

The Prophetic Vision of Philip Roth in *American Pastoral*

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Abstract

American Pastoral, the first of the three post war novels written by Roth in the 90s, presents the rise and fall of hero and the prophetic vision of Roth. This novel presents a rich, affluent, assimilated hero who is called as the Swede because of his handsome and Swedish looks. Seymour 'Swede' Levov married a white American Christian girl much to the dismay of his parents and spent much money on her. He also bought an old fashioned bungalow at a place called Rimrock against his parents and started living along with the gentiles. He gets assimilated into the mainstream of American society and forgets all the religious precepts. Roth the prophet punishes the hero with sorrows and restless life and his alter ego Nathan Zukerman narrates the sad tale of Swede's daughter who goes berserk and bombs the innocent people and the adulterous activity of his non Jewish wife. This novel also portrays the political scenario and the aftermath of postwar era.

The Prophetic Vision of Philip Roth in *American Pastoral*

There have been many prophets and law makers in the history of the Jews starting from Moses to Jesus. Likewise, the world has seen many great prophets who have stamped their identity by chastening the society and people around them. Every religion has had its own set of prophets. But among them there existed a few prophets who were universal in nature. They could not be confined within boundaries. Their vision for the society has appalled everyone and is also accepted by many. Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Gandhi, Vivekananda, Shakespeare and many great personalities chastened the society with their words and deeds.

A prophet is an individual who stands as a bridge between a supernatural power and mankind. Every religion claims to have prophets. A prophet speaks for people and pokes his nose in their business when things go wrong. A prophecy is not a sooth saying or forecasting or

a divination, instead it has a message for the people. A prophet may not necessarily be a healer or someone who performs miracles like a magician. Jewish religion presents many such prophets who stood only for social justice. Religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism, and even ancient Greek religion believe in the existence of prophets. The society accepts a man as a prophet when he/she foretells the truth or brings about a change in the society when someone goes against God and religion and mankind.

The word prophet has its root from the Greek language which means an advocate or speaker. Likewise, leaders who incite people for violence are known as prophets of doom. Also, in Hebrew, a prophet is a spokesperson. The ancient Hebrew text TaNakh presents 55 prophets in the Bible in which, Daniel, who saw great visions and predicted, is not included. From this, a reader comes to know that a prophet may not necessarily be a soothsayer or a man who sees and interprets vision, but can be a spokesperson or an advocate.

Throughout the whole Bible, the prophets corrected the ways of the people by meting out justice through their words and deeds. In many cases, they came to the foreground only when there was tumult among the people. When there was transgression, there was destruction and death. Being a prophet is not always good for the individual, instead he/she has to bear the brunt of the kings and the public. Whenever a prophet talked about destruction, there was a tumult and many times they were despised and hated. They were often threatened with dire consequences. Starting from Moses until the time of Jesus, and even afterward the prophets were persecuted. Apart from judging the people and the king, the Prophets of ancient Israel were always considered troublemakers. The kings who did not follow the precepts of their religion and misguided the people hated the prophets. When the prophet Elijah met Ahab, King of Israel, the latter called the Prophet as, "...Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (I Kings 18:17).

The modern prophets are complex and controversial. They can be troublemakers like Philip Roth. Schechtman calls Philip Roth as the one who troubles the American Jews constantly by using his literary talent and makes fun of the Jewish parents for their vain double standards. A prophetic vision can be something about the future. The vision of the prophet can differ. They may be sometimes visions from God. The vision a prophet brings out the secret of people. It can reveal itself in the form of speech or writings. A vision usually reveals the inner secrets to the

outsiders and demands a righteous life. It vehemently criticizes all forms of vile and vulgarities of the society.

This paper is committed to explore Philip Roth as a great prophet, who in his long career, has been a judge of characters in the novels he wrote and giver of laws and punishments to his characters and thereby reaching all the echelons of the society with a great purpose of reprimanding and correcting them. And in doing so, Roth, reminds us of his ancestors, Isaiah, and Nehemiah and the Judge Daniel, who lived in an alien land like the great Jewish – American living author. Sanford Pinsker, while describing Roth's alter – ego Nathan Zuckerman, says, "He writes about Jewish Kitsch as if that alone constituted the cultural whole. His voice – half wise guy, half Jeremiah – is still his greatest resource" (53).

