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SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND IDENTITY PROBLEMS IN PHILIP ROTH'S ZUCKERMAN BOUND*

*PHILIP ROTH'UN ZUCKERMAN BOUND ADLI ESERİNDE SOSYAL
KISITLAMALAR VE KİMLİK PROBLEMLERİ*

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Abstract

Philip Roth dealing with anti-Semitism, alienation and identity in especially Jewish society is one of the distinguish American-Jewish writers in the twentieth century. *Zuckerman Bound* recounts the famous Jewish author Nathan Zuckerman who has marginal novels which are not popular among Jews. In *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman challenging with his family, relatives and milieu intends to be a novelist like Lonoff. The protagonist becomes a famous novelist in his other novel, *Zuckerman Unbound*. However, he is in the middle of a war against the society. In *The Anatomy Lesson* he is subverted by his mentality and brother who thinks that Zuckerman is responsible for their parents' death. The protagonist intensifies on Jewish society and culture rather than himself in his last novel *Prague Orgy*. Not only does Zuckerman discuss with people in other religion but also he is a controversial person in Jewish society. In fact, Roth depicts himself by penning a protagonist Zuckerman. The feeling of disorientation and statelessness rise in Zuckerman/Roth mind in four novels. For example in *Anatomy Lesson*, Zuckerman becomes "a helpless patient who is

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compelled to ask himself whether or not he can even become someone different" (Wilson, 2005: 104). Also Greenberg depicts the same novel as "Zuckerman's involvement with transgression as a man and a writer" (1997). In each novel, the reader can find the attempts of adaptation, isolation and how the protagonist alters in both Jewish and American society. Even though the themes dealt with differ from each novel, by and large, the plot is predicated on the protagonist's psychology. In this study, Roth / Zuckerman's identity and the social constraints shaping them will be argued.

Key Words: Alienation, Identity, Jewish, Philip Roth, *Zuckerman's Bound*

Öz

Özellikle Yahudi toplumunda anti-semitizm, kimlik ve yabancılaşma konularıyla ilgilenen Philip Roth yirminci yüzyılın en önemli Amerikan-Yahudi yazarlarından biridir. *Zuckerman Bound* adlı eseri Yahudiler arasında popüler olmayan marjinal romanlara sahip Nathan Zuckerman adlı ünlü bir yazarı konu alır. *The Ghost Writer* adlı eserinde Zuckerman yaşadığı çevreyi, akrabalarını ve ailesini de karşısına alarak kendine örnek gösterdiği Lonoff gibi romancı olmak niyetindedir. *Zuckerman Unbound* romanında artık romanı yazmış ünlü bir yazardır. Ancak toplumla olan savaşı başlamıştır. *The Anatomy Lesson* eserinde ise ebeveynlerinin ölümünden kendisini suçlayan kardeşi ve kendi psikolojisi yaşamını altüst etmiştir. Son romanı *Prague Orgy* daha ziyade toplumun Yahudi toplumuna ve kültürüne olan bakışı üzerine yoğunlaşmıştır. Zuckerman sadece başka dinlerdeki insanlarla çelişmez ayrıca Yahudi toplumunda da tartışmalı bir isimdir. Gerçekte kaleme aldığı başkahraman Roth'un kendisidir. Romanlarda aidiyetsizlik ve tabiyetsizlik romanda Zuckerman/Roth'un benliğinde bir sorundur. Örneğin, *The Anatomy Lesson* adlı romanda Zuckerman "başka birisi dahi olup olamadığını sorgulamak zorunda kalan muhtaç bir hastaya" (Wilson, 2005: 104) dönüşmüştür. Greenberg ise aynı romanı "Zuckerman'ın bir insan ve yazar olarak sınırları zorlaması" (1997) olarak değerlendirir. Her bir romanda okuyucu adaptasyon, yalnızlaşma ve başkahramanın Yahudi Amerikan toplumundaki değişiklikleri bulmaktadır. Ana temalar her ne kadar romandan romana çeşitlilik gösterse de, genel olarak konu başkahramanın psikolojik durumu üstüne kurulmuştur. Bu çalışmada kendisini şekillendiren Roth/Zuckerman'ın kimlik ve sosyal zorlamaları tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, Philip Roth, Yabancılaşma, Yahudi, *Zuckerman Bound*,

