

The American Jewishness in Philip Roth's Fiction—The Thematic Study of *American Pastoral*

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Abstract—As one of the most prominent living Jewish writers in contemporary American Literature, Philip Roth (1933-) has been producing excellent works despite his 80-year-old age. He is a frequent subject of Chinese researchers, but among those literary studies of Philip Roth's fiction, Jewishness is not a subject to be discussed much. One of the reasons is that as an ethnic term, Jewishness is ambiguous in perception. As Roth persists with his American stance in interviews, literary discussions on his Jewishness seems to be more ambiguous. Nevertheless, Roth does not deny his Jewish root, and Roth devotes his whole life writing with the subject of American Jewish life. In view of this, there is a Jewishness that exists in his fiction which best reflects his ethnic ethos as well as the characteristic position he holds as a Jew and American writer. In analyzing one of the Roth's most important works in late-twentieth century, namely, *American Pastoral*, this thesis aims to put forward the idea that Jewishness exhibited in this fiction is Americanized Jewishness.

Index Terms—Jewishness, Americanized Jewishness, the American pastoral

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, Jewishness is regarded as an inherited and inherent trait which indicates an ancestral background or lineage to genetics. For example, Martin Buber claims that "the ethnicity of Jewry is permeated in Jewish daily life. It is the basic construction of Jewish temperament which is decided by the particular bloodline and is affected by people's nurturing environment, language and conventions" (Buber, 2002, p. 12-15).

Here, defined in literary sphere, Jewishness refers to the mindset an author reveals in relation to Jewish culture or Judaism. It could also be the mentality of the literary character, or any other subjects which reveal Jewish life—personality, language, behaviors and so on. Focusing on Philip Roth's fiction, the Jewishness which suggests the common traits of these American Jewish characters is the American Jewishness. It retains the basic elements of Jewish ethos, which simultaneously absorbs certain ideologies of American thoughts. In character depiction, Roth focuses on those American Jewish characters who are under the impact of both Jewish tradition and American social forces.

To explore this American Jewishness in *American Pastoral*, this paper focuses on one of the aspects of Jewishness, that is to say, Jewish social assimilation. By deconstructing the stereotyped American Gentile image through the disillusionment of American dream of Swede—the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, Roth suggests an American Jewishness which is undergoing transformation yet is alert in questioning the assimilation act when American Jews are greatly affected by American materialism and liberalism.

II. THE DREAM OF PASTORAL

To discuss the downfall of the Swede's American dream, it is necessary to have a look at the Swede's pastoral dream and the implication within this self-transformation plan. In Sandra Stanley's argument, the utopia myth is "an ideological construct that foreshadows the demise of earlier stories of nationhood" (Stanley, 2005, p.5). Swede's utopia ideal of a pastoral life is accordingly his ideological construct of American Dream. It is invented, rather than discovered, and is expected to make real by the Swede's self-striving. Culturally, the Swede's vision of American pastoral life links closely with American Jewish experience in this country. It is a modified picture which reflects the early Jewish immigrant's dream of America as a modern arcadia, a picture of a life with the implication of male self-fulfillment and individualistic flight from the marginalized position in reality, and a picture of an idealized land where human's relation to nature is founded on harmony, order and simplicity.

To match with this utopia reality of pastoral, the Swede also sets up an American image, Johnny Appleseed as his self-making model. In the folklore, Appleseed is an American pioneer nurseryman who introduces apple trees to large parts of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. Because of his altruism and charity, Appleseed is made a legendary figure who represents the optimism and idealism of American pastoralism. What appeals to the Swede about Appleseed is that Johnny Appleseed "wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American" (Roth, 1997, p.316). The Swede loves this image which stands for an innocent, childlike

version of American pioneer spirit. He expects his pastoral life to be the one which contains American colonial spirit of simplicity and pioneering courage.

