jewish-American people and problems arising out of the process of assimilation - with every Rothian book we read we inevitably immerse ourselves in the Jewish condition and witness the perceptions of Jewish consciousness and the whole range of Jewish-community events. Similarly, the texture of his prose, the imagery, the allusions, the rhythm of speech (particularly the stylistic imitation of the coarse communication of the streets of New York) give his books a clear Jewish flavor.

Finally, there is Roth's recognition of his fascination and kinship with Kafka, a writer born to a middle-class German-speaking *Jewish* family in Prague during the Austrian–Hungarian Empire. According to Wisse, Kafka was in Roth's eyes "the keenest witness to the growing chasm between the inner and the outer person" (20). Moreover, Kafka's writing (particularly his 1919 letter to his father) depicts the enormous influence of a father upon the intellectual personality of his child, establishing the writer's task as

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the liberation of a son from his father, a psycho-literary terrain which Roth explored in many of his books (Kimmage 27).

Despite all these facts, it is still not entirely accurate or appropriate to label Philip Roth as a *Jewish-American* writer. He is what Roth himself declared (in an interview published in "Le Monde" in November 2002, when asked whether he perceives himself as an American Jew or a Jewish American): an American novelist. The truth and accuracy of his statement is revealed when we understand that the facts enumerated above and which tie Roth to Jewishness each have an edge.

Granted, Roth has strong affiliations with Kafka, but it cannot be stated that he draws heavily on Jewish culture. He very rarely responds to other Jewish writers' work, in fact Roth's acknowledged literary line of descent are such writers as Henry James, Franz Kafka, LevTolstoi, Marcel Proust, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann, James Joyce etc. whereas his use of Israel as setting in his novels has the purpose of depicting Jewish Americans in search of their self (most of the time rejecting Israel and returning to America).

It is true that Roth writes about Jews. His first reason for writing about Jews in America is that he writes about what he has known in terms of places, people and events. More accurately he writes about Jews from within an American sensibility his primary focus being not European Jews, Israeli Jews or even immigrant American Jews, but the descendants of the last category. Roth's work imagines these second-generation Jewish-Americans in their professional, social, cultural and residential American contexts, which not once means rejecting such aspects of life, physiognomy and psychology that help one identify oneself as Jewish. His work would not be as accomplished provided he chose to depict any other type of characters and backdrop. The idea is that Roth uses ethnicity as a framework for the contemporary reality he paints, in other words "his narratives derive their universal power from their ethnic and sociocultural specificity" (Greenberg 488). The tensions entailed by transgression are at the core of most of his novels and at the heart of his writerly interest.

As for the types of character he casts in his work, Roth has a preference towards the assimilated suburban Jewish male, who has lived most of his life in flourishing and affluent post-WW II Jewish-American suburbs, being vaguely connected with the crowded immigrant tenements on the lower East Side. According to J.P. Steed,

> For secularized American Jews growing up in the mid-twentieth century, the conflict between Judaism and Christianity was minimal-perhaps even nonexistent; their Jewishness was far more ethnic than religious. […] Whereas, for previous generations, the tensions Jews experienced had been predominantly between the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities, throughout the mid-twentieth century, many of these tensions shifted to within the Jewish community-over religion, between practicing Jews and secularized Jews; over the generation gap, between young, assimilated Jews and their seemingly parochial parents and grandparents; and over the sense of self, between the individual Jew



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> and his or her expression-often viewed as either an embrace or a rejection-of collective Jewish identity. These new tensions created new versions of Jewish American anxiety, new expressions and kinds of Jewish American humor, and a newly constructed sense of Jewish American identity. (147)

It is now widely accepted by critics that Roth's Jewishness is an individual construct. Omer-Sherman's study of Roth, for example, supports this view, when he phrases the conclusion to the writer's career-long literary quest and identifies his model character as a radical individualist and celebrator of Self with Newark origins and a personal take on his American Jewishness:

> [P]erhaps Roth's vigorously pessimistic outlook of late is the logical consequence of a cultural imagination that in the end has not as its concern the epic of Jewishness, in or out of Israel, but rather takes as its enduringly ephemeral touchstone the memory of one ethnic Newark neighborhood. In Roth's oeuvre, memory and the myths of a personal history replace collective memory and people hood (265).