I. INTRODUCTION:

In *Zuckerman Bound*, by Philip Milton Roth, one of the most popular American-Jewish writers, the protagonist Nathan Zuckerman is a famous novelist full of social and psychological contradictions who becomes Roth's alter ego (Posnock, 2006: xvi). Zuckerman is raised by a traditional Jewish family and generally has a humanistic

perspective. The work consists of four short novels that deal with cultural and social clashes, including domestic constraints in the Zuckerman's first novel, *Ghost Writer*, and humiliation by society and friends in the second novel, *Zuckerman Unbound*.

Zuckerman invariably writes about being Jewish and his clashes with both his conscience and society. "This fixation may well reflect Roth's own almost compulsive obsession to write about Jewishness in America" (Roberts, 2000). On the other hand, the plot Zuckerman chooses is generally considered autobiographical and too many autobiographical elements "have been dismissed as mere personal – and, some would argue, narcissistic – disclosure" (Royal, 2000). As Searles (1985: 11) states,

And in the 'Zuckerman' novels the volatile questions raised in 'Writing About Jews' are again considered as the author Nathan Zuckerman clashes with various family members who have been angered by his portrayals of Jewish life. There is much autobiography in these recent books, as if Roth were again settling personal scores.

On the other hand, in the novel, individualism plays a very important role, indicating Roth's personal thoughts on religion, and the region. Roth mirrors his own perspective rather than that of a Jew. As Kauvar (2005: 725) states, the first point of view is used as a technique of narration, meaning that "this is my thought, not others." Kauvar (2005: 725) purports, "The writer may play fast and loose with the I, turning the self into a company of actors, but he dare not tamper with the we." In addition, Wirth-Nesher (1991: 145) notes that Roth fails to appropriately identify Jewish-Americans or Jews; she believes that penning a protagonist such as Zuckerman reflects the author's impotence in his own society: "Roth has consistently exposed the discomfort of the complacent Jewish-American writer who feels compelled to identify with his people's history of persecution, but who cannot honestly appropriate it as his subject matter."

Furthermore, as a conscientious author, Roth himself adumbrates the idea of writing a kind of autobiography. In first page of the novel, Zuckerman tells his reader he is "contemplating my own massive Bildungsroman" (Roth, 1985: 3). In this context, both Roth and Zuckerman are well aware that their protagonists are their own alter egos. On the other hand, Roth has "flaunted insouciance about the sanctity of the real" (Posnock, 2006: xvi). While Zuckerman represents his author, Roth, Carnovsky is the protagonist of Zuckerman's novel, symbolizing his subconscious. Penning these extreme characters, "Roth and his author-surrogates depend on the marginality of the Jews even as they cash in on their own marginality to that marginality" (Robinson, 2000: 95). From this point of view, it can be hard for readers to completely understand the novel, since Roth creates "one character confronting another" who "mirrors" (Oster, 1998: 67) someone else. In this sense, the novel can be regarded as a puzzle in

which the readers must distinguish the differences and similarities between Roth and Zuckerman. The reader endeavors to determine whether the novel is Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman, although Roth purports that it is a Bildungsroman in Zuckerman Bound. Dealing with the same issue, Shostak (2000) asserts that Roth blurs reality with fiction: "In both novels, 'autobiography' and 'biography,' in their broad reference to the writing of a life story, provide metaphors rather than determinate puzzles for readers to solve concerning the relationship between the fiction and the 'facts' of Roth's life."