Actually, the Swede's American dream with the Appleseed and the simplicity of pastoral utopia is affected by the historic time he lives in. The time when the Swede spends to shape his life vision is the patriotic war years of forties and the affluent postwar years. The patriotic aspiration nationwide helps greatly to obscure the ethnic difference between the Jew and the Protestant both in and outside the battlefields. When the war ends, noticeably, in postwar America, anti-Semitism declines to unprecedented low levels. The ease of ethnic tension is echoed in *American Pastoral* when Roth writes that "the post-immigrant generation of Newark's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than the Polish shtetl" (Roth, 1997, p. 10). As social tolerance expands and liberalism boosts up in American social life, the assimilating desire among American Jews to achieve the oneness and sameness in social assimilation is greatly encouraged. Under this historical condition, the Swede, with the original name Seymour Levov, starts to construct his American project out of Jewish anticipation of a better future.

To make this pastoral dream come true, the Swede has everything under plan, even if it would mean to transgress than to merely ignore his Jewish history. He marries a beautiful shiksa, Dawn Dwyer, an Irish Catholic who is the former Miss New Jersey. The Swede certainly perceives the seriousness of this breach when he persists in marrying a Catholic in the religious sense. Yet, as he believes America as the land of tolerance, he fantasizes that the transgression of marrying beautiful Dawn would suggest the one important achievement of his American dream—to melt down the ethnic difference. As to this, Shostak suggests that "[the Swede's] marriage is perhaps the most blatant symbol in the novel, since the man loved America. Loved being an American has essentially tried to wed his country in Dawn, the would-be Miss America" (Shostak, 2004, p.242). Shostak's observation touched the core of the Swede's American project in that he expects to live in America the way American do, if possible, excels theirs. In this sense, marrying Miss New Jersey and forming a family is one important accomplishment to prove his fantasy of American paradise.

If marrying Miss New Jersey is the core of the Swede's dreamed American life, then the Old Rimrock stone house is the material symbol to carry the Swede's fantasy of an American pastoral life. The 170-year-old stone house represents all the imaginations the Swede fantasizes for American colonized pioneer life. To the Swede, the barn, the gristmill, the vast land, and the huge, vacant old house all suggest American history. "It looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing since the country began" (Roth, 1997, p.190). As he idealized America as a land of innocence and simplicity, Old Rimrock satisfies the Swede's fantasy of America in serving as his "Walden-like retreat", "where the Swede and Dawn can escape their strictly ethnic upbringing and melt into the de-ethnicized pot of the larger American society" (Royal, 2005, p.189).

With Old Rimrock, Dawn Dwyer, a daughter whom he named as Merry, and a successful glove business inherited from his father to signify his material success, the Swede's pastoral seems to be complete. The Swede truly believes that he is the self-made man of American. From adolescent time of being as the responsible and the perfect, the Swede acknowledges that "all the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures; all that success and happiness had been American" (Roth, 1997, p.213). After obtaining all the material symbols of his American pastoral utopia, he is to internalize within himself a set of principles that is supposed to transform himself mentally into a perfect American. The Swede disciplines himself with a set of rules which he believes to be the liberal doctrines of American spirit—"to respect everything one is supposed to respect; to protest nothing; never to be inconvenienced by self-trust; never to be enmeshed in obsession, to be tortured by incapacity, poisoned by resentment, driven by anger" (Roth, 1997, p.28-29). Nevertheless, his utopian fantasy of building up an American Eden and becoming a natural American is ruined by his daughter Merry, who participates into the anti-Vietnam movement and explodes the local post office. Actually, it is this erring love for America and the Jewish self-discipline to modify him to be the perfect that pull him deep into the pastoral contradiction and lead to the final downfall of his pastoral utopia.

III. MISINTERPRETATION AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF AMERICAN DREAM

Although the Swede's fantasy of his American pastoral life is grandiose, it nevertheless contains a fatal defect which dooms his American project. In the assimilation effort to merge into the American mainstream, the Swede wrongly interprets American spirit. In Milton Gordon's analysis, America is a nation which "is constituted by the union of the different—that the American way—is the way of orchestration" (Gordon, 1964, p.147). The Swede apparently misses this point when he submits entirely himself to American materialism and liberalism. Out of misinterpretation of American dream, the Swede falls into two pitfalls. One is the historical disparity which prevents the Swede to merge into American mainstream; another is the Swede's effacement of his Jewish subjectivity in order to fulfill his self-transformation.

