

Transcending Marginalization of Old Age in Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*

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Exit Ghost (2007) by Philip Roth demonstrates suffering and marginalization in old age, through the characters Nathan Zuckerman and Amy Bellette. Both have been operated upon for cancer and live a solitary existence with barely any support from fellow beings. Prostatectomy has made Zuckerman incontinent and impotent. Amy's surgery for brain cancer has made her appearance repulsive. Hence, sources like the following look at the novel as projecting a negative view of old age. Aliko Varvogli describes *Exit Ghost* as a "chronicle" (Varvogli, 96) of "Zuckerman's physical decline" (ibid., 96). The concerns of Post colonialism extend to any context and state of being that is related with marginalization and not merely colonization and racism, agrees Barry (Barry, 192). This research paper attempts to argue that a calm transcendence above the ills of old age is also evident in the novel using the theory of gero transcendence as a tool.

A contemporary American novelist shortlisted for Nobel Prize in 2016, Philip Roth has written a number of novels and essays. His latter novels are "much preoccupied with the theme of getting old and sick and waiting for death to strike" (Podhoretz, 34). *Exit Ghost* (2007) is one of his novels that discuss ageing and its concerns. Interpreting the novel from the point of view of gero transcendence can illuminate positive perspectives upon the ageing process.

In 1989 Lars Tornstam, a Swedish sociologist propounded the theory of gerotranscendence in the field of psychogerontology. The terms 'gero' and 'transcendence' refer to "old" and "rising above" (Rajani, 2005, 2). According to Tornstam, there is a "shift" or a psycho-social change at the onset of old age in three dimensions: cosmic, self and relations at social and individual realms. Fahreen Rajani and Hena Jawaid confirm that this theory is applicable in tales about reminiscence in later life.

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Exit Ghost is the last of the series of Nathan Zuckerman novels written by Roth. By now, Zuckerman, the protagonist and narrator, is not only a writer of renown, and strongly established reputation, but also old and fragile. Partly due to his incontinence, and also after receiving letters from an unknown source that threaten him with the prospect of murder, he has been living secluded in a country side with few people and much greenery around, unlike the busy city of New York.

After eleven years of his lonely stay at the place, he visits New York. Meditating upon the changes that have incurred in the surroundings once familiar, he spots an advertisement by a young couple, who would like to exchange their residence with a house from anywhere one hundred miles away from New York. Zuckerman decides to respond to their advertisement and contacts them. On meeting the couple- Billy and Jamie Logan, he gets infatuated with Jamie. In the meantime, Richard Kliman, a writer who is collecting information to write a biography of E. I. Lonoff, another American writer of the twentieth century, of whom Zuckerman is also an admirer and to whose home, Zuckerman has paid a visit many years back, phones him. Lonoff had died of leukaemia before several years. Kliman wants Zuckerman to share his knowledge about Lonoff, particularly about the secret of Lonoff's incestuous affair with his elder sister, which is disagreeable to Zuckerman. Kliman is also the ex-boyfriend of Jamie, a fact that stimulates more hatred in Zuckerman. Despite Zuckerman's contemptuous attitude and resultant outbursts from Kliman, Kliman is persistent to write the biography.

Zuckerman then goes to see Amy Bellette, a seventy five year old woman, whom he had met at Lonoff's house. She had been a twenty seven year old attractive maid then. She had had a liaison with Lonoff leading to his divorce and estrangement from Hope, his wife and their children. But, now, in addition to old age, she has been affected with cancer and lives alone. After enduring chemotherapy and surgery, she had no hair and instead a disfiguring scar on her head. He is stunned by her appearance and they have a brief talk about Lonoff and Kliman. Both, on account of their good will for Lonoff they want to do their best to conceal Lonoff's secret and stop Kliman from exposing it to the reading public.