From this perspective, it can be claimed that Zuckerman is a contradicted protagonist whose milieu constrains him both psychologically and sociologically. As the critic Bernstein (2003: 175) asserts, "Zuckerman wonders where the Jew in him is." Hence, as Posnock (2006, xii) depicts, Zuckerman shouldn't be read just as a novel confronting among Jews, the novel also quests for the answers to universal questions:

I hope readers expecting (yet one more) discussion about Roth and being Jewish in America will come to be persuaded that this topic has for too long been isolated from a more capacious inquiry into larger dimensions of his art and broader questions of what it means to be human. (2006, p. xii)

II. GHOST WRITER

The protagonist of *Ghost Writer*, the first novel of *Zuckerman Bound*, is a talented young writer seeking a "spiritual and aesthetic father" or a "language in search of its source of power and authority" (O'Donnell, 1983: 365). Zuckerman gets tired of his family's oppression and, indeed, abandons his home to begin living with I. L. Lonoff, an old, experienced writer, to find his own style. *Ghost Writer* is an exploration of the author seeking his own language. The novel also deals with his inner conflicts and experiences. In addition, Zuckerman indicates his conflict with Jewish society, which turns him into a target. Budick (2003: 213) regards this from Roth's point of view and states, "Roth already puts at the center of his critique the Jewish community's fascination with the Holocaust."

In this respect, Zuckerman's psychology is a distinctive factor in understanding him. As mentioned, Zuckerman's quest to procure his own language and style is a sub-theme of the novel. Having a family whose members are against his writing due to the anti-Semitic perspective of his novels forces the protagonist to find more restrained people. In this perspective, as Greenberg (1997: 494) points out, it is a kind of search for Zuckerman's literary identity:

The Ghost Writer can be said to employ the "symbolic method" that Charles Feidelson found in nineteenth-century New England writers where the narration symbolizes the voyaging consciousness of the artist searching for new modes of representing reality (1997: 494)

The constraints of his milieu make him more confused and worried about what he will do. As he says to a distinctively Jewish character

"But then nothing I had ever written put me in such a sweat as that letter. Everything undeniably true struck me as transparently false as soon as I wrote it down, and the greater the effort to be sincere, the worse it went" (Roth, 1985: 8).

On the other hand, there are also prudent characters who wish to shape the protagonist's mind: "Nathan, you don't have to defend yourself. Why shouldn't you enjoy your first bit of recognition? Who deserves it more than a gifted young man like yourself?" (Roth, 1985: 39-40). The contradictions confronted by the protagonist are insignias representing the great number of dilemmas in his mind.

The reason why Zuckerman wants to retreat from his family can be clarified by his parents' reflection on Jewishness and Judaism. The only topics discussed in the house are Jews, Jewish culture, and their opposites, others: "Just the birds and the trees might not be a bad idea for writer, Jewish or not" (Roth, 1985: 5). In this way, exposing too many conversations about "the perils of intermarriage, the problem of Santa Claus, and the injustice of medical-school quotas" (Roth, 1985: 11-12), Zuckerman writes a controversial novel that attracts the society's attention. His point of view toward his parents is a kind of humiliation: "Oh, what sitting ducks I had for parents! A son of theirs would have had to be a half-wit or a sadist not to make them proud. And I was neither" (Roth, 1985: 80)., Such humiliation makes Zuckerman psychology jumbled and disordered.

For example, Mrs. Zuckerman is a woman "redressing historical grievances, righting intolerable wrongs, changing the tragic course of Jewish history" (Roth, 1985: 447). On the other hand, As a mother, Mrs. Zuckerman is also a devout Jew who preaches about the holocaust and Jewish history. She is a "woman whose writings otherwise consisted of recipes on index cards, several thousand thank-you notes" (Roth, 1985: 447). Furthermore, his father Zuckerman is also a votary who thinks that his son's writings are contemptful of the Jews. Endeavoring to discontinue Zuckerman's writing is an important incident.

Although Zuckerman seems to be the protagonist, Lonoff is more prominently depicted in the novel. Lonoff has the ability to see all incidents from a different perspective, which Zuckerman wants to have. In one chapter, using stream of consciousness, Zuckerman says, "Virtuous reader, if you think that after intercourse all animals are sad, try masturbating on the daybed in E. I. Lonoff's study and see how you feel when it's over" (Roth, 1985: 112). Unlike Lonoff, all the novel's characters believe the Jewish migration was destiny from which no one can escape. According to them, when a person migrates anywhere, there is no way back: "You got away from the purges – and Babel didn't. you got away from Palestine and the homeland. You got away from Brookline and the relatives. You got away from New York" (Roth, 1985: 50).

