

Overall Research, Multiple Scope and Present Criticism: A Review of *Research on the Evolution of the Contemporary Jewish American Writer Philip Roth*

Wang Zhibo

School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University
Shuangling Road, Linyi 276005, Shandong, China
Email:wangzhibo66@126.com

Abstract Philip Roth is an influential writer in the contemporary American literature. In his long lasting productive period, he has published a large number of works with a wide range of content. In the face of such a heavyweight writer, it is necessary to have a deep and conclusive research on his whole creation. Su Xin's research work *Research on the Evolution of the Contemporary Jewish American Writer Philip Roth* (2015) is a unified research on Roth. The book reviews Roth's creation from a macro perspective and discusses his evolutionary characteristics in the flow of four stages of his works. Her book also applies a multi-dimensional criticism method and a multi-perspective interpretation of Roth's representative works.

Key words Philip Roth; creative flow; Su Xin

Author **Wang Zhibo** is Lecturer at the School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University (Linyi 276005, China). His research is mainly about American Literature.

In 1959, the 26-year-old Philip Roth became famous for his *Goodbye, Columbus*, and the next year, achieved the American Book Award. In his productive years that lasted more than half a century, Roth published 33 works and received 26 prizes including the American National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the Faulkner Award for Fiction, the French Foreign Book Award, the Franz Kafka Award etc..

On this important author, Su Xin, starting from 2010, has been publishing research papers in *New Perspectives on World Literature*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Masterpieces Review*, *Social Sciences in Guangxi*, *Shandong Social*

Sciences, School Journal of Xiang Tan University. Among these papers, there are great works such as “The New Generation of Jew in American — On Philip Roth’s Early Writings”(2013), “Context and Characteristics in Philip Roth’s Holocaust Writing”(2014), “On Ethical Predicament of Philip Roth’s Autobiographical Writing”(2015). We dare say that through all these years, Su Xin has always focused on Roth. She thinks that along with the process of Roth’s works becoming classical and the decision to stop writing, as well as his age, it is time to sum up the whole creation of Roth. Last October, Su Xin’s research work *A Research on the Evolution of the Contemporary Jewish American Writer Philip Roth* (2015) is a unified research on Roth.

A Macro Contextual Analysis and a Fine Text Reading

A Research on the Evolution of the Contemporary Jewish American Writer Philip Roth (Simplified as *Philip Roth*) has an obvious feature and that is a macroscopic catch of Roth’s works over more than half a century and a fine reading of their text thus stressing the major characteristics from inside the works. Su Xin divides the whole creative experience of Roth into four periods according to the ideas and artistic styles of his works. From the beginning, Su Xin puts Roth into both contexts of Jewish Literature and American Literature, and in this way she gives Roth a precise positioning in both contexts.

Su Xin argues that Roth of the 60’s is a rebel of Jewish tradition. Different from Singh, Bellow, Malamud and other Jewish literary predecessors, he cared more about the Jewish American in the mundane life. His leading characters are mostly Jewish youth that are rebellious: they rebel against their forefathers’ Jewish tradition, hoping to walk out of their community of clothing, food and drinks, relationships and sports, and integrate into the American society. But their integration is also a process of assimilation. They are Jewish in flesh and blood and this feature is hard to change, and therefore if they are not Jewish, nor are they American. They are “the hanging man” between the American culture and the Jewish culture.

Su Xin points out that the period between the 70’s and the mid-80’s is the critical turning point of Roth’s creative life, although Roth then was comparatively desolate and silent. Roth’s focus in this period is the fast changing American society and the Jewish life as those of modern men. For example, in *Our Gang*, Roth created an American president named Tricky E Dixon, in which he discloses the deceptions of American political upper class. Aside from attacking the ugliness of the society, Roth also pays much attention to the male desire and his works of

The Bread and *The Professor of Desire* reflect this theme.

The years from the mid-80's to 90's is Roth's productive time, and his works reach an outstanding level both quantitatively and qualitatively, such as *The Counterlife*, *The Facts*, *Deception*, *Operation Shylock*, *Sabbath's Theater*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *Human Stain*. This period is one when Roth expands his creative scope and explores the historical flow of the U.S.

The period after 2000 is the last creative one for Roth but he still publishes works including *The Dying Animal*, *The Plot Against America*, *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling* and *Nemesis*, among which Roth's strength of productivity becomes triumphant. Su Xin sketches Roth's creative periods with lucid language and gives clear explanations to the features of each period. She offers both macroscopic background description and fine text analysis the combination of which makes her work clear, detailed, appropriate, and strongly convincing.