The Swede, in his effort to be civil and perfect to shackle as much as he can his ancestor's stereotyped personality, discards his link with his ethical history when he tries by every means to conceal his Jewishness. To find a new sense of belonging, he needs to build a new contact with the history that he intends to delve in. However, the American history which he fantasizes to reproduce in his Old Rimrock house reveals nothing but the unsurpassable gap that denies the Swede's assimilating effort.

One important sign of this unmatched gap is the Swede's ignorance of the colonized history of Morristown, where Old Rimrock is located. When Bill Orcutt, the descendant of Orcutt Family in old Rimrock, shows the Swede around to

the hard industry, the mining, the dirty whorehouse, and the gravestone of Morristown in a sightseeing trip, the Swede finds that he knows nothing of the local history which he chooses to be a member of. Although he feigns in difference and hides his resentment behind a modest demeanor to Orcutt who speaks in an encyclopedia manner, proudly suggesting the privilege of the Protestant's genteel history, the immense contract stings the Swede hard. The Orcutt's two-centuries-old ancestry is a sign of the gap that Swede could never surmount no matter how hard he strives in his personal effort to perfect himself. And for this, the Swede confesses that "his family couldn't compete with Orcutt's when it came to ancestors----they would have run out of ancestors in about two minutes" (Roth, 1997, p.306). This disparity in history nonetheless shows that his pastoral dream of being the one hundred percent American is only a superficial dream.

The inherent difference in their background of growing up suggests that Jews could not be the American the way they are. So this leads the Swede to disregard his Jewishness out of Jewish community's aspiration to be assimilated. In Zuckerman's words, the Swede's desire to be the perfect American transforms him into "an embodiment of nothing". There's no human substratum within him, no subjectivity, "all that rose to the surface was more surface" (Roth, 1997, p.23). What Zuckerman, the narrator of the fiction finds is that the Swede's Jewish subjectivity is stupefied by Jewish community's false illusion of American dream. Because of his Nordic appearance, his strength, his civility, and his glory in almost every field, the Swede is lifted to the exemplary altar and is complimented as Weequahic Kennedy. In a sense, the Swede is the embodiment of the community's hope to be successful. It could be said that what suppresses the Swede's Jewish subjectivity is the communal motive for assimilation. Though personally, the Swede has an enthusiasm for perfection—law-biding and superior at the same time.

The Swede's disregard of his Jewish subjectivity is also exhibited in his blind conformity to American ideology. He subjugates himself to his father's authority by acting as a civilize son; he accedes to his wife Dawn's luxurious demand by acting as understanding husband; and he tolerates his daughter Merry radical speech by acting as the liberal-minded father. In a self-restraint to be modest, to smooth everything over, to compromise, to keep decorum, never to break the code, never to hurt somebody's feelings, the Swede practices American altruism by offering not only everything he could afford materially but his real self. Misguided by American altruism, he feels complacent about conforming to other's expectation without realizing that he is captivated by other people's mind power. Besides this, what the Swede surrenders is also his thinking power. When he misplaced conformity with altruism and misinterprets decency with unconditional tolerance, there's no more Swede left, only the passive entity who is "an instrument of history".

With a false assumption of American dream, the Swede finds that his life is a false image of everything. For the pure, overqualified fashion he envisions in his romanticized American life, Zuckerman obtains the superficial resemblance to this American life vision. As the term "pastoral" rejects social reality, once this utopia encounter reality, the aura of the pastoral dream would wither into dull emptiness. The Swede learns this truth from his dear daughter, who should be the one to complete her father's dream than the terminator who dissolves the pastoral utopia. Merry Levov, the Swede's daughter is herself the misplaced product of the Swede's American dream. Like Orcutt, who remind the Swede of the Protestant history that he could never be a part of, Merry is to remind her father the ongoing history in America that he expelled subconsciously. In the Swede's pastoral vision, Merry should be the completion of her father's American utopia life. Nevertheless, it is this daughter who introduces the ongoing American history first through her vengeful stuttering, then through her explosion, and finally through her conversion to a Jain. Actually, in the domestic clash with his daughter, the Swede failed to perceive that Merry's antagonism springs from her quest for self identity, which is the necessary part of a person's growth. The Swede's estrangement from both Jewish history and American reality results in Merry's loss of belonging in the sixties volatile social unrest.

