MARRIAGE AS A MIRAGE OF HAPPINESS:
A STUDY OF PHILIP ROTH’S *THE HUMBLING*

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The present paper on Philip Roth’s novel *The Humbling* (2009) analyses how the sacrosanct ideals of a unified family and marital life have begun to be questioned in the contemporary times. Philip Roth is a postmodernist as many of his “works critique and parody grand narratives, meta-concepts, and meta-ideologies” (Statlander 5). In *The Humbling*, he writes about the meta-institution of traditional family which seems to whip its individuals physically and mentally. He shows that even though the different communities living in America have economically established themselves, yet their family lives continue to be traditional and patriarchal with homes often acting as torture chambers for the individuals living in them. Roth seems to suggest here that a stressful or troublesome family life, the sooner it ends, the better it is. The protagonist Simon Axler in *The Humbling* finds that a release from the invidious torture of his family is better as it would afford a constructive and positive solution to him for his situations of crisis and depression.

In Roth’s fiction, one notices that the traditional society does not let a person breathe easy: if at any time, one chooses to ignore the family, the community or the society, it imposes a guilt complex on one’s consciousness. One is compelled to live in perplexity as if one has committed a crime against either one’s family or the society. However, Roth suggests that in order to attain happiness, one has to come out of the “prescriptive limitations and, most of all the guilt associate[d] with over-stepping the boundaries that family, one’s ethnic group, society, and the Mosaic laws have set” (Statlander 11). Dan Isaac makes it more understandable by saying:

The characters created by Philip Roth are men in the middle, lacking a sure sense of values. They are continually concerned with complex alternatives. Placed in problematic situations, they are forced to think their position through and come out with a new formulation. Two value systems clash and a sympathetic character makes a significant choice. (91)

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In the novel, Axler in order to save himself from the psychological crisis arising from his guilt consciousness and wretchedness after his first divorce shifts to live-in relationship with Pegeen, much younger than himself. Although the affair does not succeed, yet the characters are seen as challenging the shackles of the traditional family and society. A thorough study of the novel shows that Roth’s characters are deeply steeped in the open and liberal atmosphere of the United States and do not wish for a life which the family imposes.

Roth’s works have been attacked as dangerous, dishonest, irresponsible and humiliating for the Jewish community as he seems to have denounced the importance of covenants in his works. Roth has been criticized by these Jews settled in America for trivial statements about their faith. “Furthermore, it is charged that such criticism [made by Roth] ... is taken by anti-Semites as justification for their attitudes, as ‘fuel’ for their fires, particularly as it is a Jew himself who seemingly admits to habits and behavior that are not exemplary, or even normal and acceptable.... This is not fighting anti-Semitism, but submitting to it” (Rockland 30-31). Roth’s works were also banned in South Africa as anti-Semitic. In his essay, “Writing about Jews,” (1975), Roth rails against such harsh criticism. Addressing the American-Jews who criticized him for not giving “a balanced portrayal of Jews,” Roth argues, “what fiction does and what the rabbi would like it to do are two entirely different things” (“Writing about Jews”). Roth further reveals the truth that the “stories the novelists tell” about the family relationships, new identity and changing life style of Jewish people are more persuasive than “the sermons of some of the rabbis” (“Writing about Jews”). Furthermore, the analysis of The Humbling also confirms that Roth’s literature is beyond the religious, cultural and conventional boundaries. Roth has not only shown how far Jews and Christians have moved from covenants and Biblical instructions respectively, and that the Americans (especially Jews and Christians) are more pretentious in idealizing their family relationships.

In the novel, Simon Axler is shown as a Christian who suffers like an orthodox Jew while searching for an ideal marital life. However, his wife rejects him for his wavering temperament, while his girl friend, Pegeen, responds negatively toward his adherence to marital vows, his desire for a regular married life and raising a family. Safer rightly says, “Philip Roth, like other postmodern novelists, uses comic irony to mock rational methods of solving contemporary problems, particularly problems with regard to traditional Jewish issues that people hold dear” (158). ‘To get married’ is the most rational method which not only Jews but
people of almost all the communities consider right for solving the problems of life. However, Roth seems to suggest that marriage reduces individuals to mere schlemiels who are left alone to fend for themselves. In *The Humbling*, the protagonist Axler tries hard to succeed in his conjugal relationships, but invariably ends in disaster. He invests in the relationships but to no avail: he neither gets respect for his sacrifices and efforts nor anything else in return. He tries to be so kind and liberal in his relationship with the lesbian Pegeen that he arranges another girl for her to make love, but fails to get any marital happiness from Pegeen in return. His wish for a blissful married life only brings grief to him.