On the other hand, "Lonoff quite properly responds to Zuckerman: 'Well, the Jew who got away didn't get away altogether'" (Alter, 1986: 272). In this sense, we can render that he is preferred to be Zuckerman's ideal author/person.

Zuckerman is also a symbolic character who represents not only a reliable Jew but also a realistic individual. His reality sometimes shuttles between Roth himself and the protagonist. In fact, Zuckerman tries to be a realist writer whose characters are not ideal individuals, even if they represent his relatives or friends. The critic Greenberg (1997: 495) juxtaposes Lonoff's features:

...a writer who will replace individualism, self-referentiality, instinct, and transgression, not with Lonoff's excessive restraint and detachment, but on a more universal order, with an experience of history, necessity, pain, and moral anguish. Ironically, he accomplishes this vision by an uninhibited invention that violates the memory of a Jewish saint. (Greenberg, 1997: 495)

In this respect, it can be said that Zuckerman's family, rather than his society, is against his writing, especially the idea of embarrassing Jewish characters who resemble his family members. For instance, his brother blames Zuckerman for killing his parents by writing *Carnovsky*, which is covered later. His family forces him not to write what he thinks, thereby confusing him.

III. ZUCKERMAN UNBOUND

In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman becomes a famous writer, having penned the novel *Carnovsky*, whose protagonist has the same name. Zuckerman describes nothing about *Carnovsky* except its impact on his society and family. not only does his family resist his lifestyle but also society ridicules Zuckerman because he lives as a poor man, despite having earned \$1 million from his book. society is thus added to his constraint list. In other words, living so differently from others is a manifestation of himself toward others. In existentialist way, Zuckerman proves his existence.

For instance, whenever Zuckerman gets on a bus, there is always a murmuring: "He's the guy who wrote *Carnovsky*. Didn't you read about it in the papers? He just made a million bucks and he's taking a bus" (Roth, 1985: 185). The problem is not only the money Zuckerman gets:

While he was walking through the park, a nicely dressed East Side mother out with her baby and her dog stepped into his path and said, "You need love, and you need it all the time. I feel sorry for you." (Roth, 1985: 189)

Zuckerman exposes such sentiments all the time: The compassion of others' distresses him very much.

On the other hand, Zuckerman possesses an unhealthy personality. Having no social life and no social activities, Zuckerman does not enjoy life. He also has no friends. In the novel, those who speak to him are his readers or employees. Sometimes

the people around him warn about his lifestyle. For example, one of his employees suggests, "You've thrown all that professor-shit precisely where it belongs – now enjoy a real man's life. And this time with a certified woman" (Roth, 1985: 257). Likewise, another character recounts,

"What do you do then? No shelters, no entertainment, and on top of your ordinary tax, Johnson's surcharge. Pardon my saying it, but if this is really so, Mr. Zuckerman, Uncle Sam should get down on his knees and kiss your ass. (Roth, 1985: 225)

Zuckerman is also, with no difficulty, influenced by the people around him. Frequently changing his mind, the protagonist discovers a weakness for certain person or activities, an indication of his psychological derangement. From this perspective, Ravvin (1997: 62) emphasizes the shame of his past and instability of preference, whether he is a Jew or not:

Zuckerman himself is overwhelmed by the misdirections, the inconclusiveness, of his encounter with Olga and her candy box full of thick waxed papers. He is ultimately bedevilled by the past and ashamed of his nostalgic desire for a return to origins.

Furthermore, when one of Zuckerman's readers becomes a fan, he is shocked and does not know how to react. When the fan thanks him, he is surprised and says, "Thank me? For what?" The first time in the six weeks that it had occurred to Zuckerman to pretend that he was another person entirely. He was learning" (Roth, 1985: 192). Having a normal reaction to his fan leads to hard situations for Zuckerman. Hence, as Greenberg (1997: 499) points out, "He realizes he cannot fashion an escape route into either tragic universal humanism or pure self-invention." This dilemma has trapped Zuckerman between reality and the fantasy he has created in his world.