Jamie is phoned by Zuckerman with an intention to let her know that he has decided against their exchanging of houses, but when she attends the phone, strangely starts inviting her to come to his apartment, where he is having a temporary stay. But, she refuses. There are also references to Norman Mailer in his old age and the dead writer George Plimpton. There is also an alternate plot for the novel by means of Zuckerman's distorted recording of the events by the title

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He and She. In it, Jamie is friendly with him and even agrees to come to his apartment to be alone with him.

Moving to the application of the cosmic domain, the first of the three domains of gerotranscendence, some of the essential elements in this include differences in the conception of 'time,' changes in one's understanding of 'life,' acceptance of the feature of mystery in life, vanishing fear of death and empathy for the past generations of people.

The way the notion of 'time' is viewed by an individual varies from time to time. To the young, time may seem endlessness continuum, but for the old who have lived past many years and are witnessing signs of the end, it is not so. Changes in the perception of time as an individual ages is conveyed by way of contrasting the view of old Zuckerman and young Jamie. Zuckerman had paid a visit to Harvard ten years ago, when Jamie and Kliman were students. Time as ten years, the interval between their first meeting and the current situation, seems a shorter period to Zuckerman, but to Jamie it is quite a lengthy duration. Further, a sixty year old man is looked upon as "quiet old" (128) by Jamie, but Zuckerman's views are different. Zuckerman's description of Kliman and his attitude is also to be noted in this regard. "... Unknowing youth, savage with health and armed to the teeth with time" (104). Healthy youthful body has rendered the ignorant inexperienced Kliman vicious and savage like. 'Teeth,' here is an indication of being young as the old are "Sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7) even in Shakespeare's *As You like It*.

Perceptions of 'life' likewise, though unique for each individual, similarities can be traced among the same age group. 'Life,' as such goes through countless changes in the individual's mind, as one journeys through diverse experiences in life. 'Life,' as it is viewed by the old characters in the novel is also depicted. The fictive account within the novel by the title *He and She*, is written by Zuckerman in such a way that the "imaginary 'She'" (147) representing Jamie in his real life, speaks and acts in ways Zuckerman yearns for her to behave. In commenting about the same, he says "the unlived, the surmise, fully drawn in print on paper, is the life whose meaning comes to matter most" (147). Hence, the old protagonist has come to believe that what occurs in one's mind is of more importance and meaningful than the materialistic happenings in the world.

Calm acceptance of mystery as a common attribute of life, is portrayed in the text. While many a young man or woman finds the unfathomable and mysterious quality of life intolerable and are set to find answers for them, the elderly after years of living, relax peacefully surpassing the need and desire to know everything. They have attained a level of serenity where it is possible

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to rest knowing that one cannot know it all. Many conflicting opinions are left unresolved by the narrator and protagonist Zuckerman corresponding perhaps to the mystery of life. The identity of the person who sent death threats to Zuckerman is not revealed till the end. Deteriorating memory of Zuckerman and Amy, despite the humorous references serve to complicate the story. Kliman calls him a particular day and asks him to come for lunch as he had agreed. But, Zuckerman cannot remember any prior conversation between them about this. Unwilling to reveal his memory loss, he goes with Kliman. Whether Kliman was making it all up or was it a lapse of memory, he cannot ascertain and so is the reader. Does Kliman continue to be Jamie's lover? is a question that comes closer for an answer, but is left to the reader to decide. Was Zuckerman successful in stopping Kliman from writing the biography and if Zuckerman was able to write Lonoff's biography responding to Amy's request, also remain unsettled. The possibility of Amy Bellette being Anne Frank is an idea that is carried forward from the first Zuckerman novel, *The Ghost Writer*. She had escaped to America as per the storyline in *The Ghost Writer*. Now in *Exit Ghost*, she has grown old. Here, the idea is suggested, but the true identity nevertheless is unclear.

