

Tribhuvan University

Pursuit of Social Identity in Roth's *The Humbling*

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by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled,
“Pursuit of Social Identity in Roth’s *The Humbling*” is my own original work
carried out as a Master’s student at the Department of English at Ratna Rajya Laxmi
Campus except to the extent that assistance from others in the thesis design and
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All sources used for the thesis have been fully and properly cited. It contains
no material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for
the award of any other degree at Tribhuvan University or
any other educational institution, except where due
acknowledgement is made in the thesis.

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05 April 2017

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Pursuit of Social Identity in Roth’s *The Humbling*” submitted to the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus by Sunil Pandey has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

The thesis focuses on Roth's *The Humbling* that portrays the life of Simon Axler, the last of the best of the classical American stage actors. After losing his magic of performance, Axler feels like a lunatic and looks like an idiot as he enters into the stage; his confidence has waned and performance has drained away. Something fundamental has vanished. Following salient postulations of scholarship of social identity theory, especially social categorization, identity differentiation of Ashforth and Fred Mael, and role-based identity by Burke and Stets the research tries to explain predicament of aging theater artist while finding a social space.

Drawing upon the protagonist's haunting memories of the past that significantly determine the present struggle of the Alexer, the research assesses that the moments and events Alxer recounts in life and his attempts to suicide and to maintain the life even after knowing his banal failure are the signals that he wants to discover his existence. The novel is not a mere collection of the protagonist's life. The research tries to characterize the collections as the properties of his life struggle; moreover, it aims at showing that the novel chooses as it focuses the bewildered losses of an ageing actor, a man who, on discovering that he has become a self pretence grounded in nothing.

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Loss and Quest of Social Identity in *The Humbling*

The Humbling presents the life of Simon Axler, the last of the best of the classical American stage actors. Roth describes Simon Axler as an aged man who lost his magic of acting suddenly and becomes weak and lonely. Instead of the confidence that he is going to be wonderful, he knows he is going to fail. He has already failed in the performance of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Roth describes the failure as "His *Macbeth* was ludicrous and everyone who saw it said as much, and so did many who didn't" (4). The whole thing is over for Simon Axler. He has lost his magic, his talent, and his promise. "His Falstaff and Peer Gynt and Vanya, all his great roles, are melted into air, into thin air. When he goes onstage he feels like a mad man and looks like an idiot". (2) His self-assurance in his powers has worn out. He envisions people laughing at him. Something fundamental has vanished. His wife has gone, his audience has left him. His agent cannot persuade him to make a comeback. Roth presents the protagonist at this age trying to discover the meaning of his life and his true self.

The opening lines suggest Axler has, suddenly and inexplicably, lost the ability to act: "He'd lost his magic. The impulse was spent. He'd never failed in the theatre, everything he had done had been strong and successful, and then the terrible thing happened: he couldn't act". (1) His performance was the only thing that helped him identify in his community. Now he has lost his magic of performance. Now, he is without performance, and without his identity. Over the next few pages, we learn more about Axler's career, and his initial doomed attempts to revive it, but nothing about what might have caused his problems. Nor does Axler seem remotely interested in finding out; he simply accepts his professional demise and gives in to despair. His wife leaves him (not

that we've learned anything about her) and, feeling suicidal, Axler checks himself into a psychiatric unit.

Having a particular social identity means as being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. In contrast having a particular role identity means as acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with the role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility. Herein lies an important distinction between group- and role based identities. "The basis of social identity is in the uniformity of perception and action among group members, while the basis of role identity resides in the differences in perceptions and actions that accompany a role as it relates to counter roles". (Stets and Burke 226)

Axler becomes a lonely figure. At the time of luxury and at the time of happiness and harmony he becomes not Axler only. But at the time of crisis and conflict he compels to be a singular figure, "the singularity of existence comes to light at the moment of conflict". (Jaspers 41) So Axler is now in his individual identity. He becomes a lonely figure in his alien world. This causes Axler to lose other things. In his despair, his exhausted wife moves out. His will to live flees, and Roth doesn't hesitate to introduce us to that famous theatrical shotgun. But like Hamlet, Axler can't quite build up the courage — or perhaps it's the right stage direction — to do the job. He instead ends up in a clinic.

