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**Subject:**

**A Cultural Study of Philip Roth’s The Counterlife  
in the Light of Stuart Hall’s Theories**

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*I dedicate the present thesis to my dear parents who suffered a lot for our education and without whom I could not be who I am now; to my deceased cousin, Khalil, a literature student who died young; and to all prisoners of Chillon. May they all be free one day.*

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## Abstract

Philip Roth shares this view with other culturalists such as Stuart Hall that *self* is dependent on the historical and cultural context; therefore they reject the traditional view about identity according to which identity is regarded as fixed and unchangeable. It seems that Roth views the self as a positioning process during which the subject occupies different positions that are already defined by culture, society and discourse in general. He regards subject as an actor who "impersonates" these pre-defined positions as best he can. *The Counterlife* is the story of two Jewish brothers who have immigrated to other countries in the hope of inventing an original self. One of them exchanges his dream of self-invention for the monolithic ideological aspirations and the other is not only regarded as an outsider by the family of his gentile wife but also involved in several racist encounters in England, resulting in his retrograde retreat from his secular views to his ethnic roots. Roth pictures determinism and autonomy in opposition to one another; on the one hand the subject attempts to make his dream of an authentic self come true and, on the other hand, delimiting historical context is the obstacle to subjective aspirations. In this regard, Roth seems to support a deterministic view about the self, inasmuch as the historical context is the final winner, compelling the subject to recognize his limitations and take his presupposed positions that context has defined for him as facts. Roth mostly attacks racism and ideology since the first excludes the Diaspora subject merely for his race or ethnicity and the second changes the subject to an ideological slave through interpellation, disabling subject from making a distinction between his personal dreams and ideological aspirations imposed upon him. The subject transforms into ideology's speaker, sometimes even prepared to get involved in violent extermination of those who do not belong to the same ideological group. What Roth attacks in both ideology and racism is their exclusive nature that prevents the subject from inventing an original self.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### I. General Overview

In *I Married a Communist* (1998), the novelist Nathan Zuckerman as Roth's alter-ego contemplates Roth's "compositional method" that is defined as "dialogical." Nathan states that "I think of my life as one long speech that I've been listening to . . . how to think, how not to think; how to behave, how not to behave; . . . the book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: 'Listening'" (qtd in Shostak 4). The "book of voices" whose pages manifest some of the most important ideological issues of the twentieth century are constructed based on oppositions (how to think, how not to think . . . ) and that is why some themes reoccur in Roth's fiction repeatedly; in fact he reconsiders them from different aspects as he can not trust one single aspect. Roth also uses self-interview as a method of revealing "the many selves" that he lives and "a host of counterlives" that he pictures (ibid 3).

Roth provokes his readers by inserting biographical clues into his works; in this regard he can be compared to E. L. Doctorow and Saul Bellow. In *Autobiography: False Confession?* Margaret Smith claims that Roth's fiction is not constructed by a mere mixture of biography and fiction but Roth deliberately

“blur[s] the boundaries of both fiction and autobiography as a narrative strategy” (qtd in Halio& Siegel 9). Following Kafka in blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction, Roth delves into identity, reality and truth. In fact in Roth’s fiction, the world of fiction and the world of fact intervene into and affect one another.

The American author, Philip Milton Roth, was born on March 19, 1933 in a working class Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey which made up the scene of his early novels. “His father was an insurance salesman of Austro-Hungarian stock. Later in *Patrimony* (1991) Roth portrayed his eighty-six-year-old father, who suffered from a brain tumor, but who still in his early eighties ‘had no difficulty convincing the wealthy widows . . . that he had only just reached seventy” (Liukkonen 1).

Roth studied at the University of Chicago; there he received his M.A. in English. He joined the army in 1955 but after being injured, he was discharged. “Roth continued his studies in Chicago, and worked from 1955 to 1957 as an English teacher” (ibid 1). Dropped out of Ph.D. program, he began to write film reviews for *The New Republic*. His early literary fame is indebted to the 1959 collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (winner of 1960's National Book Award), and then the publication of his 1969 bestseller *Portnoy's Complaint*. Roth wrote *Portnoy's Complaint* under the influence of the cultural style of the sixties. Immaturity, disillusionment and break down of pieties were the natural outcome of the



historical era (Posnock 12). By the late sixties, American society and politics were a grotesque travesty of what Jewish immigrants had traveled towards: liberty, peace, security and a decent liberal democracy.