In contrast to the young, the old anticipate 'death' and it is not a source of terror to them, according to gerotranscendence. Amy tells Zuckerman of the reappearance of her malignant tumour and her death coming closer in a casual way. He, with astonishment remarks that she said it in a way one would talk about a cheque that has not been cleared. Zuckerman with all his physical ailments, in the same manner is not unaware of his approaching death.

Affinity with the past generations is presented in the case of Amy Bellette and Zuckerman. After Lonoff's death, Amy has lived in isolation from others and confesses that Lonoff, "Even dead, he soothes me so" (172). Zuckerman feels a presence of a unique kind, of dead Lonoff when he visits Amy's place. Whether it is an old man's hallucination or a realistic return from the grave, the readers are not informed. Zuckerman hears Lonoff to be asking him to take good care of Amy and he respectfully obeys. His bidding for help from his dead mother and her reply stating that she is unable to do so as she is a "rotting old corpse... in the grave" (241,242) also exemplifies the point. Roth's earlier novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) had projected the mother figure as irritation and disgust personified and then there was "sardonic reversal... to the depiction of the Jewish mother-figure idolized in *The Anatomy Lesson*" (Jaffe-Foger, 2014, n. pag.), which was published in 1983. In *Exit Ghost* (2007), she is neither regarded with contempt nor idolized, but a more realistic view is presented. Zuckerman and Amy, striving together to protect Lonoff's dignity by means of covering up his disgraceful secret, in other words, standing up for a dead

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man's cause, is perhaps incomprehensive for the young Kliman, but it is most meaningful for the two of them.

The second dimension in gerotranscendence, 'self' comprises of rediscovery of child within, finding dormant characteristics of oneself and a transformation from egoism to altruism. Old age is often a second childhood. One may grow up into an adult during middle age, but anyway realizes that he/she is also growing back to a child. The likeness of a child within is rediscovered and the primal state of innocence returned to, as one progresses into old age. Ageing also reveals an individual's latent qualities, be they good or bad, ones that the person himself/herself had never known. "It could be said that we fundamentally redefine ourselves as we grow older" (White, 1). Coming closer to an understanding of the meaninglessness of life's riches, blessings and troubles, the ageing individual is quiet transformed into a selfless altruistic being, i.e. a direct contrast to narcissistic youth and egotistic middle age.

Zuckerman in various instances realizes that he is playing the role of a child, which can perhaps relate to 'rediscovery of child within' in gerotranscendence. The doctor and nurses explain to him about the medical procedure they would be undertaking to reduce or heal his incontinence. To his many questions, they patiently answer and also encourage him saying it will improve, despite his knowledge that it is otherwise. At this point, he feels "like a churlish eight-year-old" (63) and "a child on their hands who must be soothed into soldiering on behalf of its own cause" (63). In his argument with Kliman about Lonoff whether Lonoff's incestuous affair should be written about or no, Kliman "... after another angry pause, he resumed speaking, it was in the voice you use with a child who's failed to understand for the umpteenth time" (101). Zuckerman thus tends to picture himself as a child very often.

Rediscovery of hidden traits of himself is experienced by Zuckerman. At the age of seventy one, he is attracted to a beautiful woman named Jamie. Although he is physically impotent and incontinent and so acting upon his inclination is highly improbable, he is surprised that his eroticism has not deceased with age.

I thought I had freed myself of all this" (278). "... Tempted for a delight he cannot enjoy and a pleasure that is dead... I was learning at seventy one... Proving that self-discovery wasn't over after all. Proving that the drama that is associated usually with the young... lay siege to the aged (123).

Disappearing egotism in the old can also be noticed in the text. After a telephone conversation with the doctor, Zuckerman feels "drained of pride" (63). This is a direct contrast to the young Jamie who is "narcissistic... obsessed" with her "own safety" (126).