Before proceeding with other dimensions of the novel, it is important to understand the postmodernist approach used in the paper. Postmodernism works in two ways: first, it problematises all the old impractical religious, political, social, familial, economic and philosophical ideologies known as “grand narratives” (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* 60). Secondly, it celebrates the moments of fragmentation, a break up from these ideologies. The paper surveys the relevant views of the postmodernists including Louis Pierre Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Pierre-Félix Guattari regarding erosion in family relationships in general and religious context in particular.

Lyotard calls the traditional ideologies as “metanarratives”. He argues in his work “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). Lyotard takes ‘family’ as a metanarrative that starts giving moral education (that is in favour of family rather than of the child) to a child since its birth and the morality basically instils the submissive attitude in him through the norms of discipline and force. Lyotard says:

> All education is inhuman because it does not happen without constraint and terror; I mean the least controlled, least pedagogical terror, the one Freud calls castration and which makes him say, in relation to the ‘good way’ of bringing up children that in any case it will be bad (close in this to Kantian melancholy). (*The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* 4-5)

It means that the old norms of family have been imposed on nature and followed by a sort of conditioning in a disciplining and aggressive way since generations. Lyotard also defines a family as “… localized (its members live under the same roof) articulated (in terms of its categories: father, daughter, maternal cousin, etc.) and may be hierarchically organized (a family tree) around an arbitrarily chosen centre (ego)” (189-190). What Lyotard means to say is that the
individual members are also discriminated according to their different status, gender and most importantly their obedience towards the central figure of the family. That is why he says, the metanarrative of ‘family’ is like a landscape that was present and is still present with the memories of its past organization in which an individual is “no longer simply its hostage but its lost traveler” (189-90). However, Lyotard seems to suggest that the contemporary individual does not want to be a loser in facing the situations of the present by following the rules of olden times. This has led to a flux in contemporary times regarding the individual’s obedience to family.

Theorists like Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari also find that family along with other state apparatuses tries to crush freedom and thus happiness of individuals. They basically condemn the Enlightenment philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel, who confirms the religious codification of marriage especially monogamy as “one of the absolute principles on which the ethical life of a community depends”. For Hegel, marriage comes to be recorded as “one of the moments in the founding of states by gods or heroes” (252). However, the postmodernists recognize scriptures, the philosophy of Gods, as part of the ulterior design of powerful human beings to establish their rule over the common folk (Butler 14-15).

Rejecting Hegelian views, Louis Althusser calls the religions of Christianity and Judaism as “the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the medieval system” (1507) and family as its apparatus to ensure conformism and its rule in the society. Althusser says, “... since everything takes place in the Family (the Holy family: the Family is in essence Holy), God will recognize his own in it’, i.e. those who have recognized God, and have recognized themselves in Him, will be saved” (1507). This is the reason why postmodernists question the philosophy given in Torah of Jews and Bible of Christians as also other scriptures of the world, because, in the name of unified existence and piousness within a home, the scriptures only seek to suffocate and stifle individuality and freedom. Althusser makes it more comprehensible by saying:

All this is clearly written in what is rightly called the Scriptures.... God the Lord ... cried to Moses, “Moses!” And Moses replied “It is (really) I! I am Moses thy servant, speak and I shall listen!” And the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am that I am” ... And Moses, interpellated—called by his Name, having recognized that it ‘really’ was he who was called by God, recognizes that he is a subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God, a subject through the
Subject and subjected to the Subject. The proof: he obeys him, and makes his people [whole family and community] obey God’s Commandments. (1506)

Althusser calls this power play of subject and subjects the mechanism of “duplicate mirror-structure of ideology” (1507). The subject (controlling authority) is God and God’s selected people are his reflections and his images. Both God and his selected people interpellate the common individuals as their subjects (the beings to be controlled). If subjects recognize them as docile subjects and are always afraid of God and his selected people, it is considered good for them. In this way ever since God has recognized his obedient subjects in the family, family remains at a subjugating position—a state apparatus—to produce the compliant subjects for obeying the state. That is why the postmodernists like Althusser bluntly reject metanarratives because in their observation of life, they find them the root-cause behind the division of society and family as dominant producing docile subjects.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the French philosophers opine that the family constitutes the repressive cell like “Hitlerism, Stalinism, Fascism” (88). Family is the most powerful agent of psychological repression where the desires of a child and adolescents are controlled, subdued or crushed. The critics say:

The desiring-experience is treated as if it were intrinsically related to the parents, and as if the family were its supreme law. Partial objects are subjected to the notorious law of totality—unity acting as ‘lacking.’ The disjunctions are subjected to the alternative of the undifferentiated or exclusion.