In 1990, Roth married to Claire Bloom, the famous Shakespearian actress. It was after their separation when Bloom published her memoir, *Leaving a Doll's House* in 1996.

Roth sometimes regards his own life part of his fiction. In *The Plot against America*, there is a character in the novel called Philip Roth and in *Operation Shylock* Roth meets a doppelganger, another Philip Roth, a man who claims to be the writer. The protagonist that occupies the central position in Roth's fiction is almost always a Jewish male writer. Newark, New Jersey, Berkshire and Israel are places where Roth most often returns to in his fiction.

Several voices such as Nathan Zuckerman, Philip Roth and David Kepesh dominate Roth's novels, hence the categories "Zuckerman Books," "Roth Books" and "Kepesh Books." But in fact some of them can not be included in any of these categories hence entitled as "Other Books" (Shostak 10). Despite the fact that voices are fixed, their subjective positions alter along the continuum of Roth's novels. The Zuckerman novels began with *The Ghost Writer* in 1979. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *American Pastoral* (1997) was also in the same category.

In his later works, Roth has increasingly wrestled with the problem of

identity. The basic concerns in his work consist of “the self, the retention of individuality and freedom amidst a debasing and deindividualizing world and a tortured and confused body and mind.” In fact his characters are in search of a new definition for the self “without recourse to a preconstructed formula” (Milowitz 11).

*Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth’s first work was received with heavy criticism by both rabbis and readers as they believed his work pictures a sense of self-hatred. According to the critics “Roth degraded the memory of the [holocaust] victims by his critical and all too human portraits of Jews” (ibid 11). In fact in Roth’s work Jewishness is a dominant theme “as a problem, as a burden, as a source of strength, and, always, as a source of laughter” (Safer 3), yet the Jews are also human beings that he happens to know well. Roth in his 1963 essay collected in *Reading Myself and Others* asserts that he aimed to set the opposition between resorting to Jewish tradition and questioning the values and morals of Diasporic middle-class Jewish-Americans.

Another dominant theme in Roth’s fiction is “the capturing experience of coming up with a reading –of an event, of an ideology, of a person– that leaves no question as to its meaning.” In *American Pastoral* Nathan Zuckerman contemplating the character of Swede Levov, asserts that “The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong

that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again” (qtd in Royal 3). Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* always questions his brother’s motive for taking refuge in the Zionist ideology of Lippman, trying to see things from his point of view.

No matter how serious Roth’s subjects are, he treats them comically. Idealism of the war years and patriotism are few targets of his satire in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain* and Pipik in *Operation Shylock* are only some of his caricatures. Roth pictures life as an “absurd theater” where there is a constant conflict between “the ideal and the real, the sacred and the profane, the grandeur of our aspirations and the grossness of our flesh” (Safer 9). Social commentary and political satire are also applied to some of his works such as *Our Gang* (1971) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), the second revealing Roth’s disillusionment with the American Dream.

Roth for the first time in his 1960 essay *Writing American Fiction* associated himself with Malamud. He asserted that in spite of Malamud’s presentation of timeless Jews, his Jewish protagonists manifest a transformative identity. In *Pictures of Malamud*, Roth announced that “his conception of himself as a writer is crucially linked to his perception of Malamud’s example” (Parrish 5).

Roth’s characters achieve a sense of liberation through transgressions such as ignoring dietary laws, ridiculing Judaism, dating shikshas, but in Roth’s fiction

the sense of freedom may also result in feelings of alienation and emptiness, particularly in the context of the rapid cultural changes that have taken place during Roth's lifetime in America.

From 1960 up to the present, Roth has won different literary awards as follows:

1960 National Book Award for *Goodbye, Columbus*

1986 National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Counterlife*

1991 National Book Critics Circle Award for *Patrimony*

1994 PEN/Faulkner Award for *Operation Shylock*

1995 National Book Award for *Sabbath's Theater*

1998 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *American Pastoral*

1998 Ambassador Book Award of the English-Speaking Union for *I Married a Communist*

1998 National Medal of Arts

2000 Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (France) for *American Pastoral*

