

**A RELUCTANT VICTIM VS. A WILLING LIBERTINE:  
A STUDY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMBLING***

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**Abstract:** Women Empowerment is the significant slogan of today's world. Especially in developing countries a burning issue indeed, that strikes directly to the root of female freedom. On the other hand, perhaps the developed countries have seemed to attain the freedom of women, here and there with some exceptions. Hence the issues raised in this paper are whether today's women become a liberal or a libertine? This paper focuses to analyze the possible answers to this question by seeking a refuge in Philip Roth's novel *The Humbling*. This paper attempts to study the current status of women based on the life style they have, at least in Roth's eye, and also the emotional dependence as well as the emotional independence of female world.

**Keywords:** Libertine, Philip Roth, Victim, Women Empowerment.

**Introduction:** Philip Roth, an American novelist, is a living novelist known for his successful novels like *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*, *Everyman*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling* and *Nemesis*. Among his novels, in 1997, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*. Awards like National Medal of Arts at the White House and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction also have been notable in Roth's career. Roth also has won credit as the only living American novelist to have his work published by the Library of America.

**Math:** It's appropriate to quote Martin Green who provides an introduction to the book *A Philip Roth Reader* says on Roth as follows

He has at least one special claim on all serious readers, that he is himself the serious as writer. Of course, most good novelists have always read seriously...But what makes Roth special is not only that his critical sense is not so distorted, but that it plays a part, a big part, in his imaginative creations. His stories are full of beautiful insights into books and authors, into the business of teaching and criticizing, and into living with works of literature over time. (Green ix)

In enhancing Roth's fame, undoubtedly the novel *The Humbling* (2009) contributes much. Roth discusses the basic elements of life such as talent, love, sex, hope, energy, reputation etc., in this novel. The main focus of this paper is to analyze the balance picture of the existing plight of women through the eyes of Roth. The novel is divided into three chapters namely 'Into Thin Air', 'Transformation' and 'The Last Act', by which the author invites the readers to contemplate upon the complexities of life. All the three titles throw light on the philosophical aspects of life, such as the life as an illusion, life as a decision-making and its universality. Derek says in *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author* "It is clear that Roth is inviting us to interrogate the reality of a self that substitutes throwing his voice on to others, for a genuine sense of responsible agency" (Derek 117).

Though the main plot of the novel focuses on the round characterization of the protagonist Simon Axler and his 'Sometime' companion Pegeen Mike, the sub plot brings

Sybil, the frail woman, as the symbol of maternal love. Two women have a significant role to play in the life of Axler. One is, Sybil Van Varren whose pathetic plight very much influences him. Even at the time of distress he remembers the courageous act of the weak Sybil and thus becomes courageous. The other, obviously, is Pegeen Mike who, "was a vibrant presence, solid, fit, brimming with energy, and soon enough he was no longer feeling that he was alone on earth without his talent. He was happy..." (Roth 53). Simon Axler is a stage actor, especially one of the best Classical American stage actors, who thinks or even concludes that "HE'D LOST HIS MAGIC". The impulse was spent. He'd never failed in the theatre, everything he has done had been strong and successful and then the terrible thing happened; he couldn't act. Going on stage became agony" (Roth 1). Simon Axler terribly suffers from this kind of psychological problem and often longs for death, at least by means of suicide.

Sybil Van Varren, a thirty-five old year's woman stands for maternal care and love, who makes friendship with Simon in a psychiatrist hospital, where nearly for a month Simon has been staying for his treatment. Roth projects Sybil vs. Pegeen; in other words maternal love vs. erotic desire or lesbian life; or a suppressed woman vs. a liberal or libertine. Sybil tells Simon how her living, even the very survival, has become unbearable due to her second husband's sexual harassment over her little daughter. She says to Axler that she is just an ordinary woman who looks through day to-day's household duties; "The ordinary existence of an insignificant mortal. Well, I went off" to go shopping for-groceries (Roth 20)." Sybil, represents the entire ill-treated womenfolk; the so called 'weaker sex', the so called 'angel of the home', the so called 'better half of men' who terribly undergoes physical as well as mental agony over the brutal act of her second husband's sexual exploitation of her little daughter. Even worse, he hardly had shown any regret for what he had done when heartbroken Sybil witnesses his cruel act upon her daughter and inquires. Sybil outrageously plans to take preventive measures to save her little daughter from his clutches, but she herself falls as a victim to her second

husband, who says that she has become mad, hysterical and is badly in need of psychiatric treatment and successfully sends her to the same.