The family is therefore introduced into the production of desire and will perform a displacement, an unparalleled repression of desire commencing with the earliest age of the child. Social production delegates the family to psychic repression. (120)

In their theory of ‘oedipal family’, they find out that our communal structure i.e. our family (particularly nuclear family) within which we live, is a repressive regime whose psychological repression gives rise to neurotic incestuous desires and self-repression. The critics say, “The family is the delegated agent of psychic repression, or rather the agent delegated to psychic repression; the incestuous drives are the disfigured image of the repressed” (119). The reference hence is to a form of patriarchal family in which young children grow up loving a person that oppresses them physically or mentally and also holds out a threat of punishment. They are
brought up having submissive attitude, carry it over into their adult life and form docile subjects for society and the state which then controls them. Psychological repression forms docile individuals who are the easy targets of social repression (242).

Michel Foucault finds discipline one of the most powerful ways to dominate the people in society. He calls the power to discipline the individuals as the bio-power that takes hold of his life and death by creating a fear of severe punishment in him in case rules are not followed. Foucault says in “Panopticism” the third part of his work, *Discipline and Punish*:

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal /abnormal); and that of coercive assignment of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.). (199)

Families are made disciplined enough to follow the policies of governments and capitalists (both state and capitalists are one) either in fear or in common will and also make their members to obey them. That is why, the postmodernists like Foucault wish to declare the present era as the end of ideologies.

Jean Baudrillard appreciatively says contemporary times as “the end of the dustbins of history”. He remarks:

> There are no longer any dustbins for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values. Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, this is because history itself has become a dustbin. It has become its own dustbin, just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin. *(The Illusion of the End 263)*

Baudrillard makes it clear that ideology kills itself as it is unrealistic and based on simulacra or simulation which he defines as, “Simulation bears no relation to reality. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t” (“The Process of Simulacra” 1733). The ideologies through the instrument of language, images and now techno-sciences spread ideas on which they try to establish various administrative set-ups in the society. However, the reality faced by these set-ups is somewhat different. The clash between abstract images and concrete reality blurs historicity or ideology. Baudrillard says:
However, while admitting that they [metanarratives or world outlooks] do not correspond to reality i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology=illusion/allusion). (1798)

On the basis of these ideas, Jean Baudrillard finds a lot of difference between the image of an ideal family exposed through television family dramas based on ancient religious tales and the image of family as it exists in present society. He finds in techno-sciences like television a huge arena of ‘simulation’. For the purpose, he uses the example of a 1971 experimental television series The Loud family which distorted family reality into hyperreality of the ideal and impractical familial ideology that later brings disaster to the members of that family. He says:

Besides, this family was already hyperreal by the very nature of its selection: a typical ideal American family, California home, three garages, five children, assured social and professional status, decorative housewife, upper-middle-class standing. In a way it is this statistical perfection that dooms it to death…. Because heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, it is the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death…. Thus it is a question of a sacrificial process, of a sacrificial spectacle offered to twenty million Americans. The liturgical drama of a mass society. (Simulacra and Simulation 30)

The traditional and modern norms of ideal family can, thus, also be interpreted in the image of simulation: the norms seem to be very spiritual and divine, yet are probably baseless and beyond practicality.

The study of Roth’s The Humbling reveals that marital or familial ties are not less than manacles which try to control a person’s freedom. The metanarrative challenged in this novel is the western traditional concept and universal tenet of marriage as the union between two souls. In the novel, the notion of marriage proves to be simulacra for Simon Axler—one-time the best Classical American actor—as what he faces is completely the opposite of what he has expected from his wife, Victoria Powers and then his second would-be wife, Pegeen. Unable to restore the lost talent of her husband, Victoria considers it better to leave him than to be his soul companion. Thereafter, he tries to restructure his family ties in the company of Pegeen. However, Pegeen
leaves him thinking that she cannot be the substitute for his acting. The desire of family happiness proves only to be a mirage at the end. The novel’s traditional three-act structure ironically parodies the condition in which Simon Axler’s grotesque familial life passes by.