Roth won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 1998 for his master piece *American Pastoral* (1997). This novel is taken for analysis as it suits the title. Here, the author talks about the downfall and death of a sweet and handsome, legendary Jewish hero, Seymour (Swede) Levov. Once again, with the same back drop Newark, New Jersey, Philip Roth presents the woeful tale in which the hero and the society wait for redemption but in vain. At the outer level, post – war era, disillusionment of the third generation American Jews, the rift between each generation, the problems of assimilation into the mainstream of the society, the American Dream, political crisis of 1960s - the period the President Lyndon Johnson, have been beautifully dealt with. At the deeper level, as the prophet of this generation Jews, Roth has rightly rewarded punishment to the transgressors and sinners in general, and to the sons and daughters who go against their parents and authorities in particular. Also, Newark riots of 1967, the Water - Gate scandal, the sexual revolution and the racial unrest were presented beautifully to reveal the vision of the author for the universal readers. The aftermath of the war on an individual is beautifully portrayed in this novel.

The author's surrogate Nathan Zuckerman narrates this story after listening to the story of the Seymour Irving Levov from his brother Jerry Levov when the narrator attended his 45th high school reunion. In that meeting, Nathan Zuckerman further hears the tragic end of his childhood hero, Seymour "Swede" Levov. After learning the story of the Newark hero's tragic downfall from Jerry Levov, the brother of the same, Nathan Zuckerman, the author's mouth

piece adds his own fictional tale, along with the original story, while narrating this story. The novel has its roots in the real life story of the character Seymour “Swede” Masin who was also a star athlete who rose from a middle class society. Also, the main character of this novel Swede Levov and the real “Swede” Masin both married out of their Jewish faith and resemble in appearance, education and even in the area where they got settled after their marriage.

As the title suggests, *American Pastoral* (1997) is about the search for a pastoral and peaceful life. After achieving his dream, the hero is shattered off due to his transgression in not following his ancestral God and in marrying a lady of another faith against his parents’ wish. The story of this novel is based on the conversation between Nathan Zuckerman and his former classmate, Jerry Levov, the younger brother of the diseased hero, Seymour “Swede” Levov, a name he fostered for his nordic look and blue eyes. In this heart wrenching tragic tale, this yesteryear star athlete and business magnet, who was also once the apple of everyone’s eyes dies in a pathetic way. After the rein falls in the Swede’s hand, the family’s glove business sees much success. Seymour bought an old stone house in Old Rimrock, the stronghold of Wasps, much against his father’s wish. He feels much elated in having achieved his American Dream in the form of a beautiful Catholic wife, a onetime Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer and buying a dream house in a Wasp stronghold. Going away of the Swede from the Jewish Newark is something like the act of Lot who lusted after the fertile land Sodom and Gomorrah only to lose his wife and joy and happiness he had been experiencing while with Abraham, the father of Israelites. Old Rimrock is the achievement of American pastoral life for the Swede who was deceived of his spiritual insight like Lot who was also deceived after he chose the fertile land to the Canaan, the land of milk and honey. Seymour’s father Lou Levov has had no say in his son’s marriage with a gentile. Unlike Jerry Levov, the younger son who married many women, the Swede has been always good to his parents except for these two times. But Roth awards punishment to the good Seymour Levov to remind the readers of Esau, the son of Jacob who made two mistakes and lost favour in the sight of God. Roth’s great prophetic vision is seen mainly through the punishments given to the sinning characters.

The so called pastoral life of the Swede becomes worst day by day for him after his marriage with the former Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer. Ms. Seymour buys show bulls for lucrative prize and squanders money like anything. To make matters worse, their only daughter

Meredith Levov becomes obsessed with and gets involved in terrorist elements. The 16 – year - old Meredith, called as Merry becomes jealous of her beautiful mother and tries to turn the attention of her father once with a passionate kiss. The Swede is shocked beyond limits. Seymour tries to find out the psychological maladies of his only daughter but in vain. Also, the obscene words uttered by the teenager Merry shocks the whole family. The pastoral life of the Swede is utterly destroyed when he comes to know that his daughter has blown a post office with a powerful bomb which killed a doctor. Merry goes underground. All the efforts in bringing up the stuttering Merry as a pious child has gone awry.

