

# An Analysis of Loathing in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Bama's *Karukku*

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**Abstract-** Abhorrence is a recurring theme in literature, often serving as a vehicle for authors to critique societal norms, explore the human psyche, or shed light on systemic oppression. Many writers have imprinted their thoughts about this topic. In Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Bama's *Karukku*, abhorrence manifests in distinct ways, shaped by the unique socio-cultural and personal contexts of their authors. This comparative analysis examines how abhorrence is depicted in these two seminal works, focusing on its sources, expression, and resolution, while considering the broader implications on identity, society, and liberation. Through *Portnoy*, the protagonist in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth tries to bring out the self-hatred substances which makes the character feel for it and develops self-pity. Whereas in *Karukku*, Bama the writer and the protagonist, encounters many humiliations and is rejected in many causes because of her caste. She is heart broken when she realises that she is pushed to this status since she is born in a Dalit family. Despite their differences, be it whether it is the country, caste or literature, both novels underscore the transformative potential of confronting abhorrence, whether through humour and introspection or resilience and advocacy.

**Keywords:** Abhorrence, humiliation, differences, self-hatred, identity

Many prominent writers around the world fight for justice and equality. They try to bring out the pathetic condition of the people who are enslaved due to various factors. They try to save and prove their identity. They wanted to make sense of who they are, what place they have in this world, and seeks meaning to their lives.

Humans are social beings, and having an identity often connects them to groups, cultures, or communities, fulfilling a deep need to belong. Identity helps to provide self-understanding. Individuals take various roles in different context during their life time, e.g., family, relationships,

friends, works etc. They believe that this helps them to navigate these roles with consistency and purpose. But in many times, especially in the times of transition or uncertainty seeking identity offers stability and continuity. For marginalized or oppressed groups, identity can be a form of resistance and empowerment, fostering solidarity and a sense of purpose. This often ties individuals to cultural, historical, and ancestral narratives, providing a sense of pride and continuity.

Seeking identity is a natural and ongoing process, as people continuously evolve based on experiences and contexts. Many contemporary writers deal with the identity crises and abhorrence. Through their characters in their works they try to bring out their situations and struggles they face in their society. Around the world, many people fought for their freedom. They developed self-pity while struggling for freedom. They even developed self-hatred due to their pathetic condition, which they were not able to change. One such condition, during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries faced by the Jewish-American people struggling to establish their own identity and trying to overcome their own self-abhorrence. Philip Roth the American writer described this theme vividly in his writings. Most probably all his writings dealt this concept and always he supported the Jewish community and its struggling people. Not only Jewish people even Dalit community undergo this type of discrimination. Recently writers who belong to Dalit society in India also brought the same theme in their writings. One such writer is Bama.

Owing to the conditions they face in their respective society, Jewish-American and Dalit people tend to hate themselves for living such a pathetic life. They seek way to overcome the circumstances. This research article tries to bring out the abhorrence of Jewish-American people and the Dalit people which they refuse to accept and tries to change it.

A prominent American novelist, Philip Roth, was well known for his incisive explorations of identity, morality, and the human condition. Born in Newark, New Jersey, Roth gained widespread attention with his 1959 novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, which won the National Book Award. His *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), a provocative and comedic novel deals with the themes of sexuality, Jewish identity, and psychoanalysis. He has authored more than 30 books, including acclaimed works like *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *The Plot Against America* (2004). Known for his vivid storytelling and complex characters, Roth's legacy remains a cornerstone of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American literature. He was the writer who stood for more than 3 decades. He retired from writing in 2012 and passed away in 2018.