Here Axler who is a public actor and has his public identity and meaning. He becomes a public figure a celebrity who rarely has his private life. In course of doing and fulfilling his duty he has lost and forgot who he really is. But with the loss of his identity he becomes a lonely figure and only a man who is related to himself. Roth writes about his loneliness:

Once alone and in the room as signed him, he sat down on the bed and remembered role after role that he had played with absolute assurance since he had become a professional in his early twenties- what had destroyed his confidence now? What was he doing in his hospital room? A self-travesty had come into being who did not exist before, a self-travesty grounded in nothing, and he was that self-travesty, and how had it happened? Was it purely a passage of time bringing on decay and collapse? What is a manifestation of aging? His appearance was still impressive. (10)

So a person has his identity public and private identity. The private or the individual identity is related with the essence of life. It has the real meaning of life. With the collapse of the typicality and the vitality people see the real face of human being which is related with nothingness. After Axler faces his aging he is playing in his own parody. He goes on acting various roles in his lifetime and now life has making his own parody that is the meaning and the essence he has received in life.

In identity discourse, the term self often refers to a warm sense or a warm feeling that something is "about me" or "about us." Reflecting on oneself is both a common activity and a mental feat. It requires that there is an "I" that can consider an object that is "me." The term self includes both the actor who thinks ("I am thinking") and the object of thinking ("about me"). Now the loss of his magic compels him to taste the failure in each and every field as he has not so much charm as earlier. Earlier when he has not lost talent and all kinds of charm he had. No he is alone; he is an actor but with the loss of his subjective identity he now becomes truly an individual. Earlier he was not alone. Whole world was with him but now he becomes a singular figure; only Axler. Roth puts clearly the taste of being lonely and the sufferings:

All that had worked to make him himself now worked to make him look like a lunatic. In the past when he was acting, he wasn't thinking about anything. What he did well he did out of instinct. Now he is thinking about everything, and everything spontaneous and vital was killed – he tried to control it with thinking and instead he destroyed it. All right, Axler told himself, he had hit a bad period. (2)

Moreover, the actor both is able to think and is aware of doing so. As the philosopher John Locke famously asserted, "I think, therefore I am. Awareness of having thoughts matters. Another way to denote these three aspects (thinking, being aware of thinking, and taking the self as an object for thinking) is to use the term reflexive capacity". (Leary and Tagney 71) Rather than attempt to distinguish between the mental content (me) and the aspects of the mental capacity of thinking (I), modern use of the term self includes all these. So the theme of Axler as a merely thinking object, unable to socially act can be discerned in the following passage as expressed by Philip Roth in *The Humbling*.

They had given him one medication for depression that didn't agree with him, then a second, and finally a third that caused no intolerable side effects, but whether it did him any good, he could not tell. He could not believe that his improvement has anything to do with pills or with psychiatric consolation or group therapy or art therapy, all of which felt like empty exercises. What continued to frighten him, as the day of his discontinued to frighten him, as the day of his discharged approached, was nothing that was happening to him seemed to have to do with anything else. (16)

Here Axler's futile existence is the exploration the individuality and the essence of human life. He forwards his protagonist Axler in search of the meaning of human life.

In Social identity theory, "a person has not one, personal self, but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national level of self". (Stets and Burke 222) Apart from the "level of self", an individual has multiple social identities. Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups. In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the "us" associated with any internalized group membership. This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual's unique attributes. Stets and Burke suggest in identity theory.

Self-categorization is equally relevant to the formation of one's identity, in which categorization depends upon a named and classified world. Among the class terms learned within a culture are symbols that are used to designate positions – the relatively stable, morphological components of social structure that are termed roles. Thus, like social identity theory, identity roles deals principally with the components of social structure that are termed roles. Thus, like social identity theory deals principally with the components of a structured society. Persons acting in the context of social structure name one another and themselves in the sense of recognizing one another as occupants of positions. (Bruke224)

As Stets and Burke point out, Axler feels that he has lost his social role, the artistic talent has worn out and he no longer can entertain the audiences and has to live a life of loss.

When Axler loses his artistic talent and vitality he becomes depressed and feels loneliness

in his life. He now realizes that human life is meaningless. He becomes psychologically weak and fragile and finds himself as a broken man. His failure to code his self-categorization with actors and actress Roth describe in the following way:

They became actress with Axler, they became the heroines of their own lives. Few stage actors could speak and be spoken to the way he could, yet he could do neither anymore. The sound that used to go into his ear felt as though it were going out and every word he uttered seemed acted instead of spoken. His initial source in his acting was in what he heard, his response to what heard was at the core of it, and if he couldn't listen, couldn't hear, he had nothing to go on. (4)

Here, Axler is contemplating about his existence in the contemporary society as the marginalized person and he condemns his state of being old and alone in this alien world.

