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**On English Literature**

**Subject:**

**A STUDY OF KEPESH TRILOGY BY PHILIP ROTH**

**UNDER THE LIGHT OF CULTURAL STUDIES**

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In The Name of God

## **To My Mother**

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## Abstract

The present study aims to offer an analysis of Kepesh trilogy by Philip Roth, which consists of three novels, *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*. Throughout his career, Roth has wrestled with the matters of subjectivity and selfhood. Yet, in cultural theory the question of subjectivity is intertwined with the debates around gender and race. This research will adopt theories and premises of Cultural Studies and Specially those of Stuart Hall to investigate the matters of Identity, Gender and Race in these Roth's novels.

This research will argue that Roth, in *The Breast*, through the drastic alteration of Kepesh's body, renders his conventional subjectivity, which is defined in terms of dualities (of self vs. Other and male vs. female), to be not assumable. In *The Professor of Desire*, it is discussed that, the Diasporic subject indulges in bodily performances in order to assert his subjectivity against a hegemonic culture. Yet, neither the hegemonic culture, nor the ethnicized subjectivity can escape the complications in part of the Other. The research also observes, in this Roth's novel, the tendency to expose, how diasporic subject is considered by the dominant discourse, to be marked with desire and envy.

*The Dying Animal* is argued to align, a trade of Cultural Capital between Roth, the author, and Kepesh, the protagonist, and between Kepesh and other characters in the story. The exoticism of ethnic subject in colonial discourse is exposed; and it is discussed that, Kepesh, to prevent the collapse of his self, must remain distant from the object of his desire, while he seems unable to do so, to conclude that not a hegemonic discourse or any pole of a dialogic set, is immune from the contamination of the Other.

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# **1. Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1.General Overview**

## **1.2.Statement of the Problem**

## **1.3.Objectives & Significance of the Study**

### **1.3.1. Hypothesis**

### **1.3.2. Significance of the Study**

### **1.3.3. Purpose of the Study**

### **1.3.4. Research Questions**

## **1.4.Review of Literature**

## **1.5.Materials & Methodology**

### **1.5.1. Definition of Key Terms**

### **1.5.2. Motivation & Delimitation**

## **1.6.Organization of the Study**

## **1.1.General Overview**

Philip Roth is a multi award winning Jewish American writer. He was born on 19<sup>th</sup> march 1933 in Weequahic, Newark, New Jersey. His parents, Herman and Bessie Roth, were of first generation Jewish Americans, descendants of Jews from Galicia, a region between Poland and Ukraine. Newark provided the setting for many of his novels. He graduated



from Newark's Weequahic High School in 1950. Went to Buknell University, earned a degree in English; attended university of Chicago and received an M.A. in English literature. After a 2 year interlude in the army, He returned to Chicago to start a PhD but dropped out after one term. Roth has been a professor to University of Iowa, Princeton University and University of Pennsylvania, teaching creative writing and comparative literature. He retired in 1991 from teaching.

While in Chicago, Roth met his were to be wife, the novelist, Margaret Matinson. They separated in 1963 and Matinson died in a car crash in 1966. Roth was deeply wounded by this incident and portrayed Matinson in several of his female characters including Lucy Nelson in *When She Was Good*, and Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*. Roth's second marriage was to his long-term friend, English actress, Claire Bloom in 1990. 4 years after marrying, they separated, and 2 years later Bloom published a tell-all book by the name of *Leaving a Doll's House*, which scolds her years with Roth. *I Married a Communist* (1998) is Roth's veiled response to this book. Now Roth is in his 70s. He leads a private life in Connecticut, avoiding the media attention and according to his editor, Aaron Ascher, "even now he doesn't relent." He "is still going uphill and keeps getting better."