The downfall of the Swede's utopian dream in the 60's radical counterculture also suggests the loss of American innocence, the illusion that appeals to American Jews in Jewish assimilation movement. This is what Elaine B. Safer's means by saying that the fall of paradise in American Pastoral may "connect to American repeated loss of innocence, specifically for the years in which the nation engaged in a terrible war in Vietnam" (Safer, 2006, p.94-95). For American Jews who are ready to adopt a new identity in assimilation, Merry Levov's bomb ends this fantasy by overturning order, reason and progress of postwar years with anarchy, irrationality and lust for destruction. In this sense, the social unrest in 1960s serves as an appropriate historical subcontext in the examination of Jewish effort among individual American Jews. Under the turbulent social forces, assimilation is expected to jeopardy.

IV. THE AMERICAN JEWISHNESS IN TRANSFORMATION

The unaccomplished assimilation of the Swede seems to suggest the incompatibility between Jewishness and American ideal. In this fiction, through the Swede's reflection of his self-transformation, Philip Roth delineates the contradictions in American Jewishness through the clashes between the Swede's ideals and reality, which in many ways indicates Jewish introspection in the succession of Jewish traditions and American moderns.

In the first place, the Americanized Jewishness appears in the emergence of an American Jewish ethos which is deeply affected by American idea of self-striving. In defining the Swede's dream of an American pastoral life, it is more accurate if it is named as Jewish pastoral because the Swede's yearning for American-styled life reflects Jewish communal aspiration to be better and smarter. For most of the Jewish immigrants, their value on thrift, sobriety, ambition and high regard for education has pushed their American Jewish descendants to obtain occupational status and

economic affluence in American way. With this communal aspiration to become a member of the mainstream, American Jews are developing an American Jewish ethos which values personal efforts in making a better life. The aspiration for personal fulfillment helps to produce a distinct Jewish generation who models American frontiers in setting up a new life goal of self-making, "something powerful untied us. And united us not merely in where we came from but in where we were going and how we would get there. We had new means and new ends, new allegiance and new aims---" (Roth, 1997, p.44). What Roth seems to imply here is that for American Jews, they are the heirs to Jewish history, as well as the contributor to American Jewish history, which is an inseparable part of American history. On this land, they are encouraged to transform themselves as once Protestant frontier do to determine the fate of their own lives.

Nevertheless, though this pro-American aspiration indicates Jewish achievement as an ethnic group, it could be hazardous if it goes too far to set apart from Jewish tradition. As in the case of the Swede, in the blind conformity to American altruism, he is stupefied in his superficial resemblance to American material affluent. The big stone house, the prosperous glove business of Newark Maid, and a shiksa wife fool the Swede that he could no longer detect the Jewish heart that beats beneath his American appearance. Out of the reason, Roth has Marry, the Swede's daughter, to give her father the sight "to see clear through to that which will never be regularized, to see what you can't see and don't see and won't see" (Roth, 1997, p. 418). The Swede is forced to retrospect his Jewishness which is blanketed with his American fantasy.

In correcting the misinterpretations of American dream and in retrieving the link with his ethnicity, the Swede meditates on his life in self-transformation. To exert oneself in self-transformation does not mean that one needs to sweep everything inherited from past. Merry, who rejects American materialism to the extent of bare life necessities, is to behave in shocking acts to remind the Swede of Jewish tradition of self-purification.

The American Jewishness in the Swede is also seen in the Swede's effort to combine Jewish spiritual pursuit of purity with American transcendentalist thoughts. Since it is Jewish tradition to believe in loyalty, social justice and righteousness to obtain spiritual purity, in his pursuit of an American pastoral life, in his pursuit of an American pastoral life, the Swede expects to combine Jewish high morality with American transcendentalism, the protestant spiritual harmony with nature. Like Emerson and Thoreau, the Swede expects to establish a pastoral innocence in harmony with universe as his high spiritual ideal.