The only role available to him was the role of playing a role. Axler as an actor represents us all; he has played so many roles that little remains of himself. Now the show is over, and Axler struggles to rediscover himself as an individual. He once rose to dizzying heights but now wallows in an emotional puddle as he struggles to launch into a different role. Life itself is something of a theatre. To get on, we all need a good role to play. The people around him are also actors. His current partner, once happy as a lesbian, is now in another role with a heterosexual male; a woman who was cast adrift after years in a steady relationship with a woman who then decided to turn into a new identity as a man. To do this Pegeen's former lover takes steroids to fulfill her role play. This leaves Pegeen with the opportunity to try a new identity for herself in a relationship with a man, a role she has never before undertaken but subsequently abandons in search of something new. Axler's first wife was also a performer, a dancer. Once over divorced husbands and

children, she finds herself unable to continue in her role with Axel and withdraws from the marriage.

Axler suddenly finds he doesn't have the vitality of being actor it in him any longer. He is alive, and can go through the motions, but there's little more to what he does on the stage: "His talent was dead". He tries to work through it a few times, with disastrous results, and finally gives up, recognizing: "I can no longer make a play real for people. I can no longer make a role real for myself". (38) Axler is unable to find a proper role in society to keep his existence. According to social identity theory, the individual identity is best preserved by the interaction and negotiation the individuals perform in social arena. About role creating identity, Stets and Burke argue:

The role-based identities, some form of interaction and negotiation are usually involved as one performs a role. Relations are reciprocal rather than parallel. Different perspectives are involved among the persons in the group as they negotiate and perform their respective roles, creating micro social structures within the group. Thus a role-based identity expresses not the uniformity of perceptions and behaviors that accompanies a grouped based identity but interconnected uniqueness. (Stets et al 227)

However, the emphasis is not on the similarity with others in the same role, but on the individuality and interrelatedness with others in counter roles in the group or interaction context. By maintaining the meanings, expectations and resources associated with a role, role identities maintain the complex interrelatedness of social structures.

Moreover, during his brief stay, he gains some comfort from chatting with his fellow patients. On his release, he returns to his country mansion and spends his days doing nothing. His agent pays him a visit and tries to persuade him to return to the stage (their

tedious conversation takes up several pages). But Axler is adamant: "I've lost it, I have no talent, I can't do anything". (28)

His life was built entirely on artifice, but he finds artifice is suddenly beyond his reach. What's left is grim reality -- including the grim reality of aging. Axler is married, but his wife flees as soon as his failure becomes evident. Humbled by his failure, the loss of his wife is a more sudden and resounding blow; tempted to take the easiest, desperate escape -- to blow his brains out -- he still has enough sense to look for some other escape:

But once she'd left he didn't make it through the first hour alone -- didn't even go up the stairs toward the attic -- before he had phoned his doctor and asked him to arrange for his admission to a psychiatric hospital that very day. (10)

Axler loses his identity of a profound actor and becomes a lonely figure among the absurdities and meaninglessness of life. Axler is married, but his wife flees as soon as his failure becomes evident. Humbled by his failure, the loss of his wife is a more sudden and resounding blow; tempted to take the easiest, desperate escape to blow his brains out he still has enough sense to look for some other escape. Axler tries to seek the existence of his life. So here his talent is lost, his wife leaves him and he becomes alone. But in the middle of such absurdities he endeavors to live. He tries to search the meaning of life. But finally he gets the essence of the entire life that is the death and the inevitable things which always comes in front of every person. As John Erickson argues, "Consider the person who identifies worth or self with another person, a role, a profession, or a way of life. If the identification of self is broken, *i.e.*, divorce, death, physical injury, being fired, or loss of interest, the meaning for self is lost". (Erickson 69) Though he loses his self and the subjective identity he searches the meaning of life by seeking the method of living and avoiding the pains and frustration by going to the hospital for various therapies.

Whatever absurdities he meets in his life, Simon searches the meaning of life. He quest his real identity and the subjective truth. When he loses his artistic magic, he tries hard to maintain it to exist as a profound actor. But he cannot exist as a best actor and loses his audience. When he becomes lonely and realizes that he is now only Axler and has lost his public identity, another thing happens making him frustrated and causing him to visit the hospital to cure his traumatic condition by various therapies. He has to visit various psychiatrists like Dr. Farr who questions about various things of his life. The doctor describes about the dreams of patients we can understand that human life is a futile act but we should keep seeking the meaning by continuing it. As Roth writes:

The psychiatrist he saw, Dr. Farr, questioned whether what had befallen him could not truly be because less, and in their twice-weekly sessions asked him to examine the circumstance of his life preceding the sudden onset of what the doctor described as "a universal nightmare. " By this he meant that the actor's misfortune in the theatre – going out on the stage and finding himself unable to perform, the shock of that loss – was the content of troubling dreams any number of people had about themselves, people who, unlike Simon Axler, were not professional actors. (11)

Axler becomes sick and is compelled to contemplate on suicide because he cannot overcome the absurdities of life and ultimately chooses death. The universal nightmare described by the doctor here is the universal truth which is the ultimate death. But before choosing the universal truth and the essence he tries his best to search the existence by various methods. Choosing death here means failing to belong to any sort of social category.