It is seen in the novel that the marital ties have become a stranglehold for both Victoria and Axler as spouses, because both are not able to get what they expect from each other. Victoria observes that their dismal present has no connection with their celebrated past. She wishes for a life with Axler as passionate and contented as it was when they fell in love with each other and got married. She remembers her delightful youth when she was one of the best American stage dancers and Axler “used to go to the City Center to see her dance, not because he loved ballet but because of his youthful susceptibility to the capacity she had to stir him to lust through the pathway of the tenderest emotions: she remained in his memory for forty years afterward as the very incarnation of erotic pathos” (TH 9). But all her wishes dash to ground when Axler mentally collapses after the adverse response to his performance in William Shakespeare’s play Macbeth. The reviewers declare the performance ludicrous and publish harsh reviews against him. The worst happens when the loss of his acting-self begins to poison his familial life. Axler’s illusions as an actor keep him away from the reality of his existence as a spouse. “Axler inhabits the world of representation ... the loss of genuine or successful acting is not accompanied by a third Axler, at least not explicitly in the text, who would be able to side-step the situation and ponder the tragic comedy of life” (Wrethed 125). He starts losing interest in his wife, encountering the world superficially and thinking of committing suicide as he says, “there’s a grim euphoria to it. Your life is falling apart, it has no center, and suicide is the one thing you can control” (TH 14).

The novel allegorizes the decline of the Enlightenment philosophy representing a life in which the terms of coherence, unity and center seem to have no meaning and the characters lack a spirit to be together. Victoria and Axler as spouses live in the same house but only ostensibly, in reality they have drifted apart, with their communication broken:

She would cry whenever she saw him at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, unable to eat the meal she had prepared. ‘Try something,’ she begged, but he ate nothing, said nothing, and soon Victoria began to panic. She had never seen him give way like this before, not even eight years earlier when his elderly parents had died in an automobile crash with his father at the wheel. He wept then and he went on. (8)
The preemptive and practical Victoria who goes every day for her work out at a local dance studio to keep herself fit and looking youthful, does not want her spouse to be her opposite—a sentimental fool and a misfit. She can never take Axler as a depressed old man who “screamed aloud when he awokened in the night and found himself still locked inside the role of the man deprived of himself, his talent, and his place in the world, a loathsome man who was nothing more than the inventory of his defects” (6). Axler’s doppelgänger as a committed soul breaks, when Victoria realizes, “the man on whom she had depended was gone”! (8). She forgets that he is trapped in the hands of wretched condition and starts blaming him for his every collapse. She “could no longer care for him and by now needed tending herself” (7). Choosing her role of a mother than a wife of a hopeless husband, she prefers to flee to California to be close to her son by her first marriage and decides to divorce Axler. Victoria had already passed through two divorces earlier: divorce remains a way-out for her to get some sort of relief from the atrocity of her depressing marriages.

As a postmodernist work, different binaries are placed in the course of the novel like that of home/hell, love/hate, living/acting and present/past. The novelist seems to tell that traditional families exist with their anomalies without finding any remedies from their religious guidelines and their homes do not consist of any connotation of a pious place providing environment of security, mutual co-operation and warmth of relations. None of the characters in the novel seem to have any moral scruples at all. Nevertheless Axler takes seriously the drama of the dissolution of his marriage for long and feels “too tedious to discuss” (54) about it. Axler does not persuade his wife back as he has lost faith in her who has packed her luggage to go away instead of being with him in his difficult days. He who was already upset, is shocked at Victoria’s sudden decision to go away from him. The saying ‘there is no place like home’ has no meaning for Axler.