Nevertheless, this faith in innocence is relentlessly mocked by American social impurity. The Swede expects to achieve this acquired American pastoral innocence by building Old Rimrock as the fortress to expel any social turmoil that may impure his pastoral life, yet, it proves futile when the hatched vehemence in the chaos of social unrest taints his innocence as well as his daughter's. Not only his stone castle of Old Rimrock fails to prevent his daughter to get obsessed with the immolation of Vietnam monk through television, personally, his faith in innocence is subverted from every aspect of his life. He consents to Dawn's facelift out of a wishful thinking that the operation would regenerate herself after Merry's runaway, only to feel betrayed when Dawn whines that she hates the old stone house. He accommodates Orcutt with demeanor, yet what this Protestant descendant pays back is to seduce his wife. In the chaos of sixties, the Swede finally finds that he could not reconcile himself with American reality.

The influence of American thought is equally exhibited in the way the Swede forms his own family. Like his Jewish ancestors, family is the deepest concern in the Swede's life. From very early in his life, he yearns for a role to be the traditional devoted husband and father. It could be said that family is the very foundation of the Swede's pastoral dream. The Swede has a secret wish to own the things that money can't buy. The "things" he refers to here is the Jewish Walden free of political and ethnic distinctions where a new-styled family of different ethnic backgrounds could live harmoniously together. And it is out of this motive that Swede marries a Catholic and has a daughter who could be "Miss American." Yet, in reality, this idyllic scene of a family gathering where a Jewish family and a Catholic family meet could only be realized once a year, every Thanksgiving Day, for an ephemeral time of twenty-four hours, "It was never but once a year that they were brought together anyway, and that was on the neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving, when everybody gets to eat same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff---" (Roth, 1997, p.402).

To some extent, this amalgamate family pattern reflects the influence of American liberalism. Nevertheless, though liberalism in a long run is beneficial to American Jews, it could produce unexpected damage to American Jewish community if no limit is to be fixed. In the case of the Swede's family, Roth dramatizes how dislocated Jewish liberalism brings more damage to the unity of family than strengthens its binding force. With "everything permissible, everything forgivable", the Swede takes an absolute liberal posture in tolerating his daughter and waiting for her to outgrow herself. He expects his liberal practice in family education could raise a daughter who is free from Jewish irrationality and anxiety. On the contrary, instead of getting rid of Jewish constraints, his daughter goes too far as to smash every existing doctrine in order to seek her own sense of self. Merry's bombing is a direct slap at her father's pro-American way of child education. To some extent, this domestic contradiction could also be regarded as the clash between American ideal and Jewish tradition. As Mark Shechner argues, "Merry Levov is an Essene at heart, and it is to Essene asceticism and zealotry that she returns. She isn't such an aberration, after all, she is her father's unconscious; she is the return of the repressed" (Parrish, 2007, p.147). Merry is to remind her father the Jewishness that is suppressed by his American strivings. While the father considers that "everything that gave meaning to his accomplishment had been American" (Roth, 1997, p.213), the daughter hates the "rotten system that given her own family every opportunity to succeed" (Roth, 1997, p.213). In a sense, both the Swede's "loves" and Merry's "hates" are reflections of the

contradictory nature of American Jewishness. The Swede is the post-Jew disguised in his glory of American dream; while Merry is the radical Jew who repudiates her father's superficial assimilation.

V. CONCLUSION

In a word, the recognition of American Jewishness in American Pastoral is taken a spiral elevation as Roth discuss some of the problems occurred in the transformation of American Jewish assimilation. In depicting the assimilation effort of an idealized Jewish figure, Swede Levov, Roth indicates that the belief to acquire the "in-group" feeling of being a WASP-like American is a romantic illusion made by American Jews. Since the Gentile culture is no longer the one worthwhile to be trusted. By deconstructing Jewish stereotyped American Gentile identity through the disillusionment of the Swede's American dream, Roth calls for Jewish introspection into the assimilation act to ensure the continuity of Jewishness in America.

Note:

This paper is a phased research result of "Jewishness in Contemporary American Jewish Literature and Its Significance as Cultural Sample" (12YJC752007), a research project of Humanities and Social Sciences for Youth funded by the Ministry of Education.

This paper is a phased research result of "Study on Works of Philip Roth under Multicultural Background" (J11WD18), a research project of Humanities and Social Sciences funded by Shandong Provincial Education Department.

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