According to Hogg and Abrams, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group. A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out group. In the novel, the protagonist actually does not fall in a particular group but still he belongs to a group, the group of artists. However, this group does not prove his existence sufficiently so that he could feel comfortable in the social surroundings. He belongs to a social category, that is, the artists, which is in the crisis of personal recognition in the society. He tries to belong to a group but cannot.

Sitting there amid his books, he tried to remember plays in which there are a character who commits suicide. Hedda in Hedda Gabler, Julie in Miss Julie, Phaedra in Hippolytus, Jocasta in Oedipus the King, almost everyone in Antigone, Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, Joe Keller in All My Sons, Don Parritt in The Iceman Cometh, Simon Stimson in Our Town, Ophelia in Hamlet, Othello in Othello, Cassius and Brutus in Julius Caesar, Goneril in King Lear, Antony, Cleopatra, Enobarbus, and Charmian in Antony and Cleopatra, the grandfather in Awake and Sing!, Ivanov in Ivanov, Konstantin in The Seagull. And this astonishing list was only of the plays in which he had at one time performed. There were more, many more. What was remarkable was the frequency with which suicide enters into drama. (38-39)

However, the ultimate search, trying to belong to some kind of categories, ends up in suicidal contemplation.

His wife leaves him and he now becomes totally alone. But now in the midst of extreme condition he again endeavors to gain back his existence strengthening his relation with Pegeen. He goes on searching the meaning in life which is futile and absurd. Even though there are various absurdities in his life, Axler has to accept the absurdities. He should accept the aging and the failure. But he cannot these absurdities of life which is the real essence and the reality of human life.

This absurdity can loss of existence can be seen his social, familial and sexual life. This loss of existence gives rise to the fact that he fails to take a responsible role as demanded and required by the society and social context. Simon and Pegeen begin an affair despite Pegeen's having lived as a lesbian for the previous 17 years. Louise is furious that Pegeen has broken off their relationship and begins stalking her. Months later, Louise calls Pegeen's parents in Lansing, Michigan, to tell them that their daughter is now sleeping with Axler. Pegeen is distressed that her parents have learned about the relationship she wanted kept secret. Her father, Asa, tells her he disapproves because of the age difference but Simon suspects he merely envies his professional success. Asa directs Community Theater in Michigan.

The situation described above, according to Tajfel and Turner, relates to the concept of social identity theory that explains part of a person's concept of self comes from the groups to which that person belongs. An individual does not just have a personal selfhood, but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups. At this point, his failed relationship with Pegeen's signifies his inability to for a self in relationship with other groups. A person might act differently in varying social contexts according to the groups they belong to, which might include a sports team they follow, their family, their country of nationality, and the neighborhood they live in, among many other possibilities.

Two weeks later, Pegeen ends their relationship, telling Axler she made a mistake. He accuses her of leaving him to be with Tracy and believes Pegeen's parents have turned her against him. He calls her parents, shouting at them in an angry tirade. After the call, Axler kills himself with his shotgun. Sartre states: "existentialism will never consider man as an end, because man is constantly in the making". (52) With the death, Axler is making a choice. He is making a sense of meaning in his life. Here for Axler redemption from all the earthly life becomes the ultimate reality and the meaning of life.

The twenty-six day stay does him so good, if only to reconcile him more or less to going on without continuing to act. He also makes friends of sorts with one of the other patients, a woman who was unable to deal with what she discovered about her husband; later in the book, she finally finds a way to deal with it, to the surprise and shock (and also admiration) of Axler. Unable and unwilling to expose himself on the stage again, Axler lives withdrawn and alone. His life is only upended again when he meets the daughter of some old acting friends of his, even though.

It was not likely -- particularly as Pegeen Mike Stapleford had lived as a lesbian since she was twenty-three -- that when she was forty 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. Throughout his whole ordeal, Axler is repeatedly drawn to suicide. Less solution than rash act it nevertheless appeals to him, a proper final curtain (and a way to get out of whatever mess he's in).