Stunning silence, suffocation and suffering become the routine living style of Sybil. She is completely helpless and also does not know how to educate her little Alison to keep herself safe from her own second husband. Sybil expresses her impatient thoughts after witnessing the terrible scene of little Alison to Axler:

My little Alison, was sitting up on the sofa without her underpants and my rich and powerful second husband was kneeling on the floor, his head between her plump little legs...He got up off his knees, completely unruffled, and ...He drove me home in his car... I had to be carried up to bed. There I lay for four days, unable to speak or eat, barely able to drag myself to the bathroom. The story was that I'd come down with a fever and been ordered to bed. My rich and Powerful second husband could not have been more solicitous. My little darling Alison sweetly brought me a vase of cut flowers from my garden. I could not ask her, I could not bring myself to say, "Who removed your underpants? What do you want to tell me? If you really had some kind of itch, you would have waited, wouldn't you, until I came from shopping to show me?" (Roth 21- 22)

Sybil constantly experiences fear, about her daughter's future and is disgusted over her second husband. She could not bear the truth of his normal and undisturbed life; hence she decides to hire somebody to kill him. Even she pleads with Axler to kill her second husband for money. On the contrary Axler explains how she should face the hardships in future. Getting strength is what she requires, says he to Sybil and the notion of killing her second husband would surely lead her to imprisonment. Sybil stands as a symbol of a reluctant victim of male chauvinism. Being a woman she very well knows how her little daughter unknowingly and innocently allows her uncle to sexually exploit herself. But Sybil doesn't know what to do and how to proceed with her 'empty hands'. She is bound and does not succeed when, in the psychiatrist hospital, she tries to send her sister home in order to help her little daughter. On the other hand, her husband assures everyone that he will take care of her little daughter, who has become undoubtedly the 'scape goat' to him.

Roth brings out the core problem of the 'weaker sex' in this novel through the characterization of Sybil. His mastery over handling the contrary elements that one can identify in the characterization of Sybil and Pegeen definitely adds credit to his narrative and descriptive style. Sybil feels very weak, fearful and helpless whereas Pegeen feels very strong, fearless and confident about what she is doing. Roth writes ".....Pegeen drove over to pay Axler a visit and determined that after seventeen years as a lesbian she wanted a man – this man, this actor twenty – five years her senior and her family's friend from decades back" (Roth 52).

Roth's intelligence in depicting Sybil's role undoubtedly calls for reckoning how the innocent little girls fall a

prey to the brutal men folk. The voice for empowerment of women becomes absurd amidst the suffering, especially the physical suffering of women that too the victim's ignorant plight of what has been happening to her. Though the main plot of the novel extends sympathy for the protagonist Axler, equal sympathy is reserved for Sybil Van Varren who knits the sub plot. The world today comprises elements like knowledge, fear, choice and death. 'The Humbling' shows the bitter reality of today's world. Daniel Walden appreciates Roth as follows: "Unlike many aging novelists, whose productive qualities wane over time, Roth has demonstrated a unique ability, not only to sustain his literary output, but even surpass the scope and talent inherent in his previous writings. (Derek vi)

In the novel, Pegeen Mike, stands for absolute freedom, just opposite to Sybil, the bound. Pegeen Mike is the daughter of Simon Axler's friends, who were also his co-actors when he was young and so she should be considered not more than a daughter to him. Roth initiates the readers to become mentally prepared to get introduced to a woman, undoubtedly an empowered, woman, who steadily wins the entire love of Simon Axler. Roth explains:

It was not likely-particularly as Pegeen Mike had lived as a lesbian since she was twenty-three-that when she was forty years old and Axler was sixty-five they would become lovers, who would speak on the phone every morning upon awakening and would eagerly spend their free time together at his house, where, to his delight, she appropriated two rooms for her own, one of the three bed rooms on the second floor for her things and the downstairs study off the living room for her laptop. (Roth 44)

This lengthy quote from the novel brings out the significance of how Simon is 'delighted' in their relationship and how Pegeen utilizes the opportunity to empower 'herself'. Pegeen Mike is suffering from the abandonment of Priscilla who has slept with Pegeen and had left Pegeen for the last two years thus putting an end to their lesbian life which was a six year affair. Being a lesbian, she finds such an enjoyment and fulfilment sleeping with Priscilla. Pegeen declares that Priscilla is "wonderfully cozy companionship" (Roth 50).

"Priscilla would never tell people, 'I liked that book', but rather, 'We liked that book', or about some place, 'We liked going there', ...We...We...We. And then 'we' weren't we- we was over.... Her plan was to.... become a man" (Roth 50-51). Pegeen could not come out of this loneliness and betrayal when Priscilla had gone through a surgical operation in order to become a man. Pegeen feels that this painful betrayal of Priscilla, is a kind of worst injustice that had ever happened to her. After this she does not know how to come out of it and cries all the time; she also decides to leave the job. However she manages to get a position in the East after sleeping with the dean, Louise Renner, who becomes very much possessive when Pegeen develops a relationship and sleeps with Simon Axler.