Philip Roth's novels explore a wide array of themes, often reflecting the complexity of American life, identity, and human behaviour. He frequently delves into questions of identity, both personal and cultural. His characters often grapple with their sense of self, torn between societal expectations and personal desires. Mukesh Williams (2016) in his article titled "*The Protean Complaint in Philip Roth's Fiction*" clearly states about Roth's characters in his works, which exhibit the struggle of an individual, especially Jewish American,

Their Jewish life is seen more as a repressive code that thwarts sexual and psychological development and prevents reinvigoration. Roth's characters possess a tendency to release their psychic energy in short-lived love relationships and promiscuity hoping to realize maximum happiness or felicity. The myth of total felicity is further complicated by the protean content of their personalities and their ethnic background. In a way, Roth's fiction concerns itself with the various difficulties, psychological and emotional, that come in the way of the protean man. (pg 87)

His *Portnoy's Complaint* examines the protagonist's struggles with his Jewish-American identity and personal neuroses. Sexual relationships, desires, and taboos are recurring themes, often serving as a lens to examine human vulnerability and societal norms.

He even explores lust, aging, and self-destruction. Themes of death, illness, and the passage of time are central to Roth's later works, reflecting on the inevitability of decline and loss. Many of Roth's characters wrestle with guilt, whether stemming from family obligations, cultural expectations, or personal failings. The writer frequently contrasts the yearning for personal freedom with the constraints imposed by family, culture, and society.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, known as Bama, is a prominent Tamil Dalit feminist writer and activist from India. She gained recognition with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which highlights the struggles and resilience of Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. Born into a marginalized community, Bama's works often explore themes of caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social justice. Her writing, characterized by its authenticity and powerful storytelling, includes other notable works such as *Sangati* and *Vanmam*. Bama's contributions have made her a vital voice in Dalit literature, inspiring marginalized communities to assert their identity and demand justice.

Bama, a prominent Tamil Dalit writer, explores various themes in her novels that reflect the lived experiences, struggles, and resilience of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and women in India. She explores the systemic marginalization of Dalits in education, labour, and social spaces, exposing the deep-seated inequalities in Indian society. Chitradevi (2018) rightly states in her article "*Revolutionary Voice of the Subalterns in the select novels of Bama*",

Dalithood is a kind of exploitation suppression and marginalisation of Dalit people by the domination of upper castes. It is a fact that the marginalised cannot remain mute for long. They have to speak and find an outlet for their tears and fears. (p. 35)

Her writing often focuses on the assertion of Dalit identity and the fight against oppressive structures. Bama emphasizes self-awareness and pride in Dalit heritage, urging her community to resist subjugation through education and solidarity. Bama highlights the intersectionality of caste and gender, showing how Dalit women face double oppression. She critiques the role of religion, particularly Christianity, in perpetuating caste hierarchies. While she acknowledges the spiritual solace it can provide, she also exposes the hypocrisy of religious leaders

and institutions that uphold caste discrimination. The vibrant portrayal of everyday life in Dalit She emphasises and often portrays educated Dalit individuals as agents of change, inspiring others to strive for liberation. Bama's works celebrate Dalit culture, traditions, and oral histories, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream representations. She deals with various themes, which not only depict the struggles of Dalits but also serve as a powerful critique of social hierarchies and a call for justice and equality.

*Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) is a groundbreaking novel that explores the psychological and emotional struggles of Alexander Portnoy, a Jewish American man. The book is presented as a monologue to his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel, delving into Portnoy's conflicts with his identity, family, and sexual desires. Roth's work is deeply rooted in the Jewish American experience, marked by the tension between cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation in a predominantly Christian society. Whereas, *Karukku* (1992) is an autobiographical novel by Bama, a Dalit writer from Tamil Nadu, India. The book chronicles her experiences of caste-based oppression, exploring themes of systemic discrimination, religious hypocrisy, and personal resilience. Written in a fragmented, non-linear style, *Karukku* is both a personal narrative and a socio-political critique, highlighting the pervasive impact of caste hierarchies on marginalized communities. Both the novels are united under one theme – abhorrence. The protagonist Alexander Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint* and Bama in *Karukku* struggle to prove their identity. In this process, they are forced to hate themselves for their wretched condition.