Next the protagonist lacks the active role of sexual power, losing his heterosexual life, and thus, failing to belong strictly to neither to heterosexual group nor the lesbian group. In fact, the majority of the novel describes the affair between Axler and Pegeen which is read as little more than fantasies of sexual power. Axler does suffer from a

fleeting moment of doubt about the wisdom of his relationship with Pegeen: "What if he proved to be no more than a brief male intrusion into a lesbian life?" (66) Now that Axler can no longer make the imagined real, he needs must find an outlet for himself, or else die. A woman, the improbably named Pegeen Mike, arrives equally improbably in his life and a relationship begins.

How Pegeen manages all that is something of a mystery -- Axler ascribes it to her potent sexuality, but Roth has difficulties convincingly conveying that. Axler does not succumb too quickly, either, even acknowledging her parents' attempts to talk some sense into her, especially regarding the age gap, but ultimately she comes to mean a great deal to him.

Why so improbable? Well, Pegeen is forty, the daughter of old acting friends of Axler's, and a committed lesbian who has been 'out' for two decades. She drives over to visit Axler one day, and then soon they are lovers, with Pegeen going so far as to compare Axler's penis positively to the fingers and dildos she has used quite happily for twenty years with lovers and serious girlfriends. Add to that some 'feminine' clothing, a new haircut, and a round of makeup, and suddenly Pegeen goes from butch to beautiful, and Axler experiences oceans of sex. By which he tries to seek his existence.

There is a fundamental theme here – that the abandonment of his roles leads to a kind of suicide of identity. Roth marks this by listing a long stream of plays where the main character commits suicide. The list is formidable. Axler refusing to continue acting is committing not only career suicide but generating the death of his only real purpose. He is an empty vessel because he emptied the vessel that made his acting so real.

Roth demonstrates the dangers of sticking to any one role for too long. Axler is in therapy and meets a woman who clings to him for emotional support. This woman suffered

a breakdown after catching her second husband interfering with her child; she is unable to confront her husband over the issue. To do so would require an abandonment of her safe identity as a contented wife. She has already suffered the trauma of a breakup and feels paralysed to act. Her inability to confront reality brings on awful consequences.

"Suicide is the role you write for yourself, " he told them. "You inhabit it, and you enact it. All carefully staged – where they will find you – but one performance only".

(17)Then Roth comments on the act of suicide and its relevance. What was remarkable was the frequency with which suicide enters into drama, as though it were a formula fundamental to the drama... Dropping the role play leads to a form of nakedness. Without a definite role to play, we are faced with a bare and honest individual. Axler mentions twice that the first time he met Pegeen was when she was suckling at the breast. Here he alludes to the bare essential truth of a person before the role playing commences. Later as Pegeen performs in bed with a strap-on, Roth writes, "it was as if she were wearing a mask for her genitals". (113) So here the naked being represents the essential character that emerges from a relationship – any adornment constitutes the role playing that we all must undertake in our relationships. When the two are naked, bare truths tend to pop out.

Roth's point is that Axler has still not regained his touch. His suicide turns out to be as deeply flawed a performance as his failed portrayal of Macbeth earlier in the book. His death too is a piece of failed acting. If I'm right that this was the effect Roth was aiming for, that's something much harder for an author to bring off than two lesbians having sex with a man.

Review, Reception and Critical Assessment of *The Humbling*

'*The Humbling*' a novel by Philip Roth that portrays the protagonist Simon Axler loses the magic stage performing in the theatre. He doesn't know why this happened, and

he suffers "colossal" breakdown as a result he is falling apart; his wife leaves him, he finds himself totally alone. He thinks everything is over for him; audiences no longer belong to him, and they laugh at him. In the past when he was acting he wasn't thinking about anything, now he was thinking about everything and everything spontaneous and virtual was killed. The protagonist finds himself lost in social space without his proper recognition. This loss gives rise to the protagonist's complicated existence thereby further problematizing his identity and self. By drawing some definitive assumptions of social identity theory, the research assesses that the moments and events Axler recounts in life and his attempts to suicide, and to maintain the life even after knowing his banal failure. And it tries to answer why he tries to recover/discover his existence. By highlighting his struggles in life, the novel asserts that Axler is trying to sense the meaning of life and seeking existence in the world by remembering his past.

An identity is who or what a person is. The identity defines who the individuals are. It is a self-representation of interests, relationships, social activity of individuals. The sense of identity and belonging is impacted by various factors, including feelings, occupation, experiences, relationships, attitudes, and environment. The journey to find identity and belonging can often be a struggle, since the individuals constantly ask themselves: who am I? Who do others want them to be "themselves"? And 'where do individuals belong? Where do they fit in? This search for self or recognition in social space is conspicuous in the novel.

