

## The Jewish American Identity and Its Assimilation

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### ABSTRACT

This article takes into consideration the issue pertaining to the existence of Jewish American identity and its assimilation into mainstream America. It also examines the issues that cropped up after the World War II and the Holocaust belonging to the Diaspora Jewish American society and the conflict between the dominant American culture and the Jewish sub-culture. In particular, this study focuses on the condition of the Diaspora Jewish American immigrants, and their changing lifestyle with their assimilation and coming in contact with the Gentiles. To understand the Jewish American society, this article has taken one of the best Jewish American writers, Philip Roth and his works. Philip Roth's works chiefly concern with the Jews and their identity and the characters in Philip Roth's novels attempt to define themselves either as Jews or not as Jews and this tension creates an ethnic disunity amongst themselves and also within the Jewish society they belong to. The Jewish immigrants after their assimilation and fully adopting the mainland American culture try to deny their Jewish identity and Jewish boundaries by transgressing their own cultural boundaries and limits. This article thus, aims at portraying the conflict between traditional and contemporary morals as manifested in the Diaspora Jewish American immigrants.

*Keywords:* Identity, assimilation, Diaspora, conflict, Jewishness, American culture.

The question of identity and assimilation is an important issue pertaining to matters related to the Diaspora Jews who migrated to many different countries throughout history. The offspring's

who were born as a result of the union of diverse people became “Americans”, the new creation. The definition of American identity has always been subjected to threats since 1780s. Unlike other European countries like England, France etc., the United States of America has always had a regular coming of immigrants from various places and cultures.

Most of the countries where the Diaspora Jews lived, mainly outside Israel, were mostly guests, who always remained the marginal observers in the host culture. In the eyes of both Jews and Gentiles, the Jews remained Jews, and did not get adequate recognition. Through their laws and customs, the dominant culture of the host country always reminded Jews that they were a minority, often an unwelcome group who were not suitable for entering the mainstream or dominant culture unless they gave up their own religion that is Judaism. And even in that case, the acceptance was not assured. Under such a circumstance, identity was an important matter of concern.

According to the Whites or the Gentile world, one remained a Jew until one has lived in a controlled, endogamous Jewish community. In America, this was not the case. The United States was a country that had its own systems, ideologies, a structure and an opportunity and which differed radically from all other places in the world. It was a constitutional democracy with the concept of “American Dream”. The United States gave hope to all immigrants to provide them with the opportunity to define themselves, which was something unheard of in the Jewish experience. By 1880, there were approximately 250,000 Jews in the United States. And within the next 35 years, some two million Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe and, for the most part, in family units, came from the Old World, escaping Russian anti-Semitism. Unlike many Italians, who came as single man just for the sake of money and then returned, the Jews were totally different, they never looked back. Like the Italians, the Polish and the Russian Orthodox, the Jews also brought with them a

new religion, language and custom to America that was alien to all. A paradox was quickly established in the United States as it opened both its arms to the immigrants and blocked their entry.

The industrialisation of the late nineteenth century provided avenues to all the Jews and other immigrants to earn a living and move up the economic ladder. Unlike other immigrants, though free enterprise capitalism had many pitfalls, the Diaspora Jews became successful in all matters within a single generation. Jewish men began to enter retail and manufacturing enterprises to set examples of upward mobility within a few years. The Jews could be found in various profitable sectors, where they seized opportunities.

Jewish intellectuals, most notably Horace Meyer Kallen (1882-1974) who belongs to the first generation of immigrants, and Will Herberg (1901-1977) of the second, contributed a lot to the debate of Jewish identity in America. By doing so, they helped the Jewish Americans in accomplishing a dual purpose that is understanding themselves, their capabilities and calming Gentile fears about the inability of Jews to assimilate into the American culture. Kallen, who is the author of the concept of “cultural pluralism,” left an enormous influence on both the Jewish and Gentile communities. Cultural pluralism came up with an idea that immigrants should be allowed to preserve their old culture and also should absorb much of the new American culture, thereby strengthening both.

Will Herberg, born in Russia, arrived as an immigrant to the United States with his family in 1904. His most notable writings on the subject of Jewish identity came to the forefront much later, during the 1950s, upon publication of *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* in 1955. In it, he elevated Judaism to a position on a par with the dominant Christian religions. Here, he argued that religion was more important than ethnicity, and also that all Americans were rather more interested in the idea of faith rather than in its practice. His ideas, in conjunction and in contrast with Kallen’s

offer the contemporary readers an idea and a perspective on the meaning of assimilation and cultural identity. Though both the intellectuals wrote for two different purposes and with a different idea in response to particular challenges, their thoughts transcend their historic settings.

