



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Voluntary Migration and Psychological Resistance: Exploring Diaspora and Jewish Identity in Philip Roth's *Indignation*

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ABSTRACT

Philip Roth, a renowned literary figure of the United States is a third-generation Jew immigrant settled at Newark, New Jersey to share a special affinity to the place where he grew up and evidently proved his connection by elucidating the presence of Newark as an indispensable backdrop pervasively in his novels. Being a third generational Jew in the land where Christianity reined its stronghold, we observe that the author who tries to establish a cultural aspect of Jews despite practiced Atheism, perhaps to showcase his social responsibility against the bias that was showered during his stay at Newark which has largely influenced his novels and is articulated effectively through blurring the boundaries of Fiction and Non-Fiction. It shall be noted that the elements of Diaspora can be identified prominently in the Novel *Indignation*, one of the books from the collection, *Nemeses*, where the young protagonist of nineteen, Marcus faces discomfort in multiple facets for being displaced in a different state Ohio, at Wines burg College to carry out his higher studies. The incidents that unfold in the college premises of Marcus and his encounter with the rigid norms of the institution narrates to substantiate the application of the elements of Diaspora in the novel mentioned. The Modern Viewpoint of Diaspora emphasizes basically the habitual voluntary settlement in a foreign land for different purposes, yet the convincing



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degree of stability and connectivity will always remain an interrogative space for the immigrants to get it answered. In view of the aforementioned details, this paper attempts to deconstruct the features of Diaspora through the intrigue and the corresponding situations represented in the novel *Indignation* by Roth.

Keywords: Diaspora, Displacement, Jewish Culture, Voluntary settlement, Immigrants.

The term Diaspora is often traced under the umbrella of post-colonial theory, elucidating the critical situations of the migrants, mostly trans-locating from a third-world country to the land of their colonizers ("Postcolonial Concepts"). In the introductory chapter of *Diaspora theory and Transnationalism*, Himadri Lahiri sheds light on the fact that Diaspora and Transnationalism often stand as synonyms which apparently contributes to the debates revolving around 'roots' and 'routes'(3). In fact, the former was well received with a specific meaning with regard to its Jewish contextual dispersion from their historic homeland to many parts of the world signifying the oppression and the moral degradation that arose during the process of dispersion. (Safran 83). The word then gradually became relatable to the process of trans-migrations in general, as the condition of displacement was sensed widely amidst the population of the world. It shall be observed that people usually migrate either as a large scale of movement or dispersal of a particular group of people/Voluntary choices (Lahiri 2). The mass migration is evidently witnessed in the war zone countries like Iraq and Syria, where refugees move from severe hostile conditions to a better place to set up their second homeland. The latter focuses on the voluntary interest of the group of people to uplift their condition as a personal preference. We shall note an important pointer that the host country/nation would not always be hospitable to welcome their guests as it may stir the existing peace prevailing in their respective nations, mainly with regard to the manifestations of culture, ethnic and religious ideologies that the migrants carry along. An attempt was given by Himadri Lahri with the definition of Diaspora considering the existing contributions to the same. Diaspora is a social formation outside the nation of origin. It is a phenomenon involving uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the 'homeland' and their 're-rooting' in the host-land(s). Diasporic subjects usually have a strong nostalgia for the land they have left behind and for its culture(s), but at the same time may, consciously and/or unconsciously, tend to accumulate or assimilate to the dominant cultures of the new space (4).

At the outset of applying the elements of Diaspora in the novel *Indignation*, it shall be observed the young protagonist Marcus, steps voluntarily to attend Winesburg, a small liberal Arts and Engineering College at Ohio, after his freshman year from 'Robert Treat', a college at Newark, New Jersey. The Voluntary shift of place from his homeland to Winesburg which is apparently five hundred miles away, brings in a lot of suffocation to Marcus, possibly because of his skeptical attitude in not being flexible to the situation given, for which he cost his own life towards the end of the plot. The examination of the Diaspora theory, though, rejects intra-state shifts as migrants encounter little resistance with respect to their social/cultural identity (Lahiri 4), we find that the situations encountered by Marcus encapsulate the similar issues of the contest between cultural and religious identity with regard to his Jewish background from Newark. It is also said that his education stands as a priority to escape the unsound concerns and abuses from his father. This leads the readers to speculate the taste of verbal accusations and constant drudgery that his father Mr. Messner, inadvertently gave his son during the freshman year at Robert Treat college, which forced him to voluntarily decide on a college, apparently, far from home (Father) for his sophomore year to have peace and concentration in his studies as Marcus has had ambitions of becoming a successful lawyer. This Psychotic condition with his father arouse lately as he turned to be an overprotective shield to save his son from the possibilities of ruination mostly in his overthinking head through the influences of fellow men around him. Especially, with the instance, that shares the interest of Eddie Pearlgreen, a fellow of the same age as Marcus, who ended up in pool games and stealing cars. With reference to the spoilt activities of other fellows, Mr. Messner would usually ask a round of questions regarding Marcus' whereabouts of a day which annoys him so much as he would have had aboded the public library to work on his assignment paper. "So there you are," he announced. "Yeah, strange, isn't