The 65-year old American actor seeks to maintain his life and counts his mistakes he committed and the choices he failed to choose. Faced with his failure as an actor, Simon Axler starts to play the role of his own demise. He even fails in the attempts to remarry; fall in love and have sex. Life might not be packaged in plots, but death can be an option,

he comes to realize. He rages against his dying age. The research tries to answer why this old man, Axler undergoes such remembrance and still tries to overcome the tough moments at present?

Instead of the certainty that Axler was going to be wonderful, he knew he was going to fail. He has already failed in the performance of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Roth describes as "His Macbeth was ludicrous and everyone who saw it said as much, and so did many who didn't". (4) Everything is over for Simon Axler. He has lost his magic, his talent, and his assurance. His Falstaff and Peer Gynt and Vanya, all his great roles, are melted into air, into thin air. When he goes onstage he feels like a lunatic and looks like an idiot. His confidence in his powers has drained away. He imagines people laughing at him. Something fundamental has vanished. His wife has gone; his audience has left him.

In the present world, the politics cannot be separated from identity politics, and recognition and culture keep constructing and deconstructing identities. In literature, these identities have become very influential in determining the personal life of people, and perhaps it is doing no good either to perform well or not. The actor of character plays the important role in the identity of the character than the aesthetic quality of his/her work. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that a creative actor would start to play with a conscious social, political, local or whatever commitment he/she might have. We are told that the process of acting is so complex and mysterious that it is not possible to know whether the act of creation is so autonomous as to transcend the worldly classifications. The actor who should play may not themselves have the answers; and what they say about their works may not necessarily be accepted as the whole truth. They would naturally have their personal favor and biases, but normally, they would perhaps avoid any conscious application of their power as creative acting to either profess personal beliefs.

The novel has instilled a great deal of upheavals in the minds of literary scholars and critics since it was published in 2009 in Great Britain. The novel has been perceived from different angles. Commenting in Roth's shift in focus and theme, Damian Kelleher, in *Curled up with a Good Book*, remarks:

The Humbling is a book best taken as a brick in the wall of Roth's novels on death, dying and the aging process. There are aspects of it that work best when compared with *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost*, but there is much that stands on its own feet. It is hard to see this novel as a major work on the scale of his great American trilogy, but it seems increasingly that Roth has turned away from the panoramic view to focus on the singular, the indivisible self. *The Humbling* is very good, but it is not a starting point to Roth's oeuvre. (n.pag.)

Kelleher in his review perceives a change in the Roth's theme and aspect of writing novel. According to him, here he has turned into to focus the singular and indivisible self of the protagonist. He further adds that it is customary for Roth when building the characters he will spend the remainder of his novel tearing down. *The Humbling* is by no means his first novel in which the protagonist loses everything, or near enough to as it doesn't matter.

Another critic, Rayner, the writer of *A Bright and Guilty Place*, in *Los Angeles Times*, views that the novel deals with the same questions of life and death as usual. He argues ideas of tragic pleasure and comic pain have always been inextricably bound in Roth's works. He further notes:

The Humbling poses much the same questions about how life's inexplicable and unexpected turns affect character, except what's at stake here is no longer the loss of innocence. Faced with his failure as an actor, Simon Axler

starts to play the role of his own demise. Life might not be packaged in plots, but death can be, he comes to realize. He rages against his dying light but really blames only himself, disgraced, feeble little being that he was, a lesbian's thirteen-month mistake. (n.pag.)

According to him, readers, according to their taste, may find the sex scenes in *The Humbling* shocking or arousing or just plain silly. On the one hand, Roth's 30th book deals with themes that his work, especially his recent work, has made familiar.

Another critic, M.A. Orthofer, in *Complete Reviews*, negatively approaches the novel. He comments on the way of writing. He says the novel has been written soft-handedly and lacks a critical depth. He reaches to the extent that it is an exercise piece. In his words:

The Humbling is written with an almost off-hand ease; no matter how absurd things get and, once or twice, they get very absurd indeed – Roth smoothly draws the reader along. Its brevity (and, ultimately, lack of sufficient depth) makes *The Humbling* feel like an exercise-piece – but still one by a master. There's enough richness here -some well-executed scenes, a confident narrative flow- that makes it worth reading. But it is a very odd story, and a very odd take on aging and the losses that aging brings with it. (n.pag.)

Though the different critics have claimed the novel and its situations differently, my purpose in this novel is to observe the character's struggle to form his social and personal identity to maintain his existence in the society. When his artistic aura is lost, he grapples to search an authentic space in social category and lead asocial that fits with his society and people around him.