Roth has been a prolific writer who has combined critical acclaim with commercial success. His literary legacy, up to now, consists of 30 novels, 2 short story collections and 4 non fictions, with *Nemesis* –his 2010 novel– still underway. His first book was the short story collection, *Goodbye Columbus* (1960) which he wrote at the age of 27. This earned him the national book award in 1960. Then he wrote 2 novels, *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*. His 4<sup>th</sup> book, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), which was a

hilarious, obscene and sexually frank account of a masturbating young Jewish man, was a bestseller and brought Roth such a popularity that raised him to the status of a celebrity. From then on, Philip Roth's life has always been under the media scrutiny. *Our gang*, a political satire and *The Breast*, a Kafkaesque novel, *The Professor of Desire*, featuring David Kepesh as his protagonist, –first introduced in *The Breast*– were among the books written during 1970s. *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire*, together with *The Dying Animal* (2001) form a trilogy. It follows David Kepesh from his youth –being obsessed with sex and desire– into middle ages –being transformed into a mammary gland– to old age –finally becoming an old lecherous professor–.

From 1974 to 1985, there came the Zuckerman novels, all of which featuring Nathan Zuckerman as either the protagonist or one of the characters. Zuckerman is Roth's alter ego and like Roth, he is a novelist who makes these books Meta-fictional and highly self-referential. During 1990s Roth went on to write 7 novels, winning him all four of America's leading literary prizes. A National Book Critics Circle Award for *Patrimony*, a PEN/Faulkner Award for *Operation Shylock*, a National Book Award for *Sabbath's Theater* and a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *American Pastoral*. *American pastoral* is the debut novel of American trilogy and is one of the most praised works of Roth. It is published after *Sabbath's Theatre*, which features Mickey Sabbath, one of the most notorious protagonists of Roth; yet it is the story of a virtuous Newark man, Swede Levov.

Roth wrote *The Plot against America* in 2004. It is a retold history of 1940s America in which Charles Lindbergh, an anti-Semite aviator and a friend of Hitler, is elected president, against Franklin Roosevelt. The second PEN/Faulkner award was

bestowed to Roth for his 2006 novel *Exit Ghost*, which made him the only writer who has won the prize twice. *Indignation* 2008, *Humbling* 2009 And *Nemesis*, still underway, are his most recent literary outputs.

On Roth's themes and arguments, the first and the most mentioned by Roth's critics is that, Roth's oeuvre is autobiographical. The point is that, Roth draws on autobiography only to mock it; to make a fake version of it. He draws on reality only to fake reality. Rather than creating a human biography, he creates confusion out of it. The Self, for Roth, is an alluding Self. Self doesn't travel from real life to biography. Self multiplies itself; it duplicates the reality. By playing with biography, Roth explores the relation between characters and their author, between fiction and reality, between "the lived world and the written world." (The Philip Roth society, brief biography and awards, <http://rothsociety.org/bio.htm>) The tendency toward doppelgänger-ing of the Self is, for best, apparent in the character Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman is Roth himself, at the same time, he is not. When asked about his literary alter egos, Roth answered: "Am I Roth or Zuckerman? It's all me ... Nothing is me." In *The Plot against America* the same doubling, this time, happens to the history. This novel tells an alternate history of America, yet it is depicted as nuanced and plausible as possible. For Roth, there is no border between a real history and a narrated one, not a seam between fiction and reality. History, itself, is a narration. Even his own life is a part of his fiction.

Writes Robert Greenberg: "Much of Roth's fiction revolves around (semi-)autobiographical themes, while self-consciously and playfully addressing the perils of establishing connections between the author Philip Roth and his fictional lives and voices, including narrators and protagonists such as David Kepesh and Nathan

Zuckerman or even the character "Philip Roth". In Roth's fiction, the question of authorship is intertwined with the question of subjectivity.”(Wikipedia, Philip Roth)

The autobiographical criticism on Roth ranges from the simpleton view, that tries to connect the writer's real life with his books, a view that Roth cunningly leads to, to the shrewd criticisms, like the one above, that asserts of Roth's semi-autobiographical works, as questioning the relations between reality and textuality, between narrativity and authenticity or between Self and the Other. Roth's writing complicates the question of subjectivity that has always occupied him. The problem of identity is never solved, but being disguised in a disguised version of reality.