Roth presents the extent of the empowerment of women through the characters like Pegeen, Louise Renner (the Dean) and Tracy (the drunken woman). All these women are on one side whereas on the other side stands Sybil (the mother of little Alison) and Carol (the mother of Pegeen). A perfect balance picture in the portrayal of women is the uniqueness of *The Humbling*. Women, who were once known for tolerance, sacrifice, love, care and the absolute well-wishers of others in the family, especially their husband leave quickly these attributes of their freedom is questioned. Pegeen's father says; "Pegeen's a free agent. She left her childhood long ago" (Roth 69). Freedom in everything; both in thought and action, has become the cry of the womenfolk. Pegeen typifies personal freedom. She does whatever she wants to, whether it is with her parents; Louise or Simon Axler. Finally she performs when the others are compelled to watch, sometimes with shock and others sometimes with tears. She cares the least for the persons to whom she has become the driving force; its true in the case of Axler. But Pegeen very well knows how to benefit from her given surroundings. The maximum loser is Axler who did everything to make her happy.

He went in and purchased .... The Jacket cost a thousand dollars. She'd never owned anything expensive before, and she'd never worked so good in anything. Then they drove to New York, ostensibly to have some good meals and go the movies and get away for the weekend together, and he bought her more clothes - by the time the weekend was over, more than five thousand dollars' worth of skirts, blouses, belts, jackets, shoes, and sweaters, outfit in which she looked very different from the way she looked in the clothes she'd brought east with her from Montana. (Roth 58)

To Axler, Roth says: "he would have bought her a hundred. He couldn't stop. Living as he did, he rarely spent anything on himself, and nothing made him happier than making her look like..." (Roth 59).

Pegeen tries whatever she likes. She tells her mother that sharing her life with Axler is for her own enjoyment and the enjoyment includes his age factor, which holds twenty-five years seniority to her. Roth presents Pegeen's mother as just contrary to her daughter. Carol, Pegeen's mother, gets worried when she and her husband come to know about Pegeen's affair with their co-actor who is also their own age. Carol comes to inquire of it with Pegeen. During their lengthy conversation or, even argument, Carol says plainly that it would not be suitable for Pegeen to live with an aged man, that too, a jobless man.

Carol says how once she was fascinated even being married and pregnant, towards Axler, when they worked together for a Synge's play. But Carol realizes that it's only a crush which she should pass through and she successfully had come out of it. Whatever it may be, Carol says, it is not a simple matter to commit oneself with an aged man, who is also a psychiatric patient. Pegeen Mike is also in a dilemma. Despite the true affection of Axler, she is hardly able to come to a clear

conclusion. She replies to her mother that, "Well, as you say, I'm trying this for the first time. Although it's a novelty for him as well, it's not nearly as much of one as it is for me. I've been very surprised by how much I've enjoyed it. But I couldn't yet declare that it's definitely the permutation I will always want (Roth 76)". Carol realizes that she very well knows how much independence Pegeen is enjoying and this kind of independence even educates her parents that their daughter has every right to do whatever she likes to do.

The wretched state of mind which Axler feels after Pegeen's half-an-hour elaboration over her mother's unquiet mind towards her daughter's affair with an old man, makes him feel hurt and angry though he doesn't outwardly speak or show it to her. Axler dislikes the way Carol deals with their affair. He thinks that

It might be all right if Pegeen were twenty-two and there were forty years' difference between them, but why this peculiar proprietary relationship with an adventurous forty-year-old?.... Here is this eminent man with a lot of money who's going to take care of her. After all, she's not getting any younger herself. She settles down with someone who's achieved something in life - what's so wrong with that? (Roth 80)

Roth logically develops the theory that Axler becomes a use-and-throw object in the hands of Pegeen. Roth presents Axler as person who terribly longs for a life of success which is denied to him not by the society but by himself. To support this Searles says "...Roth's characters are more concerned with personal survival than with the larger society ..." (Searles 6). *The Last-Act* is the final chapter of the novel literally and figuratively. Axler is experiencing a strange fear about Pegeen-after Louise's verbal encounter with him. Louise is completely broken about Pegeen's leaving her and also avoiding her, but on the part of Pegeen it doesn't bring any change. Even Pegeen hates Louise and never wants her back in her life. Axler can observe and understand the intensity of pain that is felt by Louise when she comes to his home. From the very next moment onwards Axler fears that, "The terror of becoming the next Louise, the reproachful, crazed, avenging ex." (Roth 95).

