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Between Melting Pot and Salad Bowl: A Study of Immigrant Jewish Culture and Identity in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*

Ms. T. Shameema

Researcher, Department of English, University of Calicut, Calicut, Kerala,
India.

Abstract

Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is one of the best-known, and perhaps one of the most controversial and notorious of American novels. Playful, and deadly serious, it explores some of the crucial issues of our times. Central to the novel, however, is the issue of the predicament of the immigrant Jewish community in the midst of WASP cultural dominance. The conflict between immigrant Jewish life and culture, and WASP life and culture is highlighted in the novel. The identity crisis precipitated by this conflict is carnivalesquely brought out through the figure of the novel's young protagonist Alexander Portnoy, whose agonies eventually force him on to the psychoanalyst's table. To be assimilated into the surrounding WASP culture or remain faithfully rooted in his Jewish American culture is what creates debilitating and painful identity crisis and confusions for Portnoy. The article is a brief consideration of this

aspect of the novel.

Keywords

Melting Pot; Salad Bowl; Immigrant Jewish Culture; Identity; Philip Roth; *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Philip Roth is one of the best-known, and, perhaps one of the most controversial and notorious of American novelists. His long career began with works that infuriated not only the immigrant Jewish community of America but the Jewry in other parts of the world as well. For, Roth who is a Jew himself, though not a practicing one, severely ridiculed them and their cultural heritage and practices. In a number of his fictional works, he seems to be reveling in representing the Jewish community in an extremely negative light.

Roth's notoriety reached its peak with the publication of his 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*. Combining sheer fun, playfulness, and deadly seriousness, Roth explores a series of issues such as postmodernity, pornography, food and food politics, sex and sexual politics, WASP cultural dominance, immigrant Jewish minority culture and its identity politics, and cultural assimilation and alienation. These themes are so knit together as to project the conflict between the Jewish immigrants' life and culture and the dominant American WASP life and culture. The identity crisis and dilemmas that this conflict precipitates is brought out through the figure of the novel's young protagonist, Alexander Portnoy.

The novel begins with Portnoy's lengthy monologue of complaints and confessions about his family and life to a psychoanalyst named Dr. Spielvogel. Portnoy is a thirty-three year old Jewish American who lives in Newark and longs to escape his ethnic identity in order to be assimilated into mainstream American life. But, the impact of his Jewish upbringing turns out to be a formidable barrier. As such, he more or less fails to crash through the wall of his Jewish tradition and ends up, sick in mind, on the psychoanalyst's table, groaning and

moaning, frenzied and panicky, and indulging in what has been called his 'verbal diarrhea'. In the process he lays bare the story of his life and experiences leading up to his current afflictions.

Portnoy's family which, besides himself, consists of his father, mother, and sister, is of special importance in the novel. The family's religious and cultural rigidity and prejudices cause considerable inner conflicts for Portnoy. Confounded, he grows wrathful and recalcitrant, and rebels, even in odd and grotesque ways. His mother Sophie Portnoy and his father Jake Portnoy, who represent the ways of the Jewish diaspora, are figures of authority and control. Their sole aim is to rear him into a perfect Jewish son. To them, he is the embodiment of all their hopes and aspirations. The result, as Portnoy puts it, is that even when he is a grown up man and is thirty- three, he is treated by them as a child. The over caring attitude of his Jewish parents is what prompts Portnoy's ruthlessly ironic comment: "A Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen year old boy, and will remain a fifteen year old boy till they die" (111). Jewish parenting is superlatively flawed; it blocks freedom and proper growth.