According to social identity theory and self-categorization theory "individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, who encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and a collective self, which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong". (Stets et al 224) In particular, this collective self, or social identity, entails information such as the extent to which individuals feel committed or attached to a specific group as well as the status and characteristics of this group relative to other social categories in addition to the personal and social identities, individuals can also conceptualize themselves as a constituent of all humanity, referred to as identities. Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past-what used to be true of one, the present-what is true of one now, or the future-the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become .

In common discourse, the term self often refers to a warm sense or a warm feeling that something is "about me" or "about us." Reflecting on oneself is both a common activity and a mental feat. It requires that there is an "I" that can consider an object that is "me." The term self includes both the actor who thinks ("I am thinking") and the object of thinking ("about me"). Moreover, the actor both is able to think and is aware of doing so. As the philosopher John Locke famously asserted, "I think, therefore I am". (Locke 71)

The social identities of individuals are not static but evolve progressively over time. In particular, individuals implicitly construct a multitude of social categories. For each of these social categories, such as women, footballer, or conservative, as well as many classes that cannot be designated with simple labels, individuals identify common beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, referred to as prototypes. Specifically, they construct

these social categories and characterize the prototypes to differentiate their own group from other collectives. Once they can delineate their group unequivocally, individuals know which prototypes or norms to follow, curbing uncertainty and alleviating anxiety.

Some individuals demonstrate a fused identity, in which they feel their personal and social identities overlap, almost entirely. When these individuals receive feedback about themselves, it diverges from their expectations. In some instances, individuals internalize some of their social identities. That is, the norms and customs of one or more of their groups might become crucial to the personal identity of individuals. In these instances, when the personal identity of individuals is salient, the norms and customs of their social identity might become more prominent as well. Thus, at least sometimes, cues that activate the personal identity of individuals might activate their social identity as well.

There are three processes that create this in-group/out-group mentality: Social Categorization, Social Identification, and Social Comparison. First, we categorize people in order to understand and identify them. Some examples of social categories include black, white, professor, student, Republican, and Democrat. By knowing what categories we belong to, we can understand things about ourselves, and we can define appropriate behavior according to the groups that we and others belong to. An individual can belong to several groups at the same time.

Second, Social Identification, we adopt the identity of the group that we belong to, and we act in ways that we perceive members of that group act. For example, if you identify as an actor, you will most likely behave within the norms of acting. As a consequence of your identification with that group, you will develop emotional significance to that identification, and your self-esteem will be dependent on it. Finally, Social Comparison, after we categorize ourselves within a group and identify ourselves as

being members of that group, we tend to compare our group (the in-group) against another group (an out-group). To maintain your self-esteem, you and your group members will compare your group favorably against other ones. This helps explain prejudice and discrimination, since a group will tend to view members of competing groups negatively to increase self-esteem.

It is argued that (a) "social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons; (b) social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of out-groups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation; and (c) social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification. This perspective is applied to organizational socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations". (Ashforth et al 39)

Social classification serves two functions. First, it cognitively segments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others. A person is assigned the prototypical characteristics of the category to which he or she is classified. As suggested by the literature on stereotypes, however, such assignments are not necessarily reliable.

Second, social classification enables the individual to locate or define *him- or herself* in the social environment. According to social identity theory, "the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., bodily attributes, abilities, psychological

traits, interests) and a social identity encompassing salient group classifications. Social identification, therefore, is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate. For example, a woman may define herself in terms of the group(s) with which she classifies herself (I am a Canadian; I am a woman). She perceives herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group(s), and she perceives the fate of the group(s) as her own. As such, social identification provides a partial answer to the question, who am I?(Ashforth et al 21-22)

According to social identity theory, the individual defines him- or herself partly in terms of salient group memberships. Identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experience of its successes and failures. Group identification and favoritism tend to occur even in the absence of strong leadership or member interdependency, interaction, or cohesion. Identification is associated with groups that are distinctive, prestigious, and in competition with, or at least aware of, other groups, although it can be fostered by even random assignment to a group. Identification can persist tenaciously even when group affiliation is personally painful, other members are personally disliked, and group failure is likely. The concept of identification, however, describes only the cognition of oneness, *not* the behaviors and affect that may serve as antecedents or consequences of the cognition. "Identification induces the individual to engage in, and derive satisfaction from, activities congruent with the identity, to view him- or herself as an exemplar of the group, and to reinforce factors conventionally associated with group formation" (Ashforth et al 38). There are two further aspects of social identity that need to be understood.