Roth brings out the contrary nature between Sybil Van Buren of the first chapter and Pegeen Mike of the second chapter. Sybil symbolizes woman as the protector angel of the home, whereas Pegeen can be called as the destroyer of the home as well as the individual. Again in the final chapter, Roth brings out how the two women play a vital role in bringing the end of their men, Sybil as a murderer of her brutal second husband and Pegeen as a betraying woman of the passionate Axler. The former stands for justice and the latter stands for betrayal. Sybil, who once wanted Axler to murder her second husband, herself, shoots him to death. Axler comes to know of this from the newspaper and is very much affected by the thoughts of his past memories with Sybil in the psychiatric hospital and also he feels very sorry for the unknown future of her daughter, little Alison. He shares all the thoughts with

Pegeen, who also feels sorry for the same. Tracy, the drunken woman who is 'found' by Axler and Pegeen in the bar is the next woman after Lara. She comes to satisfy the erotic desires of Pegeen and of Axler, in the former's case as a lesbian, whereas in the latter's case as a heterosexual. After their physical satisfaction with Tracy, Axler and Pegeen go by a car to leave Tracy, and while leaving, Axler does not fail to notice Pegeen's last words with Tracy before their departure. Pegeen tells her with real excitement that they (Tracy and herself) would meet soon. Axler, from these onwards, is disturbed about the assurance of their living together forever. Being a lesbian, Pegeen is not completely satisfied to sleep with Axler. To make matters worse, Asa, the father of Pegeen has come to see his daughter and very clearly makes his point about the affair between Axler and Pegeen. Asa's comprehension about their affair is that Pegeen's attraction towards Axler is only out of the strong impulse or the desire of 'star struck'. Axler's fame as a star has made Pegeen to get wildly attracted to him in spite of his old age. Asa frequently calls his daughter over the phone and talks hardly for an hour. The author gives a hint about the impact of Asa upon her daughter when she says "his seeing me was quite enough" she replied. There's no need for this to be carried further (Roth 99)." This is the exact reply given by Pegeen to Axler when he asked if he can make her father to understand about their relationship. Axler feels intimidated by Pegeen and dares not to express his possessiveness for her. He hides his feelings since he thinks that Pegeen would not have been convinced whatever he would say. He now agrees with Asa and Carol who say that Pegeen, as the deciding authority throughout her life. Soon after Axler's and Pegeen's erotic adventures with Lara and Tracy, Axler comes to a strange idea of fathering a child through Pegeen. Axler consults the doctor about the complexities of becoming a father at the age of sixty - five. Instead Pegeen, even after two complete weeks of no sexual union with Axler, expresses her reluctance to sleep with Axler. Axler could not compel her, as usual; hence he eagerly waits for her to share with her about his visiting the doctor. Pegeen sleeps well and the very next morning, without any hesitation, she speaks to Axler about breaking her relationship with him.

"This is the end", she said to Axler at the breakfast table...

"End of what? "he asked."of this""But why?"

"Its not what I want. I made a mistake." (Roth 126)

#### References:

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Roth's View point is this; A Man's way is laid with multitude of traps, and Pegeen had been the last. He'd stepped hungrily into it and taken the bait like the most craven captive on earth. There was no other way for it to wind up, and ye he was the last to find out. Improbable? No, predictable. Abandoned after so long? Clearly not as long for her as for him. Everything enchanting about her was gone, and in the time it had taken her to say "This is the end," he was condemned to his hole with the six sticks, alone and emptied of his desire to live. (Roth 130) Roth tries to give a balanced picture of women of the present world. As the above sentence says, women might have spread so many traps for men. But as far as Sybil's case is concerned, women, that too, innocent young girls fall in the trap of men. Out of sheer ignorance, many women, especially young girls, even now are sexually exploited. Though Sybil has murdered her 'rich and powerful' second husband (whenever Sybil refers her second husband spontaneously she used to give the above adjectives) the unknowing future of her children become much more complicated than ever. She becomes thus 'a reluctant victim' who is compelled to choose her life behind bars. Roth through Axler depicts thus; "Axler repeated to himself for days afterward, *This suffering that's going to be Alison's*. It was probably the very thought that had driven Sybil to murder her husband---thereby enlarging Alison's suffering forever (Roth 105)." Whatever Sybil has done, obviously, does not bring any good to her future or even to the future of her children. Axler cries unbearably and uncontrollably and he speaks to Pegeen's parents and explores the causes for the departure of Pegeen. He feels that an irreparable damage has fallen upon his life. He could not survive with that any longer and hence he shoots himself to death. Even death is terrifying when he puts the barrel of the gun inside his mouth, yet he succeeds by remembering the courageous woman Sybil who goes to the extent of murdering though she looks too weak to do such terrible things. His role model of courage is Sybil. He says again and again that if Sybil is courageous enough to do a terrible murder, it will be easy for him at least to commit suicide.

**Conclusion:** To put it in a nut shell, the author catches the readers' sympathy for the suffering women. At the same time he also arouses the readers' disgust towards the libertines. Though there are libertines, the majority of women even today face all sorts of exploitation. The cry for 'Women Empowerment' thus poses the question of remedial measures to prevent them from all encircling dangers.

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