2001 PEN/Faulkner Award for *The Human Stain*

2001 Gold Medal in Fiction from The American Academy of Arts and Letters

2001 WH Smith Literary Award for *The Human Stain*

2002 National Book Foundation's Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

2002 Prix Médicis Étranger (France) for *The Human Stain*

2003 Honorary Doctor of Letters Degree from Harvard University

2005 Sidewise Award for Alternate History for *The Plot against America*

2006 PEN/Nabokov Award for Lifetime Achievement

2007 PEN/Faulkner Award for *Everyman*

2007 PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

The main focus in *The Counterlife* is on how the Diasporic subjects are entrapped in a net of in-between cultural dilemmas. The novel is a story of cultural hybrids that undertake a quest in search of an original timeless self. The novel provides an opportunity to study a Diaspora subject's interaction with different cultural discourses such as ideology, history and ethnicity and the resulting effects on the self. The researcher attempts to answer the following questions in the present study:

1) What are in-between cultural dilemmas? What kind of identity crisis do these dilemmas result in? How does a Diaspora immigrant respond to these kinds of dilemmas?

2) How is the subject delimited by the dominant culture of the society where he lives as a Diaspora immigrant?

3) How does the subject respond to ideology in Roth's *The Counterlife*?

4) Is it possible for subjects to act independently of ideology? To what extent is a subject independent of ideology?

5) Is there an unchangeable self in Roth's *The Counterlife*? Can a subject be successful in inventing an authentic self?

6) Is pastoralism a practical idea in Roth's Diasporic world? What is the role of ethnic exclusion in this regard?

### III. Definition of Key Terms

**Articulation:** "Articulation as a theoretical practice in Hall's writing, involves linking two or more different theoretical frameworks in order to move beyond the limits of either framework on its own, for example . . . Hall's displacement of the early theoretical assumptions of 'culturalism' through an encounter with the more recent 'structuralism'. Within Hall's writings this displacement does not involve rejecting the former in order to proceed to the latter, but a coupling or articulation of the two in order to propose an alternative theoretical direction" (Procter 54).

**Becoming:** Hall defines Caribbean cultural identity through two axes of similarity and rupture. He believes that although Caribbean cultural identity refers to a common "origin" or "point of similarity" (qtd in Redman 6) but each Caribbean area has undergone a growing process of its own, causing them to be

different from one another. Hall calls this growing process becoming.

**Culture:** Geertz defines culture as “a set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, instructions” for the governing of behavior (Bressler 132). According to Hall, the traditional definitions of culture delivered by Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R and Q.D. Leavis set high (good) culture in opposition to popular (debased) culture. Later Hall attempted to deconstruct this binary opposition.

**Diaspora:** “In ‘New ethnicities’, Hall uses diaspora as a metaphorical rather than a literal concept to foreground an anti-essentialist notion of identity and representation that privileges journey over arrival, mobility over fixity, routes rather than roots” ( Procter 130).

**Difference:** The term is derived from Derrida’s concept of *defférance*, denoting “the endless deferral . . . of meaning as it moves from position to position, sentence to sentence.” Hall uses the term to refer to the endlessness of discourse. He believes that “the meaning is generated when it ‘stops’. This (full) stop is never final or fixed, always arbitrary and contingent” (Procter 121).

**Discourse:** A discourse is a regulated set of statements which combine with others in predictable ways. Discourse is regulated by a set of rules which lead to the distribution and circulation of certain utterances and statements (Mills 54). Borrowing Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse, Hall asserts that it is important

to note that Foucault is not saying there is no actual physical world outside discourse but, rather, that the real world only acquires meaning through discourse (Procter 60).

**Encoding/Decoding:** In his essay *Encoding/decoding*, Hall criticizes the conventional model of communication in mass communications research. According to this model, communication is possible without interference “in a linear fashion from the ‘sender’ through the ‘message’ to the ‘receiver’.” The problem Hall finds in this model is that the receiver may not get the message as it was intended by the sender. “Hall’s essay challenges all three components of the mass communications model, arguing that (i) meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender; (ii) the message is never transparent; and (iii) the audience is not a passive recipient of meaning” (Procter 59).

**Hegemony:** It is a term coined by the theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) “to convey the extent to which belief systems are thoroughly naturalized and deeply dominate the consciousnesses of individuals, who think they submit freely to the reigning economic and political system but who are more or less programmed to do so” (Hall 87). “The Gramscian notion of hegemony as an ongoing process of ideological struggle allowed Hall and the CCCS to maintain the crucial culturalist accent on agency, without retreating into a naïve, ‘heroic’ humanism in which the individual is free of all structural constraint” (Procter 49).