Abhorrence in Roth's novel primarily stems from internal and familial conflicts. Alexander Portnoy is deeply frustrated by the expectations of his Jewish upbringing. His parents, particularly his overbearing mother, embody the cultural and religious traditions that he finds suffocating. This creates a tension between his desire for individuality and his ingrained sense of obligation. Portnoy, express the profound impact of his upbringing and internal conflicts on his psyche and body. He uses the metaphor of a road map to illustrate how his repressions have left indelible marks, creating "superhighways" of shame, inhibition, and fear throughout his being. This vivid imagery underscores the depth of his internal struggles and the pervasive influence of his repressive experiences.

"I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear," (*Portnoy's Complaint*, 53).

On later stages, his exploration of sexual desires is fraught with guilt and shame, stemming from societal taboos and the moral framework imposed by his upbringing. He was taught that sex is a bad word to be dealt with and is a dirty deed to deal with. His abhorrence is often directed inward, as he struggles to reconcile his actions with his conscience. The protagonist's self-critical nature amplifies his feelings of abhorrence. He despises his inability to break free from the psychological grip of his parents and culture, creating a cycle of frustration and despair.

Where as in *Karukku*, abhorrence arises from systemic and institutionalized oppression. The primary source of abhorrence in this autobiography is the pervasive caste system that dehumanizes Dalits. Bama's personal experiences of humiliation and exclusion underscore the brutality of caste hierarchies. She criticises the Catholic Church, which, despite preaching equality and compassion, perpetuates caste-based discrimination. Her disillusionment with religious institutions is a recurring theme in the novel. The Dalit Christians are not allowed to bury their dead bodies in the graveyard where the upper caste Christians bury their dead bodies. The writer feels sad that even the church rejects the real teaching of the Christ. The narrator grapples with feelings of betrayal, both by society and by the institutions she once trusted. This internal struggle fuels her resolve to seek justice and advocate for change.

Once when an old man carries a vada and a bhajji (Indian snacks) in a string from a tea shop, Bama enquires about this to her brother. When her brother explained that Parayas (lower caste) are not permitted to touch the Naickers, who belonged to the upper caste. Without touching them the old man is carrying these snacks. She was horrified to know the situation and raise her voice against the human oppression.

"The thought of it infuriated me. How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had the scarped four coins together, did that mean they

must lose all human feelings?  
What did it mean when they called  
us 'Paraya'? Had the name  
become that obscene? But we too  
are human beings. We should  
work in their fields, take home our  
wages and leave it at that"  
(*Karukku*, 16)

She feels that whatever happens to her people it happens to her. She sometimes feels dejected and hates to be born in Dalit society.

To break the weightage of the oppression, Roth employs humour, satire, and exaggeration to express Portnoy's abhorrence. The protagonist's complaints serve as a form of therapy, allowing him to articulate his frustrations and delve into the absurdities of his experiences. The writer tries to use satire and highlight the absurdity of the character making his abhorrence both poignant and humorous. This approach underscores the universality of his struggles, despite their deeply personal nature.

Bama's expression of abhorrence is marked by a stark, unflinching honesty. The fragmented narrative style mirrors the fractured lives of Dalits, emphasizing their struggles. Despite her anger, Bama's tone is infused with empathy for her community. Her abhorrence is not limited to critique but extends to a call for collective resistance and empowerment. The title *Karukku*, which means "palmyra leaves" with serrated edges, symbolizes both suffering and resilience. This duality reflects the transformative potential of abhorrence when channelled constructively.

Portnoy remains trapped in a cycle of self-loathing and frustration, unable to reconcile his desires with his upbringing. Through Portnoy's character, the writer tries to bring out the lack of resolution, which reflects the complexity of human identity and the difficulty of overcoming deeply ingrained conflicts, especially in Jewish society. At one point, the protagonist is provoked about his appearance and he reflects his identity particularly focusing on his nose, which is a prominent ethnic marker. He humorously laments that, while he can conceal aspects of his background, his nose unmistakably reveals his heritage.