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it? At home. I sleep here. I live here. I am your son, remember? "Are you? I've been everywhere looking for you." "Why? Why? Somebody, please, tell me why 'everywhere.'" "Because if anything were to happen to you if something were happen to you" "But nothing will happen. Dad, I am not this terror of the earth who plays pool, Eddie Pearlgreen! Nothing is going to happen"... "It's about the life, where the tiniest misstep can have tragic consequences." (12). Being a mature teen, Marcus made several attempts to solve the impending sensitive issue by talking on good terms with his father, but nothing actually worked but paved his way to enter Winesburg College. Little did he know that the constraint is pervasive and the virtue of tolerance is what he needed to acquire. Nevertheless, we observe that the shifting of place happens through a voluntary decision juxtaposed with the unpinning psychotic pressure from his father's baseless suspicions. Marcus, introduced to the new environment, was calm and determined to focus on his studies. He was let in a room to share it with three Jewish boys. Bertram Flusser was the notable one, as he was trying to make life, a challenging factor for his roommates. His tantrums are beyond one's control. Flusser is a man of music and he often plays Beethoven on his recorder only when his roommates are in sound sleep (21). Losing his temper, Marcus broke the recorder into pieces (23). This incident allowed Marcus to change his room as his mates were driving him nowhere but crazy. The shift in the room was notified to the Dean and corresponding documents were submitted to substantiate his decision which was approved by the officials. He was later partnered with Elwyn Ayers Jr., a third-year student inclined to take up his engineering major after his preliminary study. "Living with Elwyn was much like living alone. In his flat Ohio accent, he'd make a dry crack that would cut off conversation when I felt like taking a break from studying to talk for a few minutes" (30). However, Marcus was satisfied that he could finally concentrate on his purpose of abiding Winesburg for a couple of years. But things were not on good terms eventually with Elwyn, when he commented on Marcus's date Olivia, a 'cunt' (72) which enraged and spoilt the idea of continuing to stay with the third-year boy. This led him to seek residence at Neil Hall, the most detested room in the whole of Winesburg, almost living alone without a mate.

With the observations made with Marcus' attitude of resistance, it is evident to prove that the process of assimilation could not be derived from the narration. This leads us to a contesting platform to contemplate the factor of Home and how the protagonist conceived it. In fact, the place which Marcus claimed as his hometown, did not give him the space, he needed to breathe and that stood as a primary reason to shift his place to Winesburg. Thus, the definition of 'Home' and its spot of location shall be briefly discussed to understand the ideology behind the sense of belonging. Avtar Brah simplifies the conception of Home from two perspectives. One shall be a mythical state of desire, probably of a diasporic imagination, when there applies no chance of migrants returning to their geographical native land. "On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality" (Brah 192). In the case of Marcus, he tries to figure the one which suits the rational conditions of living in an ideal place like home (his comfort area), but unfortunately, he could not spot one within the brief time that he shares on earth. Brah brings out an argument that "the question of home is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances" (192). Marcus staunchly believed in the concept of Atheism and stood in his rational terms with people. He had a clarity that the existence of divine powers were distractions to human growth and he relied only on his effort and hard work to excel in his studies. In fact, the ideologies that Marcus adorned and imbibed were his comfort space and perhaps, that's the interior space he could identify as his home to rely on. Marcus and his thought on Atheism are strongly portrayed in the narration deeply influenced by the novelist Roth himself as he stood as an ardent atheist till his final breath. The heated conversation between the Dean of Winesburg and Marcus reveals the strong sketch of Marcus' character and his opinions allow the spectator to figure out his challenging spirit to assimilate in a foreign space that was bestowed on him. When questioned why he denies identifying himself as a Jew, he claims that he "Objected not because I was an observant Jew but because I was an ardent atheist" (80). Marcus, as we find was the man of his beliefs and would stand to his conventions at any cost. He believed in the irrelevance of mentioning his religion in his college application and never did. His father's profession was acknowledged just as Butchering but not tagged his religious name as a prefix, 'Kosher'. "I'd be curious to know why you didn't write down 'Kosher, Marcus.'" "I didn't think that was relevant. If some entering student's father was a dermatologist or an orthopedist or an obstetrician, wouldn't he just write down 'Physician'? Or 'Doctor'? That's my guess anyway." (92). He continues with the argument that he had no intention to hide his religion but never felt the preference to practice one (93). Marcus enunciates the problem in a well-defined way while



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asking about his problem of constant shifts to different rooms. He instinctively testifies his own behavior is “not the inability to adjust” but to keep himself away from the superfluous problems that are susceptible to distract him (98). Marcus makes his proclamations clear with proper substantiations and never left it a sweeping statement. While arguing against the religious practices, he quotes Bertrand Russell, a Nobel laureate, who is known for his famous essay titled “Why I Am Not a Christian” where he talks about different points of view like the first-cause argument, the argument from design, the moral argument for a deity and the argument for the remedying of injustice (102). “Religion he declares is based primarily and mainly on fear- fear of mysterious, fear of defeat, and the fear of death”(103). This greater influence on fighting against the concept of fear and upholding his ideologies on the pedestal apparently led him to fall from studies, ultimately in life. If at all, he adjusted or rather assimilated to the norms of the college, he would have sustained to become a powerful orator. He stood steadfast to be a resistance to the cultural norms of the college by denying to attend the Chapel under the prescribed curriculum, thus digging his own grave to perish in the Korean War, where he realized the loop of fatal circumstances to fight against. It was my job not to pluck the chickens but to eviscerate them. You slit the ass open a little bit and you stick your hand up and you grab the viscera and you pull them out. I hated that part. Nauseating and disgusting, but it had to be done. That’s what I learned from my father and what I loved learning from him: that you do what you have to do. (5) Despite loving to learn the toughest lessons of adapting to the situation to fulfill one’s duties, Marcus failed in following the same to land in the hands of death at an early age, nevertheless upheld his perceptions high in the plinth with an outstanding gesture. In the light of the discussion based on the novel *Indignation*, tracing the elements of Diaspora, it shall be attempted to claim that the factor of voluntary migration, resistance, and the endless loop of defining home was contested in the intrigue with reference to the character of Marcus and his ideas behind accustoming to the given context of living.

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