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Under the third dimension of gerotranscendence i.e. social and individual relations, there is high realization of the need for solitude, discrepancy between 'self' and 'role' are better understood, spending more time on reflection and a simultaneous yearning for social involvement as well as philosophizing in solitude. A single individual may play a number of roles like son, husband, father, professional, etc, therefore one cannot be defined in terms of a role that he/she plays. There is more to the 'self,' in addition to the sum of all the roles played. There is an increasing awareness about the value of the 'self' extending to more than the totality of the roles or a role sans roles. Elderly have a complex longing to be communal and be a part of the society, on one hand. On the other hand, a need for privacy and isolation, to spend on philosophizing and secluded meditation is also perceived essential.

Zuckerman enjoying his solitary stay at the countryside, describes it as "a species of freedom" (59) in many instances. He is overwhelmed by having to be unanswerable to everyone and "under no one's surveillance" (64). He also feels that he had attained a state, where one does not hunt for attachment or involvement of any sort.

The habit of solitude, solitude without anguish, had taken hold of me and with it the pleasures of being unanswerable... sweetened by luxurious contentment... I found in my solitude (58).

The distinction between self and role is typical of gerotranscendence. Role loss in old age is elucidated by Roth. At times, being isolated from the society and people, thereby refusing to take a role seems preferable to the inevitable conflicts while playing a role, thinks Zuckerman. He confesses to have voluntarily stopped "seeking a role in the drama of my times" (280), much similar to Simon Axler, the elderly protagonist of Roth's another novel, *The Humbling*. In other words, he is content to be himself.

Besides a need for "social activity" and ... 'solitary philosophizing' at the same time," (Schroots, 747) in the ageing individuals is presented. This dual nature is best expressed when he states Zuckerman states he wishes to live away from the crowded cities so as to maintain "to remain in America without America's ever again being absorbed in me" (69). The protagonist is deprived of the need for social activity and the consequent loneliness is alluded to often. Despite his feeling of resignation, he finds himself "wanting to be with people again" (103). Amy has also been living alone since Lonoff's death. For different reasons, both Amy and Zuckerman have been forced to or in a sense, volunteered to live alone. Each experiencing a different kind of loneliness is juxtaposed in the text.

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Reflection or philosophizing about 'life' and aging process is a feature that is present throughout the novel. The novel, being written in Roth's latter years, can be taken as a reflection of life in old age by the ageing writer. "Roth acknowledges Zuckerman as "a kind of me" who shares his creator's age, profession, and origins, and likens himself to a ventriloquist" (Moran, 21). It is also manifested in Zuckerman the fictional narrator. According to him, industrialization has made "machine... the enemy of life" (65). Lifeless machines, forming a vital part of modern day civilization, as opposed to his early days, perhaps when the influence of industrialization was less is voiced out. Declining physical and mental faculties day by day are compared to "starting to shut the circuits down one by one" (106). He muses upon ideas such as, one cannot stay eternally young, once dead even people who were once popular are forgotten unless a disgracing biography as Kliman plans to write for Lonoff is written about them, life seeming "limitless" (19) at a younger age.

The theory of gerotranscendence and its application to the novel hereby given may seem all positive and too impractical, as one would have met many senior citizens in death anxiety and similar ailments common among the aged. To answer this question, Massmann has noted in his study, "Exploring Gerotranscendence and How it Relates to Depression and Attitudes about Death" that different individuals showed varying levels of gerotranscendence. Minimal amount of gerotranscendence were seen in elderly with depression and fear of death.

A brief introduction to the plot and transcendence in old age in Roth's *Exit Ghost* are explicated, applying the theory of gerotranscendence in this study. Gerotranscendence at its three levels; cosmic, self and social relations, is also detailed. Changes in the understanding of time, life, mystery in life, death and a developing empathy for the generations past, under the 'cosmic' domain; rediscovering an innocence/child within in addition to the hidden aspects of oneself and relinquishing ego in 'self,' and in the level of 'social and individual relations', a need for solitude and social activity along with increasing reflection and distinguishing between self and role, are the concepts elaborated to illustrate the transcendence of Zuckerman in old age.