"I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose? "You seem like a very nice person Mr. Porte-Noir, but why do you go around covering the

middle of your face like that?"  
Because suddenly it has taken off,  
the middle of my face! Because  
gone is the button of my  
childhood years, that pretty little  
thing that people used to look at in  
my carriage, and lo and behold,  
the middle of my face has begun  
to reach out towards God. Porte-  
Noir and Parsons my ass, kid, you  
have got J-E-W written right  
across the middle of your face..."  
(*Portnoy's Complaint*, 83)

Discriminating by appearance makes him to hate himself and at one point he starts yelling at others.

In contrast, *Karukku* offers a more transformative resolution. Bama's journey from suffering to self-realization is a testament to the power of resilience and advocacy. Her abhorrence becomes a catalyst for change, both personal and communal. Her narrative represents a note of hope, emphasizing the importance of collective action and education in dismantling oppressive systems.

Comparing Jewish-American identity and Dalit identity involves examining two distinct experiences shaped by history, culture, and socio-political realities. While these identities arise from different contexts—Jewish-American identity being rooted in the diaspora and assimilation in the United States, and Dalit identity stemming from the caste system in India—they share parallels in marginalization, resilience, and the pursuit of justice and dignity.

Historically, Jews faced systemic anti-Semitism, exclusion, and discrimination in various parts of the world, including the United States. Despite legal equality, cultural biases persisted, creating a struggle for acceptance. Whereas, Dalits have endured centuries of caste-based oppression in India, including untouchability, segregation, and denial of access to education, resources, and rights. The challenge often involves balancing the preservation of Jewish traditions, language (Hebrew or Yiddish), and rituals while assimilating into mainstream American culture. Dalits face a dual struggle, preserving their cultural identity and histories while resisting the hegemony of caste-based traditions imposed by the dominant castes.

Religion plays a major role in both the society. Religion is central to Jewish identity, but it varies widely from secular to orthodox interpretations. But in Dalits, religion often intersects with caste oppression. Many Dalits have turned to Buddhism

(inspired by B.R. Ambedkar) as a way to escape the hierarchical constraints of Hinduism and assert their dignity.

Despite historical discrimination, Jewish Americans have achieved significant social mobility through education, community support, and economic integration. Whereas, social mobility remains a challenge due to entrenched caste hierarchies. Affirmative action policies in education and employment have provided opportunities, but systemic discrimination persists.

Jewish communities often maintain strong networks for cultural, religious, and economic support, fostering resilience and collective identity. Dalit solidarity has emerged through movements like Ambedkarite activism, emphasizing collective empowerment and political representation. The Holocaust looms large in Jewish collective memory, shaping identity and influencing responses to injustice. Historical trauma from caste atrocities and systemic oppression continues to shape Dalit identity and resistance.

Through this research paper, it is clear that both identities reflect ongoing struggles for justice, equality, and recognition. The Jewish-American experience emphasizes combating anti-Semitism and preserving cultural identity in a multicultural society, while Dalit movements fight for caste annihilation, human rights, and socio-economic upliftment. Jewish-American and Dalit identities, while contextually distinct, share overlapping themes of resilience, the fight against systemic oppression, and the assertion of dignity. Both groups have used literature, activism, and community building as tools to reclaim their narratives and challenge structures of power.

Both *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Karukku* explore abhorrence as a response to oppressive forces, albeit in vastly different contexts. Roth's work delves into the psychological turmoil of an individual grappling with cultural expectations, while Bama's narrative sheds light on the collective struggles of a marginalized community. Despite their differences, both novels underscore the transformative potential of confronting abhorrence, whether through humour and introspection or resilience and advocacy. Together, they offer profound insights into the human condition and the enduring quest for freedom and self-realization.

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