The first is that it is simultaneously individual and social. On the one hand, my social identities – ‘I am a woman’, ‘I am a Scot’ or whatever speaks in a fundamental way to who I am in the world. But what any of these memberships mean cannot be reduced to my own or indeed anybody else’s individuality. Thus social identity provides a conduit through which society inhabits the subject. It provides substance to the notion of a socially structured field within the individual. It thereby explains how large numbers of people can act in coherent and meaningful ways, by reference to shared group norms, values and understandings rather than idiosyncratic beliefs.

(Turner 12)

Second, while there are clearly psychological dynamics associated with social identification, the act of defining oneself as a group member should not be seen as arising out of some individual need. In other words, there is nothing more basic about individual identities and individual processes than about social identities and social processes. Nor is individual identity somehow more ‘real’ and more important to the subject than social identity. As we know all too well, people can love, hate, kill or even die for their group.

At this point, it should be clear that social identities are much more than self-perceptions: they also have value and emotional significance. To the extent that we define ourselves in terms of a group membership, our sense of esteem attaches to the fate of the group (and hence the fate of fellow group members is pertinent to our own). However, the meanings and evaluations that we attach to our group memberships are necessarily comparative. Who we are is partly defined by reference to who we are not. To excel means to do better than the other. Putting these elements together, then it follows that we will try to distinguish the groups that we belong to from other groups and we will do so in a way

that is favorable to in-groups. We will seek positive group distinctiveness through differentiation between social groups along valued dimensions of comparison. This last clause is critical, but often overlooked.

Loss of Role

Simon Axler, the protagonist of *The Humbling*, is humbled several times over the course of this novella. Old age is part of it: old age is getting to him, wearing down his body -- his back gives him considerable trouble. When he has sex, he's reduced to the passive role of lying on his back and being mounted, and he sees it's likely he'll be in a wheelchair within a decade. However, it's the loss of "his magic" that really hits him hard. He has lost his role in theatre. This loss complicates his existence in taking social role, thus creating a crisis in social identity.

Roth's *The Humbling* is disturbing. It is profound and thoughtful reading on life and existence rather than on for a comic relief. It dramatizes a man, a classical American stage actor who is deprived of himself – he achieves nothing fascinating in his life. One can imagine Axler's withered interest to life from his suicidal thought: he contemplates, and advises his fellow patients that suicide is the only role one can write for oneself. And, Axler cannot write his role in drama of life to commit suicide. This is the tragedy of life he is facing.

Roth sketches a diminishing existence of Axler: his speech is slower; his memory is slower. Age can be seen as merely a speeding up of the slowing-down process, and Roth wishes to focus on what happens when life continues, but liveliness does not continue. The charm fades away. The impulse was spent. His talent was dead. His psychological problems with acting clearly relate to more general concerns about the conclusion of active life: his stage fright is a symptom of age fright, as it were.

The bleak conclusion of this novel is inevitable. Simon attempts to transform Pegeen into the feminine sexual self. He believes that erotic desire and sexual renewal will cure his fears of humiliation, failure, mortality and all the slings he has undergone. He seriously contemplates fatherhood. Simon crashes to earth as he contemplations turns out to be dashed failure. He cannot perform on both the stages, on the stage of life and that of drama. And when the artist can no longer create, Roth suggests, he has nothing to live for.

The Humbling is disturbing novel on life and existence. Roth aims to dramatize a bleak human existence: it is about all loss and gain and all about caprice. This life's a fluke from start to finish. It is here today, gone tomorrow. Who knows why? These truisms are watchwords of Roth's novel. However he allures his characters to ride the crashing waves of the counter life. The conclusion of *The Humbling* is clear: in putting a touch on his suicide, Simon Axler's minor creative flourish is a near parody of counter life. It redeems nothing. Such is the reduced state of human existence in *The Humbling*. Indeed, the art most praised is suicide: It's exhilarating. It's invigorating. It fails to give his a significant role to survive and have a meaningful identity.

The novel's narrative division in three acts resembles three stages of his life. However, in none of them, his attempts to find meaning and existence; gains nothing. Humbling life is the ultimate end Axler foresaw in his life. He knows his relationship with Peggen is one in which his infatuation will weaken him even as it gives her the strength to betray him. The love affair between Axler and Peggen becomes just a decadent phase in Axler's life. In beginning, Pegeen appears as a male fantasy, the fantasy in the form female figure, blonde with an extensive body and a kind of ready-made prettiness. Later, the fantasy turns out to be dire as Pegeen is revealed as a lesbian; Axler's fantasy ends up rather imagining her as expectant mother, however, unlikely to be true.