In the novel, Roth seems to say that the existence is a continual process of trying to find meaning and happiness in the face of the knowledge of the chaotic world, however more the escape, more the trouble. While seeking help from a psychiatrist, Dr. Farr, in the hospital, Axler falls out of frying pan into the fire. The doctor adds to his pain by comparing his situation with that of “walk[ing] naked down a busy city street or being unprepared for a crucial exam or falling off a cliff or finding on the highway that your brakes don’t work” (12). Sitting across with such a psychiatrist, who seems to need a psychiatrist for himself, and discussing his life
again and again as also finding out the cause for this universal nightmare (the stage phobia whose cause cannot be found, according to doctor) become all the more a nightmare for Axler. “What the Hell Am I Doing Here?” (18), the title that he gives to his drawing unveils the tragicomedy of his life. He apprehends that his improvement has hardly anything to do with pills, with psychiatric consultations, group therapy or art therapy as all of them seem to be empty exercises (16). Moreover, in the company of the depressed patients, the more Axler tries to forget his past, the more he finds himself in the gutter. Axler undergoes treatment to curtail suicidal tendencies in him but becomes fascinated with “the gang of suicide patients” (13). He finds himself inclined towards suicide when he impulsively starts speaking before them as a guest lecturer, “Suicide is the role you write for yourself. You inhabit it and you enact it. All carefully staged—where they will find you and how they will find you. But one performance” (15). For one minute, he loses his senses when his new friend, Sybil Van Buren—an elfin, pale-skinned brunette and his alter-ego, also trapped in precarious condition, taking him a real hero from his stout physique, asks him to shoot her second rich husband “as though he [Axler] were a gangster in a movie rather than another patient” (42). Sybil caught her husband red-handed abusing her eight-year-old daughter, Alison, by her first marriage. The ineffectual husband saved his skin by declaring Sybil mad and getting her admitted to the hospital without bothering his values and her worth. The irony of the situation lies when in the hospital, Axler has also to save his skin from Sybil by declaring himself an out-of-work actor who if botches the job, they both will go to jail. While looking into the matter that Sybil’s son and daughter are still under the dark shadow of her husband, Axler only gives her advice, “get strong, cooperate with the doctor and try to get strong as fast as you can so you can go home to your children” (24).

Escaping the sick environment of the hospital, leaving everything on fate and coming to his starting point again, Axler decides finally to divorce Victoria. A close look at the characters in the novel reveals that they tend to forgo the relationships in one way or the other, seek substitutes and find solace whenever their near and dear ones desert them. The second section of the novel called The Transformation seems to be an appropriate title for the events in the life of Axler who tries to find peace in his live-in-relationship with Pegeen Mike Stapleford—a girl twenty years younger and also the daughter of his actor friends, Asa and Carol Stapleford. However, the affair culminates into the reason behind Axler’s apocalypse giving a postmodernist expression of verbal irony and binary oppositions of transformation/transgression and
creation/destruction. The aged Axler takes a simple visit of a local drama teacher, Pegeen to his house as a revelation of a soul to soul relationship and a way of renewal of his life as if she were his “Pegeen Mike Flaherty” and he is her “Christy Mahon” from J. M. Synge’s play *The Play Boy of the Western World* (*TH* 43), but in actuality, it proves to be his sheer illusion.

Pegeen after Victoria is the first lady that touches Axler within when she cleans his wounds, brings him water to drink and makes his dinner in their very first meeting. “... she worked in his kitchen, behaving as though the place was hers. She 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” (53). Pegeen’s showing off her avid interest and sincerity in the affair, being fantasized about him since she was a young girl, spending her maximum time at his house, avoidance of her parents and their rejection of Axler, stripping of the wall paper chosen by Victoria, occupying two rooms in his house, willingness to have a child from Axler, conversion from lesbianism, changing dressing sense and hair cut the way Axler likes and their sexual adventures including spanking, strap-ons and role-play is enough for Axler to overlook all the signs that warn him not to trust the affair. Axler finds it better to laugh off the warnings of Carol to Pegeen for not being a caretaker of a crazy old guy. Carol warns Pegeen:

You’re new to the world of men ... that the man you should choose to initiate this new life with is a man of twenty-five years older than you are who has been through a breakdown that led to his being institutionalized. And who now is essentially unemployed. (73)

However, Pegeen’s retort “I don’t think there’s any need to provoke a scene when there isn’t a scene in the offing” (99) makes Axler to drop his idea of confronting Asa and his wife. Moreover, Axler assures whatever Asa says negatively is out of his jealousy of Axler on whom even Carol had a crush for in her youth and whose fame Asa could not stomach. In his revenge-motive, Asa seems forgetting that Pegeen is his daughter. As a sadist, Asa uses his daughter as a weapon to give grief and torture to Axler.

Axler deliberately ignores the warning of Louise, a Dean whom Pegeen slept with to attain a post in the college converting the latter into an “obsessive, possessive, jealous, rancorous bitch” (67). The “terror of becoming the next Louise, the reproachful, crazed, avenging ex” (95) stays there in the mind of Axler, yet to live with Pegeen and sexually experience her seems to be very exciting for him: if Pegeen is with a man for the first time since her college, he is with a
lesbian for the first time in his life (55). For Pegeen, the affair with Axler remains an adventure as well as a way out to be out of her love trauma as she says, “You’re what the doctor ordered” (81). She wishes to “keep it going because she’s still aching, all these months later, from Priscilla shock and the Louise ultimatums” (63). Pegeen has lived as a lesbian since she was twenty-three and spent the last two years of a six-year affair with Priscilla, her lover and teacher colleague in Bozeman University. Axler accepts her lesbianism along with her sexual proclivities. The ecstasy in the affair crosses all boundaries when Axler for the sake of Pegeen entraps Tracy, a drunken young woman in the bar, drives her to their house and make love to her one by one. The night with Tracy perhaps brings a turning point in the thought process of Pegeen and Axler both. Pegeen seems to go back to her lesbian world, whereas Axler begins to realize that he is “the god Pan no longer” (115). Pegeen’s expression to Tracy “See you soon” (115) can be taken as an ironical expression to ‘see off Axler soon’ from her life.

