

Power Structures and the Fate of the Self: Inequity in Philip Roth's Later Fictions

Cybele Aishwarya

Department of Languages, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Vidhya Lakshmi

CODE, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract—This paper examines how Philip Roth critically explores the intersection of institutional violence, individual identity, and social inequality in his later novels – *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *Indignation* (2008). This article focuses on the institutional problems like education, politics and media as well as their effect on the individuals in the society, especially Black people. The middle aged or the aged protagonists Roth faces the problems like marginalization, and rumor as they struggle with the institutional power. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that, Roth, in his novels, portrays institutional violence transcending physical or legal aggression to include symbolic and structural harms, such as institutional neglect, erosion of reputation, racial bias, and public disgrace. This study also contextualizes Roth's narratives within the broader American socio-political framework, highlighting his critique of a progressive societal polarization and social inequity. Through his narrative, the writer reveals the vulnerability of self-identity amid institutional power, exemplifying the powerless state of individuals, distorted, or subjected to irreversible judgment. Roth cleverly dramatizes the outcome of social inequality and institutional neglect through multiple characters in his novels. This study finally contends how Roth's later novels highlight the failure of American liberalism to uphold individual freedom in an age of dogmatic morality and increasing administrative intrusion.

Index Terms—political inequality, gender inequality, power structure, institutional hypocrisy, marginalization

I. INTRODUCTION

Philip Roth (1933–2018), born in New Jersey, stands as one of the most distinguished and towering figures among prolific American writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He was a leading American novelist renowned for his challenging, thought-provoking, and contentious portrayals of cultural identity with a focus on sexuality, and Jewish-American life. Roth's focus is on morality, complexity of selfhood and American experience. Roth has authored more than thirty fictional works. He has gained fame through his debut collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), which won the National Book Award. His work *Portnoy's Complaint* is a satire on sexual and cultural repression in mid-century America. *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *Indignation* (2008) are Philip Roth's later novels. In these novels, Roth depicts social inequality, dealing with the power structure and individual's liberty in America, reflecting the themes like race, gender, class, ethnicity, and institutional power. Roth has explored the institutional authority over African Americans and the systemic injustices prevailing in the land. His narratives focus on the theme of power structure, i.e. institutional violence, reflecting the systems like government, academic institutions, media, and religion. Through these descriptions, Roth projects the effect of social inequality developed by these systems. The social inequality divides individuals and their personal identities and destroys their moral values. This is a strong exploration of the impact of power structures on individual lives.

This study highlights Roth's conceptual framework of power structure and its unequal treatment on people which threaten and shake their personal freedom and self-identity in contemporary American life. Apart from Roth's focus on individual identity, sexuality and Jewish-American life, the traces of analysing extended societal rankings and disparities are found in several of his works. In his later novels, he delves into the relationship between personal identity and the pervasive influence of broader societal structures.

II. DISCUSSIONS

A. *The Collapse of the American Dream in 'American Pastoral'*

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* is an incisive analysis of the American Dream as it unravels the historical and personal upheavals. Social inequality, the central theme of the novel, is explored through race and economic class as well as cultural, generational, and ideological divides. In this novel, through the character Seymour Swede Levov, a former star athlete and successful Jewish-American businessman, Roth deconstructs the illusion of post-war prosperity and the assimilation into the mainstream of American life, which reflects the peaceful and prosperous lifestyle.

Swede's perfect life in Old Rimrock, New Jersey, is shattered when his daughter, Merry, delves into an act of domestic terrorism by bombing a post office in protest of the Vietnam War. Roth describes this act as a projection of systemic violence existing in American institutions which induces the individual to involve in violent activities. Thus, Merry's act cannot be taken simply as a personal rebellion as it has another background. Merry's radicalism is like a response to the society known to be aware of war, race, social prejudice, and capitalist exploitation. Roth does not analyze the political aspects behind the act of Merry. He focuses more on the emotional and existential devastation fell on Swede through Merry's action.

Once Swede got his identity like education, family, and the capitalist economy through the institutions; but the same institutions have failed to support him when he faces crisis in his life. Roth experiments the real nature of these power structures which prioritize their own well-being than the individuals during crisis. The violent act of Merry is the reflection of the organizations' passive role in understanding her ideological protest. Roth critiques the existence of current inequality in American society with the fragility of liberal democracy and illusion of capitalist meritocracy. Stanley (2005) in his article comments on Roth's portrayal of social upheavals of the 1960s and 70s in American.