The most important theme in *Zuckerman Unbound* is his father's death at the end of the novel. Although Zuckerman has a deficient relationship with his father, when he hears his father's last word, *bastard*, he is devastated; the Jew hears that he has no roots or biological family: "Added to the obsessive guilt feelings over his parents was another traumatic injury" (Harap, 1987: 149). He also has psychological problems adapting to society and his milieu, disconnected from region, religion, and family. His brother, Henry, thinks that Zuckerman is the cause of his father's death by writing *Carnovsky*: "Henry charges Nathan with killing their parent by writing 'that book', the liberated Carnovsky, and with believing like the bastard he is that fiction doesn't have consequences" (Miller, 1989: 135). In this sense, Zuckerman mental disabilities are increased:

As mentioned above, in *Zuckerman Unbound* the protagonist—now a well-known writer himself—is cursed by his father from the latter's

deathbed, leaving Zuckerman "no longer any man's son" (p. 224), thereby ending the novel on a profoundly negative note. And these fundamental disruptions continue to haunt Zuckerman in *The Anatomy Lesson*. (Searles, 1985: 33)

Roth consciously has the protagonist metamorphose to find himself and attain his ideal characteristics. Calling the novel a *Bildungsroman*, as aforementioned, Roth creates a world in which Zuckerman is ripened by dilemmas, obstacles, and contradictions. Roth is, in fact, proud of being a Jewish and has no problems with Jewish society. Parrish (2000) regards as a methodical procedure applied to the protagonist:

Roth both subjects Zuckerman to a systematic deconstruction of his assumptions about the making and unmaking of cultural identity and at the same time encourages the reader to confront the cultural consequences of Zuckerman's commitment to the infinite possibilities of self-transformation. (2000)

In this respect, in *Zuckerman Bound*, Zuckerman succumbs to further social constraints from not only his Jewish society but also his milieu. In addition, his father's last word for him, *bastard*, makes him more confused and shocked and he later loses his mother and his brother, Henry, blames him for their parents' fate. Under such conditions, one cannot expect him to have a normal attitude or psychological makeup. Social constraints limit his life and make it harder.

IV. THE ANATOMY LESSON

The Anatomy Lesson possesses the most depressive incidents of *Zuckerman Bound*. After he loses his parents, Zuckerman decides to be a doctor. He whiles away his time before finally enrolling in a university in his forties. Such an act can be regarded as a kind of escape from his psychology and society: "Without a father and a mother and a homeland, he was no longer a novelist. No longer a son, no longer a writer" (Roth, 1985: 446). From this perspective, the idea of being a normal character is unthinkable. Ravvin (1997: 61) clarifies:

Zuckerman begins to question his own motivations for undertaking his odyssey of retrieval. He wonders if he is trapped in a familiar pattern of return and rebellion, a struggle between the urge to affirm and to abandon his filial love.

In this novel, Roth is more concerned about Zuckerman's inner world than with social impellents. There are many exemplifications in the novel of his mentality. Instead of endeavoring to be himself, Zuckerman behaves as if he were another person. "Through his prism glasses he followed our President's chicanery – the dummy gestures, the satanic sweating, the screwy dazzling lies" (Roth, 1985: 416). In Roth's words, the reader finds sarcasm and a foreshadowing. Roth is a talented author who uses pricking features in his novels.

Zuckerman's permanent headache is also prominent theme in the novel. According to Zuckerman, it gives the right of conviction: For example,

What if pain was offering Zuckerman the best deal he'd ever had, a way out of what he should never have got into? The right to be stupid. The right to be lazy. The right to be no one and nothing" (Roth, 1985: 443).