Roth also gives a quality of pastiche to the novel by presenting fragments of ancient stories which have lost their power to influence us: the story of Greek God Pan is parodied here. Pan, the god of shepherds and flocks, hunting and rustic music, wandered the hills and mountains of Arcadia playing his pipes and chasing nymphs who commonly fled from his advances. Pegeen comes as a “girl-boy, a child-adult and a cunning naïf (88) and a magical composite of shaman, acrobat, and animal” (113), but goes away. Though she tries to be perfect for him as she says, yet the words “My heart’s not in it tonight” (125) resolves the mystery in which Pegeen keeps Axler into and she declares in the morning, “This is the end” (126). The climatic day arrives when Pegeen leaves Axler in the lurch and he finds himself to be “preposterous, disgraced, feeble little being ... a lesbian’s thirteen-month mistake” (139). She departs away repeating the words of Asa and asserting her selfhood, “I can’t be a substitute for your acting.... I’m what you have instead of that.” (128). Though tears have been there in her eyes, she wants “only to be free of him and to satisfy the common human wish to move on and try something else” (127). Axler is left only to cry:

You’re not leaving me because I don’t have a job! You’re leaving me for that girl!.... Now there’s no interloper between you and your father. You’re unburdened of your impediment. No more admonitions from home. Safely returned to your original position. Good. Go on to the next one. I never had the strength for you anyway. (129)
The novel can be interpreted as a hybrid of both open and closed endings as it shows the ambiguity of life. The ending is ‘closed’ in the sense it is circular as Axler seems to be in the death-well: he reaches the same point where he started. Axler feels as if he were condemned to be alone and emptied of the desire to live. The two options are again left for him: to bear with the tragic circumstances of life or to escape them by killing himself. Like a contemporary man infatuated towards easy ways to keep at bay the negativity of life, the protagonist enacts death to leave this world dramatically. Death seems to be a connotation of freedom, liberation from his ennui and frustration, seemingly resulting from failures of life. Death becomes a celebration and a winning point for Axler: death also becomes an occasion of his greatest performance to prove himself worthy of recommendation by the audience. Throughout his career as a stage actor, he wanted to give his actor-self an authenticity which he gives by enacting death and thus dying. He resorts to his acting to commit suicide taking attic as a theater and identifying himself as Konstantin Gavriloich Treplev (in Anton Tchekhov’s play The Seagull), an aspiring young writer who feels a failure at everything, desperate with defeat at work and love and also commits suicide at the end (140). So this is not Axler-cum-Konstantin that shoots himself leaving eight words suicide note: “The fact is, Konstantin Gavriloich has shot himself” (140).

The novel can also be seen as ‘open-ended’ as Roth offers no solution for familial entanglements. As a postmodernist, Roth puts before us the suffocating world of marital relationships which Axler, Pegeen and Victoria represent in the novel.
End Notes:

1 The word ‘ideology’ was coined by Destutt de Tracy in 1796 assembling the two words ‘idea’ and 'logy’. He used it to refer to ‘science of ideas’. Ideology consists of beliefs, values and ways of thinking that human beings perceive in their lives and take them to be reality. According to postmodernists, the ideology always serves to legitimate the interests of the dominant economic and social class (www.Britannica.com).

2 The word ‘Hegemony’ is derived from an ancient Greek word ‘hegemonia’ that means leadership and rule imposed through indirect or implied means of power like intervention in the state affairs rather than by the direct military force (www.merriam-webster.com). Antonio Gramsci in his work Selections from Prison Notebooks (1971; trans. 1999) gives the theory of Cultural Hegemony describing the domination by the ruling class over a culturally diverse society. The ruling class manipulates the culture of the society — the beliefs, explanations, values and perceptions — and propagates its own ideology as the universally accepted dominant ideology. That ideology also justifies the actions of the ruling class and shows them beneficial for all in the state (20).