Loss of Social Belongingness in Philip Roth's The Humbling

Saroj G. C [1]

Abstract

This article examines Philip Roth's The Humbling, a literary account of questions of aging and loss of self. Specifically, it analyzes the roles and actions of protagonist, Simon Axler, who has suddenly lost his talent and skills in theatrical performance and is desperately looking for salvation by indulging in temporary distractions around him. However, the loss is too deep to be complacent with. Drawing upon the protagonist's recurring memories of the past performances that significantly govern the present struggle of Alxer, the article assesses that the moments of struggle Alxer recounts in the present after knowing his banal failure signal his inability to maintain social belongingness. Drawing on social identity theory, especially the three stages of social identity formation: categorization, social identification and social comparison, this article postulates an inherent and inevitable connection between social self and personal self. Following this, it argues that Axler's doomed predicament — the loss of personal self — results in eternal quest and loss of social belongingness. Finally, this article concludes that Alexer's failure to identify with the social groups is instrumental to lead him to embrace suicide as the ultimate alternative.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory, Social Belongingness, Personal Self, Existence

[1] Mr. G.C. teaches at Nepal Commerce Campus, Minbhawan. Email: sarojgc1@gmail.com

Introduction

In *The Humbling*, Philip Roth's protagonist, Simon Axler, loses the magic of performance. He doesn't know why this happened, and he suffers a "colossal" breakdown as a result he is falling apart; His wife leaves him, he finds himself 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. He has already failed in the performance of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Roth describes it as "His Macbeth was ludicrous and everyone who saw it said as much, and so did many who didn't" (Roth 14). 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. He also thinks "Something fundamental has vanished" from his life (Roth 61), and Roth suggests that his "breakdown was colossal", meaning that the loss does not only have consequences at personal and professional level, but also leads to more profound consequences at social level.

The uncanny loss of Axler has been the subject of various interpretations. Most of the interpretations concern the pathos of aging and the existential grappling of the protagonist. For one, Harrison argues that the novel is an account of performance anxiety, and it portrays a man who is unable to believe in his suffering any more than he had in the emotions of the characters he can no longer play, a "man deprived of himself,' 'a self-travesty grounded in nothing,' can imagine only one form of potency— 'suicide is the role you write for yourself" (Harrison BR11). Similarly, Skidelsky notes that though the novella is an egregious example of his literary talent, it "asks interesting questions about aging and what it does to you" and tries to paint the picture of the absurdity of life through

Simon Axler ("The Humbling By Roth"). However, a deeper analysis of Axler's situation suggests that his suffering alludes to more than performance anxiety and the problem of aging. Alluding to fundamental concepts of social identity, specially formulated by Tajfel and Turner, in this paper, I argue that Axler's loss as an actor is a loss of personal self and his social belongingness, and his suicide is a result of his inability to maintain his social belongingness and a feeling of self-loss.

Social identity theorists, notably Tajfel, Turner, Hogg and Abrams argue that individuals derive esteem from a group that they positively identify with; therefore, they favor it. In other words, the existence of the individuals is intricately conditioned by the social membership — what is personal is also social. This process of favoring one's in-group happens in three stages: social categorization, social identification, social comparison (Tajfel & Turner 33-47). People first categorize themselves and others into social groups based on external or internal criteria. Then, people identify with a group, invest emotionally, and change their behavior to some extent because of their membership. Finally, people compare their groups to others to acquire esteem for their identified membership (Ellemers 29-30). This process leads to the maximization of similarities within groups and the differences between groups (Tajfel & Turner 18).

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, footballers, 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 group from other collectives (Stets & Burk 227). Once they can delineate their group unequivocally,

individuals know which prototypes or norms to follow, curbing uncertainty and alleviating anxiety.

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. Second, social classification enables the individual to locate or define *himself* 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 (Ashforth Mael 26). 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). Following this trajectory of the social identity theory, this article tracks Axler's journey of loss from the failure of social categorization through social identification to social comparison.

The Loss and Quest for Social Belongingness

From the very outset of the novel, the readers know that because of known reason, 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" (Roth 1). Before this appalling loss took place, he was impeccable with the roles he played: his reputation was the last of the best of the classical American state actors (Roth 2) Similarly, he was brilliant with the sound: "Few stage actors could speak and be spoken to the way he could" (Roth 4) . . . "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" (Roth 4). However, now he "couldn't act. The ways he could once rivet attention on the stage! And now he dreaded every performance, and dreaded it all day long" (Roth 2). Axler's performance only was the marker of his self and his public recognition. But, he has lost it. This was his identity marker as magical performer.

This loss can be characterized as a loss of personal identity. According to Ellemers, a social identity theorist, "striving for a positive social identity may result in people primarily identifying either as members of their social group or in a more individualistic orientation (which may eventually lead to the association of self with a group that has the higher status" (31). Axler first focuses on individual orientation. He knows that "he couldn't act" and he has lost "everything spontaneous and vital was killed," (Roth 2). However, this loss at the personal level is equally deep in social terms. Seen from the perspective of social identity theory, the personal loss deepened due to his lack of social affiliation.