B. *Ethnic and Political Inequality in 'American Pastoral'*

Seymour Swede Levov, the protagonist of the novel *American Pastoral*, is the illustration of the American Dream. His life's uplift journey continues with his marriage to a beauty queen and development in education, business and so on. Though he succeeds in all, he cannot recover from the drastic historical change occurred in his life. Swede's idealized life collapses when his daughter commits an act of domestic terrorism streaming with the political violence of the 1960s. Her act is the symptom of broader generational and ideological divides. Roth uses this rupture to reveal the conformist, post-war optimism of Swede's generation, the disillusionment of youth, racial injustice, and capitalist excess. Merry's violence is both political and symbolic reflection of the marginalized by American foreign policy and domestic complacency. Roth portrays the American Dream as inherently unstable and exclusionary, built upon overlooked tensions of inequality and discontent.

The vision of post-war renewal proves deceptive. Roth demonstrates how the institutions of family, education and the economy fail to protect individuals during chaos. This shows that beneath the polished exterior of America lies a state of power structure and inequity. Roth through this novel explores the ethnic dimensions of social inequity. Although Swede has achieved economic stability and other institutional wealth, his identity of Jewish Levov family remains a barrier when he tries for assimilation into White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. His father, Lou Levov, was a working-class Jewish glove manufacturer. "Mr. Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college-educated Jewish sons" (Roth, 1997, p. 11). He was aware of the anti-Semitism and the rigid social stratification of American life. His life emphasizes the pressure placed on the marginalized communities to transcend their history of exclusion, as a response to their state of poverty and marginalization. Swede's efforts to assimilate into White Protestant America result in cultural erasure which projects the internalized inequalities that haunt ethnic minorities in their pursuit of social legitimacy.

C. *Gender and Social Inequality in 'American Pastoral'*

Apart from generational and ethnic divides, Roth examines gendered dimensions of inequality. The novel *American Pastoral* portrays women being restricted by rigid social expectations and traditional roles. Dawn Dwyer, Swede's wife is caught in the psychological struggle of aging, disappearing beauty and social worth. Her eventual transformation through cosmetic surgery and a job in real estate serves Roth's commentary on women's value in the society in their old age, as it reduces their identity, appearance and domesticity. Merry's radicalism can also be interpreted as a response to the silent, domestic role embodied by her mother, which she seeks to reject. However, even in rebellion, she remains framed by patriarchal structures, both in her father's need to 'rescue' her and in the male-dominated radical circles she joins. Roth portrays women as trapped between dehumanization, resistance and social alienation, with many experiencing emotional and psychological collapse under such societal pressures.

Roth criticizes the systemic inequality as well as the existing geographical inequality, contrasting white suburb of Old Rimrock with urban landscape of Newark. Newark is a symbol of racial inequality and systemic neglect where constant racial unrest, economic decline and social disintegration take place. Due to this it faces white's fight to the suburban segregation and Swede is one among them. He relocates his family from Newark to suburb as it represents safety and success than Newark. Through this Roth breaks the myth of America's equality and harmony. The prosperous, calm, and principled life of American is represented as a fantasy world which keeps social fractures beneath it. The best illustration of this is Swede, whose life seems to be prosperous, happy, wealthy and away from racial prejudices until he encounters the crisis. The crisis gives him racial tension, generational discord, gender inequality and political unrest clearing his perfect life aside.

D. *Institutional Hypocrisy in 'The Human Stain'*

Like *American Pastoral*, Roth utilizes the novel *The Human Stain* too to explore the power structures, inequality and individuals' suffering. Through the platform of race, class, gender and institutional power, Roth finds social inequality as the center of focus in the novel's narrative. With the lives of his characters, especially Coleman Silk, Roth analyses those themes in depth. Roth describes the contradictions of American society and its identity politics, by exposing how

the power structures constrain and punish the individuals and defend them directly at times. “Through the eighties and into the nineties, Coleman was also the first and only Jew ever to serve at Athena as dean of faculty” (Roth, 2000, p. 5). Roth’s character, Coleman Silk reflects this societal structure and institutional power in the way he decides to live as a white Jewish man, despite being African American by birth and the consequences he faces later. This decision is a symbol of existing racism in American society. Brauner (2004) describes these impurities and its connection to the American experience illustrating Roth’s works.