We believe that Roth's second reason to write about American Jews is that he has always been aware that the peripheral has become the middle in contemporary culture. He understood (very early in his life and career) that America is characterized by a great cultural diversity which is not without a clear toll on the construct of individual identity. At the age of sixteen he left his neighborhood and from then on he lived for dozens of years in New York, Chicago, London - fast-changing cosmopolitan cities which accommodate people from various social, ethnic and cultural contexts and which foster both integration and sectionalism, peaceful cohabitation and conflictive opposition. In these diversity-oriented social and cultural environments Roth was an alert observer of the intercultural exchanges of experiences and perspectives on society, politics, literature etc. and realized that identity ended up in crisis and fragmentation in its socio-cultural existence as well as the its literary and artistic representation. As a result Roth has had a far larger view and message than the limited ethnic, parochial one some critics seem to want to assign to his work.

Many times during his career, Roth has protested against the label of "Jewish-American" writer. For instance, in a 2003 radio interview, when asked what is his "reaction to being called a Jewish writer", he explained why he feels it is quite an injustice to be called that:

> If the categories remain consistent, it doesn't bother me. By consistent I mean that if you call John Updike a Protestant writer or if you call Flannery O'Connor a Catholic writer, then I don't mind being called a Jewish writer. Academicians need these categories in order to teach coherently, but all I ask is that the categories be consistent. I think the proper way to categorize, if I were to do it, is to say that all of us are American writers with different kinds of subjects and territories. Updike, for example, is an American writer whose territory often is



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> small-town Pennsylvania and New England, and I'm an American writer whose territory is a small section of New York.

To support his view that he is an *American* novelist, we should also consider the evolution of the American literature since the second half of the 20th century, when Roth together with other writers of Jewish descent in the United States (Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud), joined the mainstream of American fiction, which meant that their works became popular with the reading audience, received regular laudatory reviews and aroused wide critical and academic interest. It is our opinion that the label "Jewish-American" is, therefore, more appropriate first to representatives of early Jewish writing in America, who, depicting their the immigrant experience, had marginality, alienation, and victimization as dominant themes, and second to a newer generation of American writers, who having chosen to place at the centre of their work Jewish thought and history, is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts, Jewish religious teaching and values, the trauma of the Holocaust, and the establishment of a Jewish nation in Israel.

When considering Roth's relation to Jewishness it is also compulsory to discuss his attitude towards the expectations of his own tribe. Particularly at the beginning of his career, Roth was accused of irreverent and humorous treatment of Jews and of portraying Jewish characters who feel chocked by the Jewish culture. This there were numerous accusations of anti-Semitism, a number of people using what Roth called "vicious, malicious and stupid epithets/generalizations" (radio interview NPR: *Fresh Air* show Oct. 31, 2003), such as "Jew-hater" and "self-hating Jew" to refer to him. All these made him feel assaulted. The mistake those people made, while supposedly defending the Jewish tribe's reputation, was to take his books' characters out of context and thus to overlook their flavor and spirit. Roth's position on this matter was that he does not consider himself the voice of the Jewish-Americans, therefore he has no responsibility in advertising the tribe: "Each writer speaks for his or her own imagination and its strengths and has no obligation to speak for anything or anyone else. [...] I don't have much sympathy for reading for the tribal lands" (recorded interview broadcast on 25 Dec 2005, *Open Source*). This attack also shaped the course of his career. According to Shostak, "the readings that made him 'other' […] gave him his material [for the next novels since]. Criticism made his writerly subjectivity visible to him" (13). Roth himself admits in *The Facts*: "The angry Jewish resistance that I aroused virtually from the start […] was the luckiest break I could have had. I was branded" (130).

To conclude, we maintain that Roth is inexorably connected to the Jewish tribe, because Roth's Jewishness remains a fact and his books reflect it stylistically, as he himself admits it to Hermione Lee:

> The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn't really reside in their subject matter. Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all. It's kind of sensibility: […] the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation,



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> the obsesiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting – above all, the talking. The talking and the shouting. Jews will go on, you know. It isn't what it's talking *about* that makes a book Jewish – it's that the book won't shut up. The book won't leave you alone. Won't let up. Gets too close. "Listen, listen – that's only the half of it!" (Roth 2007 162-3)

but, as a writer he is much more than his identity politics, and the outcome of his long career is an aesthetic response to the multiculturalism of America, not only to this Jewish-American identity.

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*** - "American Novelist Philip Roth" from NPR's "Fresh Air", Oct. 31, 2003

*** - "Roth Interview" from NPR's "Fresh Air", September 2005




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