Since the 1950s the Diaspora Jews of East Europe has not been able to adjust themselves with American society. This resulted in the decline of their commitment and devotion towards their own religion. Judaism has been replaced by a reverence for "Jewishness," a secular, ethnic culture. The unique characteristics and traits of historical Judaism have been worn away by the struggle between the Diaspora Jews and its middle class Protestant counterpart. The urge for assimilation has carried away the religion, its laws and practice, allowing their replacement with folk symbols. The Jews in America lost sight of what held them together. They abandoned Judaism without thinking of what they might be after abandoning it.

Since the turn of the century, Jewish fiction has concerned itself more with the issue of identity. And this indeed has been the major issue. Novels of the second generation Jewish American writers, in particular, have focused mainly on the depiction of the experiences of Diaspora Jews and their responses to the pressure to assimilate themselves into the American culture. The novels conceptualise Judaism in America and examine the second generation and the Diaspora Jews' struggle to maintain its organic connection with Judaism – its Jewish identity.

As the Jewish Americans have become more interested in the social "mainstream," the questions on the survival of Jewish identity have arisen in the United States. The purpose of this article is to explain the impact of religiosity, result of Jewish assimilation and the changes in Jewish identification in order to understand what is "Jewishness" of the most assimilated Jews. Disrespect towards one's own religion has been one of the main

reasons of identity crisis and the result of assimilation. A decline in religiosity poses a greater threat to Jewish identity than declining social contact does. It is important in this context to refer to Nancy Haggard-Gilson who in her article, "The Construction of Jewish American Identity in Novels of the Second Generation" remarks: "Jewish identity means, then, that there is a sense of peoplehood among individuals that is derived from the culture and history of Judaism and which is sufficiently substantive to support the construction of subjective identity. It must be personal and active, rather than periodically celebrated or dependent on context. Of course, religiosity has declined and one must be willing to grant the possibility of a Jewish laxness of practice in order to accept the interpretation I suggest. But the history of the Jews does not seem to imply that a lessening of practice necessarily triggers an increasing, inevitable demise in the identification with the ideas, ethics, and sensibilities of Judaism. Though the second generation apparently abandoned religious practice with some ease, perhaps precisely because it marked them as foreigners, its own sense of self was very much anchored in what was thought to be the core of Judaism: the pursuit of justice and morality over intellectual conformity; the belief that knowledge and understanding cannot be received but require inquiry and debate; that observing the ethical rules of behavior is more important than an intense, unwavering belief in God; and that an identification with the historical experience of the Jewish people is as central to what it means to be a Jew as gaining literacy in Hebrew and the Talmud. To dismiss second generation attachment to these ideas in deference to a conservative definition of Jewish identity based on religious observance is, I will argue, not only wrongheaded but curiously unsympathetic – pathetic to the culture of Judaism itself."

One of the most prominent living Jewish writers in contemporary American Literature, Philip Roth (1933-) has become famous for his works on Jews. Roth is of the Jewish origin who does not deny his Jewish root. He is a recorder of the

American Jewish experience. He devoted his whole life writing on and about the American Jewish life. In this sense, there is a Jewishness that is reflected in his writings. We also observe in his writings his ethnic ethos as well as the characteristic position he holds as a Jew as well as an American writer.

In some of his most influential and important contemporary writings, Philip Roth demonstrates an understanding of the development of Jewish-American identity and how it collides with the American identity. Roth's Jewish-American characters assimilate and retain and abandon their Jewish heritage for a new American identity. The Jewish characters who crowd Roth's stories and novels replace their own cultural identifiers with those of the majority and dominant American culture.

In Roth's books, "Jewishness" has been explained as a psychological condition. But in *The Counter life* (1986), Jewishness becomes a historical condition seen as a series of conflicting ideologies. The book mirrors through Zuckerman the reinvention of the world. It also portrays Roth's exploration and confrontation of self with history: the American self which can be reborn and Jewish history which cannot be reinvented. Roth sees himself as a "writer who is a Jew" rather than as a "Jewish writer". In his *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), he confesses how deeply the Jew is "lodged" within him, and that without the Jews, he would have not existed as a writer. And as because "Jewishness is the problem that is reflected in all his creativity, he may be called the prophet of American Jewish life.