Axler's loss deepens at least in his realization as he realizes the loss of social membership or social categorization. In other words, Axler fails to categorize himself as a successful actor; he fails to fall in the category of actors. Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. After undergoing the loss of performance, Axler severely suffers from a lack of "self-categorization is equally relevant to the formation of one's identity" (Stets and Burke 222). He fails to categorize himself as "stable, morphological components of social structure" (224). In order to categorize himself as a social component, he has to play a role in social structure as the social identity is constituted and maintained by the social roles that the individuals perform in the social environment. Identity roles deal principally with the components of social structure that are termed roles. Roles bring the categorization into existence. Persons acting in the context of social structure name one

another and themselves in the sense of recognizing one another as occupants of positions (Stets and Burke 224). For example, the individuals can play the roles. The individuals perceive themselves as actual or symbolic members of the group(s), and she perceives the fate of the group(s) as her own. As such, social roles provide a partial answer to the question— who am I? The ways he could once rivet attention on the stage. And now he dreaded every performance and dreaded it all day long. And now he dreaded every performance and dreaded it all day long. He spent the entire day thinking thoughts he'd never thought before a performance in his life" (Roth 2-3). Roth explains Axler's loss of capacity to perform:

> He was asked to play Prospero and Macbeth at the Kennedy Center—it was hard
> to think of a more ambitious double bill— and he failed appallingly in both, but
> especially as Macbeth. He couldn't do low-intensity Shakespeare and he couldn't
> do high-intensity Shakespeare—and he'd been doing Shakespeare all his life. His
> Macbeth was ludicrous and everyone who saw it said as much, and so did many
> who hadn't seen it. (Roth 4)

Because of the loss of capacity to perform, what continued to frighten him "was that nothing that was happening to him seemed to have to do with anything" (Roth 28-29). According to Turner et. al, self-categorization as part of a person's self-concept, that is, the set of cognitive representations a person holds about who they are; self-categorization is the cognitive grouping of oneself and other members of a category as similar ("us"), in contrast to the members of another category ("them") (*Rediscovering the Social Group* 42-43).

In the second phase, the profound loss — the capacity to act, leads to more threatening social consequences. These social consequences are observed concerning the role he fails to play in order to categorize himself in social milieu. Social categorization is the process

by which people categorize themselves and others into differentiated groups. In this connection, Axler feels that he has lost his social role, the artistic talent has worn out and he no longer can entertain the audiences. His failure to categorize himself as a theatre actor has consequences. In other words, this loss of roles can be seen in his professional social, familial and sexual life, for example, being a capable sex partner or family member. This loss of existence gives rise to the fact that he fails to take a responsible role as demanded and required by society in social context.

For an individual in a society, [Social] "categorization simplifies perception and cognition related to the social world by detecting inherent similarity relationships or by imposing structure on it (or both)" (Krueger 14220). In other words, people attach features to individuals and they generalize individual features to the group. Axler fails to fails to discover any attributes to qualify or categorize himself as a family member, particularly as a husband. His wife, "after the Kennedy center debacle and his unexpected collapse" withdraws from marriage, and Axler now becomes totally alone in the house in the country and "terrified of killing himself" (Roth 9). After being admitted in the hospital, Dr. Farr asked him to examine the circumstances of his life preceding the sudden onset of his hopelessness. Dr. Farr asked Axler about "his marriage, his parents, his parents' death, about his relations with drug-addicted stepson, his boyhood, his adolescence, his beginnings as an actor, as the older sister who dies of lupus when he was twenty (Roth 12). The doctor wanted to know about his familial affiliations. However, Axler does not have an answer to these questions which traditionally define him as a family member, a strong component of social categorization.

The twenty-six-day stay at the hospital does Axler so well, however not sufficient to create social bonds. He also makes friends of sorts with one of the other patients, a woman, Sybil Van Buren, who was unable to deal with what she discovered about her husband. He tries

to affiliate with her because "the consequence of self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and outgroup members" (Stets and Burke 225). However, he cannot assimilate. Though they have similar membership as patients or patients practicing similar types of therapies, the social background through which their sickness resulted is different. However, Axler strives to belong to a more significant group, the actors. When Jerry comes back to reunite him with his career, Axler has the least hope that he can do: "There no teacup. Jerry, it's over. I can no longer make a play real for people. I can no longer make a role real for myself" (Roth 38). His realization is that he is socially alienated which was observable when he completely identifies himself with a possum. This possum is stranded because the possums are ordinarily nocturnal but this was out on the snow-covered ground in broad daylight (Roth 46). Roth describes this connection as "nature's caricature" (Roth 48).