Silk is aware of the institutional power that it will kick him out from his profession and social ambition if his racial identity is revealed. He tries to utilize the opportunities and chooses to live as white. However, this choice comes at a heavy emotional cost. He is a respected classic professor who is charged for the racist remark, from where his eventual downfall occurs. He remarks two frequently absent students as “spooks,” without knowing that they are Black. This brings him down from his respectable position, and he is accused of racism. Roth critiques this moment as an institutional failure, where the pursuit of ideological purity often overrides context, intent, and truth. Instead of conducting an inquiry, the institution charges Coleman, which reflects how institutions often prioritize appearances and justice over moral reflection. Roth comments this culture, where an individual’s life and career are spoiled by a misunderstood statement. An individual’s freedom of speech, freedom of thinking and societal structure is highly questionable. Coleman’s only supporter during this critical situation is his girlfriend. She feels bad about the situation and she does not like humiliations on a learned person. But she could not support him in any ways.

Through this situation, Coleman understands that his racial identity blocks his academic and social aspirations. By living as white, he receives enormous opportunities to reach a high position in his life which are denied for Black individuals, as they are cornered for the systemic barriers and inequalities traced in their race. Though he is successful in academic, he lives an isolated life as his family disowns him. His racial secret haunts him. He suffers with the psychological and emotional form of systemic racism and societal pressure. Finally, he becomes a victim of social judgment, morality and political correctness. Roth’s comment on Coleman reveals the internal struggle between the desire for individual agency and the societal constraints imposed by racial identity.

Coleman’s downfall stems not merely from personal error or the hostility of others, but from a deeper, systemic issue, namely, institutional violence. The university, which outwardly presents itself as a defender of liberal values and intellectual freedom, responds to the accusation against Coleman with unthinking severity. Rather than seeking truth or justice, its primary aim appears to be the preservation of its public image. Roth depicts this reaction as symptomatic of a society that prioritizes symbolic performances of inclusivity over a genuine engagement with the complex and often uncomfortable realities of race and identity. In such a climate, the individual becomes expendable, sacrificed to sustain the illusion of institutional righteousness.

Roth attempts to expose the culture of political correctness and social surveillance that uses institutions and its authority to punish individuals who deviate from their dominant expectations. This is another example of the societal changes in favour of the organizations’ power that is deviated from the American history. Coleman’s life incident also projects how the institutions handle its power on social injustice presenting their rules and systems as morally unique and showing themselves as agents of ethical progress. Rodenhurst (2010) in his work expresses how Roth’s works are bound with identity problems, racial issues, American culture, etc.

E. *Complex Web of Inequality in ‘The Human Stain’*

Faunia Farley, a marginalized woman in the novel *The Human Stain*, is portrayed as a working-class woman with limited education and lack of financial stability. She is deeply affected with social inequality structure. Both Coleman and Faunia are victims of social inequality. They both suffer because of the system, even though they occupy different positions in the social structure; Coleman as a learned intellectual person, works as a professor in the world of academia whereas Faunia as a poor working woman, survives on juggling multiple low-paying jobs. This class divide emphasizes the class stratification within the Black people.

Often Faunia is misunderstood and criticized for exploiting Coleman to get financial support, leaving her personal history and status aside. Others think that she feigns her illiteracy to gain sympathy from others regarding her backward economic status. Faunia’s life reflects the marginalization of woman and their passive life when compared to men who are above them. Here Faunia is criticised directly for her poverty and indirectly for being woman. For her relationship with Coleman, she is often commented as sexually autonomous lady, by Coleman’s colleagues particularly, though she is from lower socio-economic background.

Another woman character juxtapose to Faunia is Delphine Roux. Unlike Faunia, she is intellectual and ambitious young woman. Though she is acknowledged from the institution, she cannot occupy the position and get the privilege of men there. Due to this, she struggles in the dominant academic environment. Her rigid moral stance against Coleman, including the anonymous letter condemning him, can be interpreted as a response to the pressures of asserting authority in a space that marginalizes women.

Roth, in the novel *The Human Stain*, portrays the characters that are shaped by the societal norms. In this novel, Coleman Silk, Faunia and Delphine are on different tracks. Though Coleman is economically well settled, he lives in fear about his hidden Black identity. On the other hand, Faunia suffers under poverty and the loss of her children. She also faces the abuse of her ex-husband Lester Farley, who is a resentful working-class white male. Here, social inequity is not a general term, but with hidden divisions like race, class, gender, and power. By narrating different characters

from different environment and background, Roth brings out the truth of surface level identity politics which polished the emotions and morality. In the title *The Human Stain*, 'stain' refers to the dirt left on the people by the power structures and systemic injustice. Parrish (2004) stresses that Roth's *The Human Stain* can be read as both a sequel to Ellison's novel and as an investigation to Ellison's fate.