On the other hand, Zuckerman's suffering in *Zuckerman Bound* is at its highest level, compared to the other novels. The adjectives he uses for himself encapsulate the situation: "Either way, Appel didn't minimize the suffering. Alienated, rootless, anguished, bewildered, brooding, tortured, powerless" (Roth, 1985: 477). Alienated and lonely, Zuckerman, attempts to find his own character, or himself. Even the inattentive reader can easily understand this.

One can say that Zuckerman succeeds in reconciling with his Jewish identity. Instead feeling angry or alienated, he accepts that he is a Jew, like his parents and those of his milieu. When he argues with one of the characters, he states, "But I'm not Jesus, Gandhi, St. Francis, or you. I'm a petty, raging, vengeful, unforgiving Jew." (Roth, 1985: 502). Continuing in his conversation, Zuckerman talks about his writing just as the traditional Jewish people in his surroundings do: "If you intended to stay, then type what I've written, because it cost me bloody hell in my aching joints to write it" (Roth, 1985: 502). In this sense, one can assert that Roth / Zuckerman has completed his personal efflorescence in the novel, since Roth encapsulates the novel as a *Bildungsroman* at the beginning of the novel, as mentioned.

To sum up, *Zuckerman Bound* can be considered Roth's most down-and-out novel. His parents' death and the blame placed on him for their death by his brother naturally lead to mental disabilities, psychological descents and ascents, and moral dilemmas. On the other hand, these incidents cause his metamorphosis. His transformation requires suffering. Parrish (2000) summarizes the novel as follows:

He has no more stories to tell about himself except through others. Consequently, he can write about himself not as an artist striving after the madness of art affronted by philistine Jews incapable of understanding his task, but as the almost anonymous member of a particular cultural enclave that acted out a particular cultural story. From this perspective, heretofore present but unemphasized in Roth's fiction, the protagonist's story matters to the extent that it reflects the transformation of the group of which he is a part. (Parrish, 2000)

V. PRAGUE ORGY

The last novel in the Zuckerman stories is the *Prague Orgy*, which deals with Zuckerman's journey to Prague upon his friend request to take his father's manuscripts to be published there. Shechner (1989: 229) summarizes the novel as follows: "What saves Zuckerman's hegira from being just tourism is the constant testing of the new world against the self and the self against the world." During Zuckerman's visit, he confronts various obstacles and is finally deported by the police for taking the manuscripts to the United States. Because this novel deals with (the characters of) Prague rather than the protagonist, he becomes a well-rounded character in the novel.

VI. CONCLUSION

Scrutinizing the four novels of *Zuckerman Bound*, one can easily see that Roth's novel possesses autobiographical characteristics. Shechner asks himself when closing the book, the reader requests the answers of "the question of whether Nathan Zuckerman or Peter Tarnopol or David Kepesh or Alex Portnoy is or is not Philip Roth" (1989: 223). In another words, Porter (1995: 98) asks, "How close is the narration to the truth?" Roth remains ambivalent in response to these questions.

Furthermore, the contradictions and conflict created by society are also a prominent factor in the novel. Representing both an American and a Jew, Zuckerman is a product of his American society, in which he is stuck between Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Robinson (2000: 95) attributes it with his permanent Jewish writing: "Critical consciousness comes from being both inside and outside the marginalized community, and it is replaying that self-contradiction that keeps Roth (and Zuckerman) repeating the same stories." Then again, for Kaufman (2009: 44), it is a kind of chemical bond: Intertwining Jewish and American society, Zuckerman's figure "would continue to reflect upon the vicissitudes of American life and literature until his death." Finally, Stanley (2005) alleges that the author endeavors to understand the America and American identity: "Roth is interested in exploring the rhetoric of American identity through an overarching narrative, but his narrative foregrounds the disintegration of myths and symbols that purported to 'heal the wounds of time.'"

In sum up, Roth's protagonist, Zuckerman, encounters contradictions and conflict while reading his novels. The situation ends with him feeling responsible for his parents' death. The crisis makes him depressed and confused; however, he manages to come out of his depression and become healthy again. *Zuckerman Bound* is a novel whose protagonist attains his efflorescence.

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