For Roth, the diaspora Jews are the ones who live in harmony with all other mankind, accepting their place in a multicultural, multivalent world. And the American Jews who are historical, cultural, and spiritual heirs of European Jewry are not self-questioning, self-hating, alienated and frightened Jews but rather vital, ironic, sympathetic, and tolerant people with the Jewish sense of survival that was all human, elastic, adaptable, humorous, and creative. Roth finds in their descendants – the

children (sons and daughters) of the immigrants who had entered America – men and women like his father, with determination and courage to change an alien land into a permanent home. Through his novel *Operation Shylock*, Roth has described how the American Jews have maintained their ties and bonding with their Jewish roots. In this novel, the Mosad agent Smiles burger, who is a father figure to Roth, reminds Roth of his “responsibilities” towards the Jewish people.

In his *American Pastoral* (1997), we find how a Jew wants to immerse himself in America. The character Swede reinvents himself as an ordinary, natural, regular American fellow. *The Counter life* and *Operation Shylock* offer ways of determining the American Jews as the moral and spiritual equivalents of Israeli Jews. *American Pastoral* disturbs our notion and shows Jewish renunciation as unsettling as any of the Puritans who would have laid on the apostates within their ranks.

By giving up their original Jewish identity and passing into the majority American culture, Roth's characters show a desire to establish a self-created identity. Though the Rothian characters can be seen abandoning their own Jewish identity, but they cannot ‘let go’ of their Jewish origins. Roth develops a complex competitive American arena, showcasing the Jewish-American struggle for self-identity. Some evidences where we find Roth displaying about his own self are his works like *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993) where he names the characters after himself. In *Deception* (1990) he named the central character as Philip and in *Operation Shylock* (1993) he named the main character as Philip Roth. In her article titled, “Philip Roth's Fictions of Self Exposure”, Debra Shostak feels that it might be odd for those writers who make use of the references about themselves in their writings because there are many writers who make the efforts to keep themselves away in a detached or objective way without alluding to any personal remarks in their writing. She is further of the opinion that may be Roth

deliberately writes in this fashion enabling his career out of his reader's inclinations toward "biographical interpretations":

"Few writers dare to name themselves at the center of their inventions, which is why it is so arresting to find a work of fiction that pronounces its author's name within the text. Because readers are frequently tempted, from either prurient interest or more impartial motives, to discern autobiography in a fictional narrative, most writers of fiction seem to labour out of modesty a sense of privacy, or a display of imaginative capacities to erase the traces of their own lives from their work. But not so Philip Roth, especially since his invention of Nathan Zuckerman, he has encouraged readers to interpret the narrative voice of his fiction as a self-revealing "I," a Roth surrogate who, by the time of *Deception* and *Operation Shylock*, is no longer a surrogate but is "Roth" himself... What I argue here is not that Roth is, strictly, writing autobiographically, but rather that he makes capital out of his readers' inclinations toward biographical interpretations of his work. The "Roth" in the text must always be read in quotation marks, even when seemingly most unmediated, in order to underscore the indeterminacy of the "Roth" who appears in each narrative and to distinguish this narrativised "Roth" from the man who writes the books and lives in Connecticut – a distinction the texts labour to obscure."

In his another work *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), Roth projects as to how the title character moves away from the funeral of his closest friend and declares: "it's putting corpses into clothes that really betrays what great thinkers we are" (413). The great emotional crisis of dressing his dead father "for eternity in the wrong clothes," gives a clue for a textual correspondence with his indefinite representations of "Jewishness" ranging through his controversial career.

Of the American Jewish literature in the second generation novels, the family has been always considered a central component of the plot. In Jewish families, mothers and fathers have an enormous responsibility to see that their children are properly educated in Hebrew, Torah, and the laws of observance. In return, children honour their parents by doing well in

religious training. But parts of Jewish traditionalism have broken down in the United States and this is portrayed through novels. We see how Philip Roth's novels like *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), *My Life as a Man* (1974) try to depict the role of the Jewish parents in influencing the lives of their children.

Philip Roth's dedication to the Jews and his Jewishness is marvelous. His works address the issues like dilemmas and paradoxes of late-twentieth-century Jewish existence, their culture and conflict. The re-enactment of identity forms the major concern of the second generation Jewish writers. It builds up some hope in someone from a second generation immigrant to transform himself/herself into a Native American. Being Jewish is no longer a mark of disgrace in American society and culture. It is in many respects a privileged status. But we find that this is somewhat ironic in the sense that though Jewish identity has become socially more acceptable and even more desirable to identify Jewishly, the identity and identification of the American Diaspora Jews today are less firm and important. To be identified as an American has become more important for the American Jews.

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