F. Institutional Power Structures in 'Indignation'

One of Philip Roth's later novels *Indignation* (2008) centres on the life of a Jewish Student Marcus Messner, from Newark, New Jersey. The novel was set in the year 1951 during Korea war. Marcus, a young man, is transferred to the conservative Winesburg College in Ohio from a local college, seeking distance from his overbearing father. Marcus (2008, p. 17) says, "I was eager to be an adult, an educated, mature, independent adult." The novel focuses on the powerful oppression of Marcus against the dominant societal structures he faces in the mid-20th century American institution. Marcus imagines the new college as a sanctuary for his freedom and personal academic development. But his life takes a different turn when he confronts with the institutional authority for their suppression and systemic inequality.

Marcus' confrontation begins when he is forced to attend weekly chapel services and follow Protestant values. As an atheist, he cannot accept the rigid principles of the institution and refuses to participate in the religious rites. Through this rebellious act, Roth explores the institutional violence and rigid systems which demand obedience and punish dissent. This is not brutal on the surface level, but it takes away the personal freedom. Marcus's act shows his statement of intellectual and spiritual autonomy. His refusal shows him as an outsider who does not fit to the institutional space.

Marcus' dissatisfaction with Dean Caudwell and the pivotal scene clearly portray the institutions' authority, hypocrisy and power over common people. Dean interrogating Marcus with moral concern and educational discipline, framed by the institution, reveals the authoritative power and control lie beneath. Marcus's self-expression and independent ideas are considered as arrogance. The expulsion of Marcus happens due to his confrontations and not for his academic failure. This illustrates the power structures' control over religion too. To the organization, personal thoughts and freedom are threat to the institutional order. Expulsion of Marcus here is not mandatory but it reflects the institution's power and the fate of an individual in the society.

Marcus becomes eligible for the military draft and is subsequently sent to the Korean War, where he dies in combat. His senseless and brutal death, functions as the final consequence of institutional failure. Schwartz (2011) writes in *Apocalypse Then: Philip Roth's Indignation* that, Marcus's death is likened to the koshering process used by his father, a butcher, a metaphor for how the institutions that claim to civilize and educate can, in fact, destroy.

Here, Roth does not present institutional violence as dramatic or public; it is quiet, bureaucratic, and systemic. A minor transgression spirals into fatal punishment, not because of evil intent, but because of the cold machinery of institutional discipline. Marcus's idealism and refusal to submit are portrayed not as flaws, but as incompatible with a system that demands obedience over critical thought.

Moreover, the novel critiques not only educational institutions but also the broader societal mechanisms that uphold inequality. The rigid post-war social order of 1950s America, shaped by militarism, religious conservatism, and ethnic homogeneity, creates a hostile environment for someone like Marcus, an atheist, and a working-class intellectual. The cultural and religious climate of Winesburg College implicitly excludes and marginalizes those who differ from the Protestant mainstream. Lyons (2009) underscores this resistance in his discussion of Marcus's internal response during a sermon.

Marcus repeats this lines silently, a gesture that encapsulates his youthful resistance to be coerced into conformity. Roth presents this indignation as both noble and tragic. Marcus's inability to adapt to institutional expectations results not in transformation, but annihilation. His fate reflects Roth's broader commentary on the fate of those who resist cultural assimilation and refuse to perform docile identities.

G. The Uneven Cost of Freedom in 'Indignation'

While *Indignation* centers on Marcus's ideological conflict with institutional power, Roth broadens his social critique through themes of class, gender, and familial control. Marcus' father is a kosher butcher, deeply rooted in tradition and survival, i.e. working-class, under the rule of authoritative system. On the other hand, Marcus is a rebellious, who needs freedom. This generational gap forms the narrative of the story that brings cultural tension and social inequality. Marcus tries to use education as a platform to escape from the trap of familial suffocation. His hope on educational system shatters with the rules of the institution. He concentrates on sports, academic and campus social life, yet he is isolated socially and emotionally. He is academically excelled but failed socially and culturally. He is alienated in the institution, family, and government.