Multi-dimensional Criticism and Reading from Diversified Angles

Aside from the grasp of Roth's transformation in his creativity and a fine text analysis, Su Xin also applies multiple angles in her multi-dimensional reading of his works. The American Literature after WW II flourishes and the social positions of marginal minorities and groups, together with their religious beliefs and customs are all given much importance. Their reflection in literature is the rise of Jewish Literature, Black Literature and Women Literature. Roth, as Newark's Laureate poet, lays particular stress on describing the contemporary life of American Jewish, while deconstructing the relevant themes of American Jewish literary tradition. Within the pluralistic background, his works is destined to break through community and may even enter the range outside Israel, the U.K. and the European Continent, not to mention that Roth himself admits, "I've suddenly become a 'swinger'" (Roth 17).

Accordingly, neither the pure analytical angle nor the single critical method can provide a whole consideration on Roth's creativity. So Su Xin applies techniques of social cultural criticism and autobiographical criticism and merges the three parts of cultural text, social text and writer's text, and analyzes and inquires into them all. At the same time, she also uses for reference the theoretical terms of Narratology, Genology, Psychology, Feminism and Post-modernism, trying to display wholly and finely the rich content of Roth's works.

For example, when she analyzes the battle of sexes in works such as *The*

Breast, My Life As a Man, The Professor of Desire, she applies techniques of Freud's theory and Feminism, thus pointing out the value of sexual love in the pursuit of freedom in Roth's description of this kind of love. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the young Portnoy's intense desire toward Shiksa actually reflects his wish to confirm his independent position in American society. The self-fantasy much like psycholagny has a soothing effect on an anxious heart. Because the temperament of male always realizes itself through disparaging that of the female, men tend to select women from a comparatively inferior social position and become accustomed to injuring the women's self confidence to maintain that of men. Therefore, Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* selects to marry the tolerant Helen instead of a powerful woman.

Personal Experience of Reading and Analysis and Present Criticism and Deliberation

As Su Xin emphasizes, Roth does not follow any literature style or school and he never joins any style or school. In 1970's Nonfiction Novels, New Journalism appear in American literary circle with new literary representations and genres, but Roth still sticks to his own skills, and he puts together techniques of realism, modernism and post-modernism, thus forming his unique and mobile creative features.

Su Xin writes in the conclusion, "Roth is a special and times-conscious writer, and there are conspicuous signs of times... In the new genres that springs up in the previous half century in the American literary circle, Roth is not a blind follower, and instead, he is an active participant and facilitator" (Su 178-179). In the previous mentioned Roth's creative features and some questions that appear in foreign literature in China, can we think in the following way: as a foreign literature's researcher, how can we fit into the development of China and how can we stick to our position and not merely become a mouthpiece of foreign literary culture, while introducing, expanding and researching on foreign literary culture?

Shall we manifest the consciousness of the times like what Roth has done in his works and persist in taking the road in literary creativity? Su Xin gives a positive reply in her book: she does not limit herself in the research achievement and viewpoints already existent both home and abroad and she does not stop her research on Roth simply because it is so hard to give a conclusive decision for Roth and to give a conclusive evaluation to Roth. She grasps the characteristics of Roth that are forever changing and forever new and thinks it is time to make a conclusion on this productive, diversified and active in thought through her drawing on huge

amount of research materials.

All in all, Su Xin has stayed with great verve on the research on Roth. While she absorbs and draws lessons on excellent research results both home and abroad, she makes analysis and summarizes on the whole life of Roth with her wide learning, deep theories and unique Chinese position. Her macroscopic and microscopic views are combined, and her multi-angle and diversified critical vision and techniques of criticism run through her whole work. All these are obvious features in her book.

This book is one of the series of “Series Research on Contemporary American Writers” edited by Professor Huang Tiechi, the leader of the key subject of comparative literature and world literature of Shanghai Normal University, and is published by Shanghai Joint Publishing Press. Professor Huang is a specialist of research on American Literature in China. This series of books select the quality literary works, which resonate the pulse of times. Later works of this series include famous American writers like Cormac McCarthy, Katherine Anne Potter, and John Updike.

Work Cited

Roth, Philip. *Reading Myself and Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

Su Xin. *Research on Evolution of the Contemporary Jewish American Writer Philip Roth*.

Shanghai: Shanghai Joint Publishing Press, 2015.

责任编辑：李敏锐