Another fully adopted approach toward works of Philip Roth is one with the Freudian and Lacanian outlook. This view has been adopted mostly toward the three Kepesh books and *Portnoy's Complaint* in which we have sexual explicit scenes and sexually obsessed characters. As the content of these four books demand, they have arisen many feministic debates also. Stale complaints on Roth's misogyny and degrading depiction of women fall into the negative criticism on Roth on behalf of feminists. Yet Debra Shostak, the astute Roth critic, was to suggest that Roth in *The Breast* by trying on a female's body i.e. an Other's identity, places his masculinity at risk. Shostak in a lively and compelling book on Roth draws on Freud, Lacan and Kristeva to assert that, Roth disturbs not only the relations between genders but also the relations between subject and object, between body and identity, between desire and lack.

The other theme, explored by critics in Roth's *Ecritude*, is the theme of ethnicity in a broad sense and American Jewish identity in particular. The way which being marginalized can affect the subject; The way parents relate to children in a minor society;

The way subjects try to escape the grip of their race, their religion even their sex, which leads to trying on others' subjectivities; The way the subjects cannot escape that grip; are some of the ways in which Roth's works would relate to ethnicity studies.

The works of Roth, which are the subject of this study, are the Kepesh books. This is a trilogy which includes: *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*. Kepesh Seri is called after the books' protagonist's name David Kepesh. Another novel by Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, will be utilized as an aid to illuminate or enforce some point in the mentioned trilogy because of its thematic affinities.

This study, in approaching the works of Philip Roth, will take its premises from the guidelines provided by Cultural Studies. In 1983, in a Time magazine interview, Roth described his themes as thus: "intimacy and subjectivity are my subjects." throughout his career Roth has craved toward exploring the dimensions of subjectivity and selfhood. Exploring subjectivity in Roth is the basic concern of this study. All canonized critical approaches have commented on the problem of subjectivity, but the confinements on approach will be those based on Cultural Studies.

## **1.2.Statement of the Problem**

With Roth's success getting almost epic proportions, it is undeniable that he is a great writer. He is canonized by the library of America and his work amounts to classics. This study aims to introduce this noble writer and his major themes to the reader through an analysis of three of his novels, making use of Cultural Studies' premises.

Literary and cultural theory today asks what the feminist theorist Elaine Marks calls the "'big questions," the big metaphysical ones that [have] dropped out of Anglo-

American philosophy: life and death and the meaning of love” (Marks 2001: 277). Joe Moran notes that these “big questions” include those addressing “the nature of reality, language, power, gender, sexuality, the body, and the self (Moran 2002: 83)” (Hall, Donald E. *Subjectivity*, page 40)

Roth has the ability to address these “big questions” which is the objective of this study. His writing yields itself to discussing the weightiest of topics: subjectivity, culture, sexuality and ethnicity. Yet as Timothy parish puts it in his essay “You Must Change Your Life: Gender and Desire in Philip Roth”: “The challenge that confronts the ambitious Roth’s critic is to identify a critical approach that does justice to the many and often contradictory positions that Roth's fiction enacts or performs.” Cultural studies, since it is entirely interdisciplinary, enable the researcher to maneuver freely between disciplines and to look at the phenomenon under investigation from many perspectives.

In *The Breast*, the researcher will draw on from Hall’s concept of new Identity and from Cultural Studies’ involvement with the matter of Gender, to state that, the subject-positions we take –which we assume to be inherently assigned to us– are rather constructions of culture, society and history and thus prone to change and dissolution. It will undermine conventional notions of personality as moderately stable and detectable. It will show how subjects are come to “try on the identities of others”. It will see how subjects risk allowing themselves to be transformed from subject to object and from self to other.

The book *The Professor of Desire* –as the name suggests– follows David Kepesh in his obsessive desire for sex. In the study of this book, David Kepesh will be discussed to be the diasporic subject who tires to assert his subjectivity against a hegemonic WASP

culture, through the performances of his body. The diasporic subject, however, is considered by the dominant discourse, to be marked with desire and envy toward the hegemonic culture and its agents. The study will show the traces of this notion in *The Professor of Desire* to state that how the hegemonic discourse can be deep-seated in a diasporic mindset. Yet in discussion of every topic, the researcher advocates the notion that: not any polarity in any binary set is immune and refined of intervening and mingling of the other pole.