As Eve became the cause of downfall for the whole mankind and loss of the idyllic garden of Eden, Merry, the only daughter of the Swede, paves way for the downfall and death of her father. Roth's vision of rewarding the good and punishment for the sinners is vehemently seen in this novel when one comes across the tragic end of the non – religious man, Seymour Irving Levov. The personal life of the author should not be taken into consideration while evaluating his merits and the vision for society. Roth is a lawgiver like the great prophet Moses. Most heroes of his novels die or meet a fatal accident when they go against religion, parents and authorities. Likewise, the main character Seymour "Swede" Levov, in the process of creating a pastoral life, loses it and dies. Merry, being a pro - communist, becomes an antiwar supporter and goes berserk by planting a bomb in the only grocery attached to a post office in her rural Old Rimrock, which ended in the death of a bystander. She calls her father a capitalist pig and at the mention of President Lyndon Johnson's name, the stuttering Merry becomes crazy and shouts and calls the Presidents as:

...f-f-madman" and a "mi-mi-miserable monster!"

She snarled at Lyndon Johnson whenever his face appeared on the seven o' clock news. Into the televised face of Humphrey, the vice – president, she cried, " you prick, sh – sh – shut your lying m – m- mouth, you c - c - coward, you f - f - f - f - filthy fucking collaborator!" ... When her father, as a member of the ad hoc group calling itself New Jersey Businessmen Against the War, went down to Washington with the steering committee to visit their senator, Merry refused his invitation to come along... You can confront him directly. Isn't that what you want?" "Merry," said her petite mother to the large glowering girl, "you might be

able to influence Senator Case ---“ “ C – c – c - c – c – c – c – case!” erupted Merry and, to the astonishment of her parents, proceeded to spit on the tiled kitchen floor. (100)

The 16 year old daughter of the Swede was deranged off her mind and she was strongly influenced by the so called communist theories. She despised her father and mother who loved and adored her. Also, she developed guts to wag her tongue against her father by calling him money minded, capitalist pig and a blood sucker of coloured people. Merry is not aware of the fact that her father is the only leading leather manufacturer still having business in Newark in spite of the communal black riots and looting 1967. Seymour is the only employer who cared for his black employees to do business in that troublesome area for some five to six years. Only after that, the Swede, hesitatingly changed his business offshore, to Puerto Rico and then to the Philippines. Also, this innocent daughter hates her own mother for the pompous life she leads. The great author Philip Roth, compares Seymour “Swede” Levov with the father of mankind, Adam, whose pastoral life was defiled either by the satan in the form of the serpent and Eve, his own God given wife. Likewise, the gentle Seymour, the modern Adam, in the process of creating a modern pastoral life, is shattered off either by the crazy daughter who goes on planting bombs, killing innocent people or his wife, Dawn Levov, former Miss Jersey, who wasted all his money in buying cattle and in unnecessary ways. After the disappearance of their daughter, Seymour does everything to save his wife from going crazy. After some years, Dawn, having become normal, goes for a facelift only to commit adultery with her architect, the next door neighbour, Bill Orkutt. The waywardness of the Dawn as a punishment of Seymour for going against his parents is the vision Roth has for the sons who disobey their parents. A reader of Roth understands his vision while reading the two verses in the Bible: “He, that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy” (Proverbs 29. 1) and “For commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death” (Matthew 15. 4).

Without being involved in preaching, Roth has told the readers that despising the words of parents will bring curses and reduces one’s life span. The more pathetic case is Levovs’ only daughter Meredith Levov, who lost all the luxuries in her life and twice being raped while in hiding. Having become a criminal and then later as a Jain, Merry decides to live a ragged life in

spite of her father's pleadings. Seymour has suffered enough for going against God and parents and Merry against her father. Roth, the prophet, knowingly and intuitively awards and punishments to his characters according to their deeds. The punishment meted out to Seymour tells the profound understanding of the author. For many, Roth is a sex novelist who sold out the family's secret to get name and fame. At the same time, the readers should also know that every prophet has been hated by his community for telling the truth. Through *American Pastoral*, the author, without hinting out his own religious beliefs, shown the vision of life, by portraying the post war era in the back drop of communal riots using an individual Seymour "Swede" Levov and by showing the personal agony of the protagonist, a universal justice has established through this award winning novel.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCE

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