The image of his mother sitting menacingly beside him with a large kitchen-knife and stuffing him with food is an image which haunts Portnoy throughout his life. Sophie is nagging and domineering, ethnocentric and piously Jewish to the core. She hates the gentiles and dislikes everything associated with them. To her, Kosher laws alone are sovereign. As a child, Portnoy enjoys no privacy, as his mother's panoptic eye is perennially cast on him and on everything in the household. The energy and thoroughness with which she checks things both surprises and irritates Portnoy. She checks his sums for mistakes, his socks for holes, and his nails, neck, and every seam and cream of his body for dirt. She even dredges the furthest recesses of his ear and pours cold peroxide into his ears to bring to the surface bits and pieces of the yellow wax inside. Recalling her untiring surveillance, Portnoy tells Dr. Spielvogel that she "patrols the six rooms of our apartment the way a guerrilla army moves

across its own countryside- there is not a single closet or drawer of mine whose contents she hasn't a photographic sense of" (172-173).

Sophie Portnoy has a series of taboos relating to her son's food and his socialization, in the white gentile world outside. He shouldn't eat lobster; he shouldn't go after shiksas i.e., white girls. When he falls ill, she ascribes it to his deviance from Jewish dietary injunctions: "Why has this child spent half his life in hospitals? Because he eats *chazerai*" [i.e., pork dishes].

Food not prepared according to the Kosher code is, in her view, all garbage. She is perpetually anxious that her son might turn his back on Judaism and his ancestral culture, lured by America's dominant WASP culture. She does not want him to forget that he is a Jew and that the Jew is one who has always been hunted, ostracized, victimized, and massacred over the centuries. Portnoy's mother, father, and sister and the Rabbi are shown in the novel as making concerted efforts to drill this Jewish truth into his consciousness. At one point in the novel, when he is fifteen, his eighteen year old college-going sister confronts him squarely, telling him that had he been born in Europe instead of America, he would certainly have been dead:

Dead. Gassed, or shot, or incinerated, or butchered or buried alive. Do you know that? And you could have screamed all you wanted that you were not a Jew, that you were a human being and had nothing whatever to do with their stupid suffering heritage, and still you would have been taken away to be disposed of. You would be dead, and I would be dead... And your mother and father would be dead. (77)

Roth intends her sentiments to be representative of the Jewish immigrant community's stance toward the culture and society of America, their host country, their savior and refuge. Portnoy's metaphoric comment, years later as he lies on the analyst's table, is profoundly sarcastic: "I suppose the Nazis are an excuse for everything that happens in this house" (77).

Portnoy's father, like the others, is also filled with the Jewish sense of superiority. He is a racist, too. If to Sophie, the cleaning lady is an inferior creature, to her husband, the Afro-Americans are more so. He wouldn't call them except by using the term 'niggers'. Young Portnoy is so offended by his parents' self-righteous superciliousness and lack of humanity that he furiously bursts out before his mother:

Can't you grasp something of the principle of equality...I tell you, if he ever uses the word nigger in my presence again, I will drive a real dagger into his fucking bigoted heart! *Is that clear to everyone?* (75).

A glutton, in spite of chronic constipation, he consumes plentiful of senna laxative and divides his time between the kitchen and the bathroom, and spoils the quiet of home with his never-ending professional fears and irritations. He, too, adds to Portnoy's annoyance.

To Portnoy, his home is no haven; it is not, to use Ezekiel's phrase, "the place where we gather grace". A claustrophobic place, it constricts and suffocates him, and it makes him greatly confused as to who he actually is, what his real identity is. He has to be either a Jewish Cain or a Jewish Abel. He chooses to be a Jewish Cain. So, with his egalitarian temper and his love of living a thoroughly human life, he lives and grows to be the thirty-three year old Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities, breaking taboos—food taboos, sexual taboos, and socializing taboos- and jettisoning his family's anti-Gentilism.

In outlook, Portnoy is eminently liberal. He is imbued with the Ulyssian spirit of 'drinking life to the lees' and is postmodern in his transgression of boundaries. This mindset invariably makes him view religion as a repressive force that presses into believing that life is boundaries and restrictions, discipline and obedience, renunciation and self-control, sobriety and sanctions. In his view, religion divides human communities and makes them dangerously self-righteous, and prejudiced against each other. It is Portnoy's cultural catholicity and eclecticism that makes him eloquently mock the Jewish idea of the White goyim Christian culinary culture as a culture of eating frogs and pigs and crabs

and lobsters, vulture-meat and ape-meat, whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, as the culture of a breed of mankind so hopelessly shallow and empty-headed as to drink, divorce, and to fight with their fists, as the culture of the eaters of the execrable, as the culture of an abominable people with a diet of abominable creatures.