**Hybridity:** “The rhetoric of hybridity, sometimes referred to as *hybrid talk* is fundamentally associated with the emergence of postcolonial discourse and its critiques of cultural imperialism. This . . . stage in the history of hybridity is characterised by literature and theory that focuses on the effects of mixture upon identity and culture” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity>).

**Ideology:** Althusser’s definition of the term is “a Representation of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence” (Althusser 56).

**Interpellation:** Althusser regards “interpellation or hailing [as] the very precise operation [through which] ideology . . . ‘recruits’ subjects among individuals . . . , or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects” (Althusser 60).

**Moral Panic:** Stanley Cohen, the British socialist defines moral panic as “A condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (qtd in Procter 77). Cohen classifies moral panics to two groups. The first are momentary and are forgotten by the society while the second are permanent and might compel the government to change the laws or social rules, a process that Hall calls “signification spiral” ( ibid 77). Hall believes that the folk devils that are supposed to be the causes of these social panics are in fact escape goats or displaced objects of fear.

**Organic Intellectual:** Antonio Gramsci used the term for the first to make

a distinction between “organic intellectuals” and “traditional intellectuals [as] ‘an autonomous and independent social group or class’.” Hall asserts that “the ‘organic intellectual’ must work on two fronts at one and the same time. On the one hand, we had to be at the forefront of intellectual theoretical work . . . But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge . . . to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (qtd in Procter 50).

**Positioning:** Hall uses the term in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* to define the instability of cultural identities as “points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture.” Considering politics of identity as politics of *position*, Hall rejects the possibility of a clear-cut direct relationship between “the law of origin” and identity politics as he believes that identity politics is not unalterable or fixed (Hall 226).

**Self:** “For Hall, the self is internally fragmented, incomplete, multiple and is produced and positioned – that is *subjected* to and determined within – discourse. This decentred view of identity is crucial to postmodernism, but belongs to a broader twentieth-century debate which underpins so much of Hall’s thought in the 1980s and 1990s” ( Procter 110).

**Subject:** “The subject’ is a term used in postmodern and poststructuralist

theory in place of terms like ‘identity’ and ‘the individual’ which privilege a view of ‘the self’ as, in Hall’s terms, ‘whole, centred, stable . . . or autonomous’” (ibid 110).

#### **IV. Significance of the Study**

Philip Roth is an acclaimed American writer whose works have won different literary awards. Two of his works of fiction have won the National Book Awards. Two others including *The Counterlife*, have won National Book Critics Circle Awards. He has also won three PEN/Faulkner Awards for *Operation Shylock*, *The Human Stain*, and *Everyman*, and a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his 1997 novel, *American Pastoral*. *The Human Stain* was awarded the United Kingdom's WH Smith Literary Award for the best book of the year in 2001. In 2002, he was awarded the National Book Foundation's Award for distinguished contribution to American Letters. He has been named by literary critic; Harold Bloom, as one of the four major American novelists still at work, along with Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy. Still these are few of his great literary achievements. Due to the fact that such a celebrated author is not known to the Iranian English literature students, this study can be regarded a helpful guide to the fictional world of Philip Roth. And since no research has ever been conducted in the history of Iranian academic literary studies on any of Roth’s literary works, the

present study can be considered as an introduction to the coming researches by those students who are interested in Philip Roth studies.

## **V. Delimitations**

Culture is a vast phenomenon influenced by social interactions that each of them by itself consists of a wide range. Each of these social interactions and their relationship to identity needs a wholesome research; so including all of them in so short an occasion can not do justice to them all. Therefore the researcher of this study attempts to focus more on culture as an ethnic tradition, the ways it can affect life of a Diasporic subject and the self as it is positioned in and influenced by the historical context.

Philip Roth is a contemporary writer whose most works are about identity, subjectivity and self; perhaps among them *The Counterlife* focuses more on these issues, therefore it is an appropriate choice for the present study. Yet Roth concentrates mostly on one specific ethnicity, making it possible to narrow down the analysis. The researcher attempts to explore: 1) the in-between position of a Diasporic subject, left between different cultural strains 2) the self as a transformative feature dependent to the historical context and the possibility of self-invention. As the result it is important to note that by a group of people the researcher means a specific ethnicity, not people who necessarily live in one