In the novel, gender inequality is notable through the characters Marcus and Olivia Hutton. Marcus and Olivia are romantic partners and Olivia is criticised by all for this relationship than Marcus. Olivia's attempt of suicide due to her past incident is only suspected by others and she does not get empathy from them. Even Marcus' mother, as a woman, cannot accept the past of Olivia and urges Marcus to put an end to the relationship as it may be a barrier to his achievement in life. Hence the society does not give emotional or social support to woman. She is expelled from the college too. Marcus too is punished but only for confrontation against the institution and not for his sexual relationship. Roth takes this incident to prove the gender inequality and different norms existed for men and women. Olivia is

marginalized and also a victim of the societal norms that suppresses women who challenges the traditional roles. Her relationship with Marcus threatens the cultural norms.

The best illustration of Power structures' control over individual's fate is Marcus's death. In the 1950s, military conscription was deferred by college enrolment, in which the preference was given to middle and upper-class men. Here Marcus is cornered for his rebellion as well as his class. He does not get safety and opportunity from the college. This results in his death in Korea which is not a fatal death but the result of institutional decisions. His 'indignation' is not a personal emotion but a reply to the societal injustice. Though he is intelligent and sincere, he is emotionally alienated. He attempts to live independently and away from traditional roots, but the boundaries of religion, culture and authority pull him back and punish him. Whether in the form of a university administration, a religious establishment, or a militarized state, these institutions often claim to uphold moral order while enacting injustice. It is clear that the violent act of institution is not physical but it has emotional and psychological impact. A man with a flaw is highly dominated by the systems.

III. CONCLUSION

Philip Roth's later novels, *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*, and *Indignation* portray institutions as forces that preserve their power by pressing some people down which represents inequality. The power described in the novels represents the American society. This results in the dual identities of people accompanied by conflict. Individuals suffer either directly or indirectly with socially unequal norms and become a stagnant pool without having a space to move forward or achieve anything. This is common among uneducated and educated as well as economically rich and poor.

The post-World War II interrupts the progress of America following the Vietnam War resulting in racial conflicts and economic disparities. Roth notices the shifting of socio-political landscape into disillusionment, cultural division, and institutional credibility. His novels capture these changes interpreted with political and historical consciousness with psychological depth. The projection of social injustice in his later novels influences a change in people's mind and lack of trust in institutions in the 21st century. Roth has emphasized the life of Jewish-American people through his major characters. This reveals that assimilation into a nation itself does not mean they belong to that society or find identity in the nation, but they oscillate between two different cultures. The characters depicted by Roth clearly portray the situation in the American society. These select novels for the study expose how organizations inflict violence that is psychological, social, and personal. Roth's characters explain how individuals are caught in this system and their clash with the institutional expectations and its consequences. Roth's works are an example for the battle between personal integrity and the institutional pressure and the power of literature in illuminating the intersections of power, identity, and resistance.

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Cybele Aishwarya is a dedicated educator and communication skills facilitator with expertise in English Literature, soft skills training, and student engagement strategies. With a strong grounding in LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) skills, she is known for her creative teaching methodologies, interactive classroom activities, and emphasis on practical learning. Her academic journey includes advanced certifications and specialized training in communication and professional skills enhancement. She has conducted workshops and developed activity-based learning modules. She actively participates in institutional projects, community initiatives, and educational outreach programs, fostering a culture of continuous learning and personal growth among her students. Cybele Aishwarya's research journey in English Literature reflects her deep passion for literary studies and her commitment to exploring the intersections of literature, culture, and human experience. Cybele has actively participated in literary conferences, seminars, and academic discussions, presenting papers that combine rigorous textual analysis with innovative critical approaches. Her research process is marked by an interdisciplinary mindset, drawing connections between literature, history, sociology, and psychology, making her work relevant to contemporary academic and cultural dialogues.

Vidhya Lakshmi C N is an experienced ELT (English Language Teaching) and soft skills trainer with a strong foundation in LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) skills, creative thinking, and clear articulation. She holds a Ph.D. in ELT and certifications such as Train the Trainer (VSkills), TESOL (ITTT), and IELTS Teacher Training, among others. With over two decades of experience, she has served as an Assistant Professor of English, Skill Development Cell Head, and Soft Skills Trainer at various prestigious institutions, including Hindustan Institute of Technology & Science and Peri Institute of Technology. Her contributions include publishing a patent in ELT, several academic journals, and textbooks, along with presenting papers at national and international conferences. A firm advocate of activity-based teaching, Dr. Vidhya also brings international exposure through her volunteering experiences in the USA, enhancing her dynamic approach to education and skill development.