But, Portnoy would love to violate all life-denying laws, including those of Judaism and to free-wheel in the American goyische [i.e, non-jewish] life. So, he routinely masturbates. Even on board a bus, he stealthily does it. He also eats lobster one night. Reminiscing before the analyst, Portnoy says: “It all begins with the breaking of one dietary law—eating lobster away from home.” Portnoy’s war against his family and its Jewish mores also takes the form of lusting after white girls and sleeping with them. The Jewish taboo against inter-religious sex, about which his mother repeatedly cautions him, is no bar to him. When he is fourteen, he adamantly refuses to go to the synagogue with his parents on holidays. He stresses his essential human identity and concerns:

Religion is the opiate of the people. And if believing that makes me a fourteen-year old communist, then that’s what I am, and I am proud of it, I would rather be a communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue any day. I happen to believe in the rights of man, rights such as are extended in the Soviet Union to all people, regardless of race, religion or colour. (74)

Portnoy’s acts are not just acts of protest or rebellion; they are also an expression, and a vindication, of his deep-seated desire to live a fully human life, even if it amounts to assimilation into the permissive WASP society. Humorously, he asserts before the analyst: “...I will discover America. *Conquer* America- maybe that’s more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington—now Portnoy”.

But, cultural heritage and the impact of an upbringing based on it are die-hards. And this is true of Portnoy. He only half succeeds in his war on his Jewish identity and in acquiring the identity of a liberated human being in order to live

the American way. His transgressions engender a deep sense of guilt in him, rendering him a helpless, tormented victim of cross-pulls. His ancestral culture and the culture of America pull him in opposite directions, making it arduous for him to choose one stable identity. In a different sense, the conflict that causes a guilt-torn conscience in Portnoy is between what Roth himself has termed, the measured self and the insatiable self, the accommodating self and the ravenous self. Portnoy knows where the source of his crisis lies. Referring to his parents, he raves:

These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time! ...The very first distinction I learned...was not night and day, or hot and cold, but goyische and jewish!...jew jew jew jew jew! It's coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering jews!...I happen also to be a human being! (118)

Portnoy is also aware that he is not alone in his suffering. Beautifully evoking the history of the European Jews' migration to America, he sums up the enervating cultural and identity confusions and dilemmas of the young Jews of his generation:

...I am not in this boat alone, oh no, I am on the biggest troop ship afloat...only look in through the portholes and see us there, stacked to the bulkheads in our bunks, moaning and groaning with such pity for ourselves, the sad and watery-eyed sons of Jewish parents, sick to the gills from rolling through these heavy seas of guilt —So I sometimes envision us, me and my fellow wailers, melancholics, and wise guys, still in teenage, like our forebears— and oh sick, sick as dogs... (119)

Indeed, the tug-of-war is between Portnoy's insatiate self with its appetites and his horror of wantonly abandoning himself to gratifying them. In Roth's view, "personal inhibition, ethical conviction and plain, old, monumental fear" constitute "the barrier that forms one boundary of the individual's identity and experience.

Metaphorically speaking, Portnoy is neither inside the melting pot of the American WASP culture; nor is he fully inside his Jewish culture, one of the varied ingredients of the American salad bowl of ethnic and minority cultures. For Portnoy, acculturation is still a dream. In this respect, he is quite unlike Hayat, the young Pak- American Muslim protagonist of Ayad Akhtar's novel, *American Dervish* (2012). Hayat breaks the taboos of his Islamic culture, eats pork, marries a Jewish girl, and emerges triumphant out of his identity crisis, acquiring a human identity, achieving acculturation, and resolving to live the American way. Hayat ends up right inside the melting pot; Portnoy ends up right on the psychoanalyst's table, groaning and appealing for a final solution to his tornadoed self and identity.

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