The third book with which the researcher would deal in a complete chapter is *The Dying Animal*. The novel –hence the criticism of it– continues to foreground questions of identity, gender, ethnicity and desire. Another discourse in this book which the researcher wishes to discuss, which is almost unprecedented in the field, is the notion of Cultural Capital. This will lead to a study which engages theories of new-historicism, cultural materialism and other new Marxism-oriented point views in Cultural Studies.

The division mentioned above is a loosely delineated orientation and does not mean that there are clearly cut theories assignable to each work. In fact all Roth's novels are centered on the theme of Identity. What the researcher would do is to highlight one aspect of this grand theory in every novel, while taking the standpoint of Cultural Studies.

### **1.3.Objectives & Significance of the Study**

#### **1.3.1. Hypothesis**

The question of subjectivity (or identity) is one of the most attempted problems of philosophy and literary theory. Roth is an author who has engaged the problem of identity, more than any other themes, in his writing. Roth's writing approaches the

question of identity, each time, from a different angle; whether it would be gender, race or ethnicity.

In *The Breast*, it is mostly the complications that gender would bring to subjectivity. What if someone trades his gender for the Other? What if a drastic metamorphosis of the body makes the subject, to put on the Other's Identity? The Breast attempts the question of subjectivity, as it relates to the concept of difference posed between the dualities of Mind vs. Body, Subject vs. Object, Self vs. Other and Male vs. Female. *The Professor of Desire* tests the self's entanglement with the matter of ethnicity. To this end, it depicts the struggles of a Diasporic subject in a hegemonic discourse of WASP, while he performs bodily, in an attempt to contend the authoritarianism of that discourse. The Ethnicized subject is located in a confrontation with the dominant culture, to challenge the alignments imposed by that culture upon him. In *The Dying Animal*, the cultural-ity of the subject's plight is rendered definitive and the play of cultural capital posits the subject in new, un-imagined subject positions in which he performs accordingly.

In all these ramifications of the subject, this hypothesis is put to test that the subject positions we assume are cultural and historical. The identity, being a construct and the consequence of formative cultural processes, is the assumption that is tried, by placing the subject in positions

- where he is disarmed of the stakes of identification provided for him by culture,
- where he is in confrontation with that culture, which at the first place, has formed his comprehension of his self,



- and where he is the receiver in one end of a culture which contributes to the ostentatious dominancy of his self, or completely contrariwise, to the extreme annihilation of his self .

On the other hand, cultural studies' central occupations are identity, gender and race. Stuart Hall, the main figure of Cultural Studies, in his writings has attempted these matters expansively. This study, in testing the hypothesis mentioned above, draws its tenets from the demarcations provided by Cultural Studies. The hypothesis is that, identities in Roth are severely gendered and Ethnicized and that, the subject positions they assume are contingent, self reflexive and initiated on difference. Roth, by stripping the subjects away, from the possibility of positing a claimable differentiation with the Other, tests the assumption of their subjectivities' consistency and inviolability.

### **1.3.2. Significance of the Study**

Philip Roth's ability, to address the controversial issues of literary and cultural theory in his writing, has brought many critics around the globe to pick his novels to analysis. Literary critic, Harold Bloom, has named him as one of the four major American novelists still at work, along with Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy. International criticism on Roth has got such proportions that there is a field called Roth Studies, which covers a wide range of topics, such as identity, ethnicity, maleness and etc. Yet, roaming the libraries of major universities and searching online, the researcher found that, there is not any scholarship on the subject in the country. Until recently, this writer has been mostly overlooked by intellectual academic sphere in Iran.

The researcher hopes this study would introduce this much honored author to the reader, along with an extensive study of the identity, culture, sexuality, ethnicity and of

the relations between self and the Other, between culture and identity and between power-knowledge and social behaviors from a constructivist point of view; since his writing yields itself to discussion of the topics of cultural studies which are subjectivity, culture, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

Besides, the researcher's main field of interest is subjectivity and culture. Among many big names of literature, Roth has been picked, because analysis of his novels enables the researcher to draw on discussions on subjectivity and culture. Working within these fields the researcher hopes this study would bring into light possibilities that had been unacknowledged so far, or it may at least pose the questions in a new way that may revolutionize man's comprehension of himself and his world.

### **1.3.3. Purpose of the Study**

This study is intended to attempt to answer the questions about identity, gender and race (or ethnicity or Diaspora). This purpose is going to be achieved through the analysis of Kepesh Novels by Philip Roth under the light of cultural studies. The novel *The Breast* will be mostly analyzed according to the relations between Identity and Gender. In the novel *The Professor of Desire*, the complications that Race and ethnicity would bring to the subject will be scrutinized. And finally, through the analysis of the novel *The Dying Animal*, the power relations which would be resulted from the legitimacy given to subject in behalf of culture, the cultural-ity of Identity will be pinpointed.

Roth's Kepesh Books have been targeted to a lot of dispraise which has considered them to be partly pornographic. Another purpose of this study is to purge Roth from the accusations; by posing that Roth has used the vehicle of sex to interrogate

the deepest questions of mankind. His writing yields itself to the study of such engaging matters as: identity, plurality of being, culture, discursive-ity, gender, race, ethnicity, Diaspora, desire, sexuality, cultural capitalism, life and death; and to a questioning of such stiff binaries as Subject vs. Object, Self vs. Other and Male vs. Female. Also Roth has been accused of being misogynistic. The present study's premise is that Roth not only is not misogynistic; but also he, by blurring the borders between genders, contributes to a polemics which believes in gender categories to be result of cultural and quite arbitrary ascriptions.

#### **1.3.4. Research Questions**

The present research attempts to answer the following questions:

- Is there ever a sustainable subject position assumable regarding the matter of gender and how does this notion applies to situation of Kepesh in *The Breast*?
- Is it adequate to define Selfhood in terms of its differential relations to Other and how does *The Breast* renders the answer to be negative?
- Is the border between subject and object secure (or subjects are ever in peril of sliding into objects) and how the concept applies to *The Breast*?
- How does the historical split between mind and body affect Kepesh's sense of identity in *The Breast*?
- How the concept of gender relates to subjectivity?
- What is the situation of Diasporic subject in the face of a hegemonic culture and how does it apply to situation of Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire*?
- Is ever an immune irreversible subject position assumable in terms of the supremacy of one race or its culture?

- How is Kepesh's Subjectivity ethnicized in *The Professor of Desire* and how does he try to contest it?
- Does commanding the high stakes of the hegemonic culture contribute to Kepesh's sense of identity in *The Dying Animal*?
- How does the notion of Cultural Capital apply to situation of Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*?
- Into what struggles do the inequality in possession of the Cultural Capital may lead Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*?
- What is the role of race or ethnicity in the process of identification?

#### **1.4.Review of Literature**

“*Unclean Lips: Obscenity and Jews in American Literature*” is a dissertation written by Joshua L Lambert in 2009. Lambert cites “obscenity debates as crucial in the development of modern American literature,” he continues to argue that Jews played the major role in this history. “The dissertation proposes four ways in which obscenity mattered to American Jews. The production and defense of obscenity contributed to Jews' attempts to counter sexual anti-Semitism; to obtain cultural capital that was otherwise denied to them; to defend contraception; and to advocate for minority rights. The decentralization of authority in Diasporic societies and resulting diversity also helps to explain the vigor with which some American Jews intervened in these debates.” (Introduction, viii) He draws on three Jewish-American authors one of which is Philip Roth.

“*Cross ethnic Mediums and the Autobiographical Gesture in 20th Century American Literature*” is a dissertation written by Miriam Jaffe-Foger in 2008. Her