But now amid his frustrating condition, Axler again endeavors to gain back his existence strengthening his relation with Pegeen, Axler's lesbian lover. He goes on searching and trying to create affiliations. As the social theorists argue, while creating social belongingness, 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 (Stets and Burke 227). By maintaining the meanings, expectations, and resources associated with a role, role identities maintain the complex interrelatedness of social structures. In a similar vein, Axler tries to emphasize his individuality— the meaningfulness he realizes to be with people. Despite Axler as a heterosexual and Pegeen's having lived as a lesbian for the previous 17 years, they begin an affair. He becomes happy when she brings a glass of water for him, for "nobody had brought him a glass of water for a long time" (Roth 53). Unfortunately, Louise, Pegeen's lesbian partner, 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 ("The Humbling, By Philip Roth"). Pegeen is distressed that her parents have learned about the relationship she wanted to keep secret. Her father, Asa, tells her he disapproves because of the age difference but Simon suspects that he merely envies his professional success.

The situation described above, according to Tajfel and Turner, explains that a part of a person's concept of self comes from the groups to which that person belongs. An individual does not just have personal selfhood, but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups (Roth 36). At this point, his failed relationship with Peggen's signifies his inability to define his self in relationship with other groups. A person might act differently in varying social contexts according to the groups they belong to. After listening to what Pegeen's mother thought of him, "Of course, he was— hurt and angry. He sat there listening (. . .)" (Roth 79). He was particularly stung by "Carol's clarification of aging process and the jeopardy in which it placed her daughter (Roth 80). He reflects on his inability to affiliate with the family of Pegeen: "As for your parents, I'd just as soon spare them, but I can't arrange my life according to their feelings. Their feelings don't matter that much to me, frankly, and at this stage of the game, they really shouldn't matter that much to you either" (Roth 81). However, to form social belongingness, a sort of conformism is necessary. Axler denies it as the narrator notes "No, he would not take off in that direction. Instead, he would sit ting and be patient and hope the family would fade away" (81).

Next, the protagonist lacks the active role of sexual power. First, 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?" (Roth 66). Losing his

heterosexual life, and failing to belong strictly to neither to heterosexual group nor the lesbian group, he tries to act as a sugar-daddy for Pegeen. Pegeen Mike Stapleford, "a girl-boy," "a child-adult" and the daughter of old acting friends, is 25 years younger than Axler. He buys a whole lot of expensive clothes for her, offers an expensive round of makeup. Suddenly, Pegeen goes from butch to beautiful, and Axler experiences oceans of sex. Axler fantasizes: "All he was doing was helping Pegeen to be a woman he would want instead of a woman another woman would want. Together they were absorbed in making this happen" (Roth 65). However, his attempt to be part of Pegeen's life seems improbable since Pegeen, "a lesbian with a trail of wounded lovers raging in her wake, has more than enough sexual energy to make up for Axler's eviscerated state" (Harrison BR11). Though the apparent causes for the relationship between them are: perilous age and perilous psychiatric conditions, Axler ascribes it to her potent sexuality. First, he notes that the sexual relationship between them has been up to the mark as per Pegeen reaction: "Go ahead. Harder" (Roth 94). Second, the oddity that Pegeen is sleeping with Axler, a heterosexual, and the other two lesbians at the same time troubles him. And, he knows that he has not become a seminal part of Pegeen: "the affair was a futile folly and that Pegeen's history was unmalleable and Pegeen unattainable and that he was bringing a new misfortune down on his head" (Roth 95).

Having a particular role identity means 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. 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). 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 finds himself as a broken man. 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. (227)

Whatever absurdities he meets in his life, Axler searches for belongingness, which gives meaning to life. He quests 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 the best actor and loses his audience.

Thirdly, Axler fails to establish any substantial affiliations through both social categorization and identifications, thus social belongingness since he lacks the sense of who he is— an instrumental marker of social identity. This can be observed in his evaluation of self. He evaluates himself as an actor and a defeated self. While Jerry tries to persuade him to resume his acting, Axler reasons:

> . . . everyone knows the feeling 'I can't do it,' everyone knows the feeling they will be revealed to be false— it is every actor's terror. They have found me out. I've been found out.' Let's face it, there is a panic that comes with age. I'm that much older than you, and I have been dealing with it for years. (Roth 35-36)

The formation of social identity is self-evaluative. The evaluation of the self takes place based on comparison with ingroups and outgroups, and comparisons yield the

characteristics that are ascribed to individual group members (Schmid et al. 213). These characteristics may "compare positively or negatively to the characteristics of other groups"(Ellemers 30). Positive or negative, the comparison gives a sense of belongingness. After Axler evaluates himself as an actor which is inward orientation, he begins comparing with the characters of plays who have a suicidal instinct or who commit suicide.

Axler compares his self with the members of the ingroup quite negatively. The consequence of the social comparison process is the selective application of the accentuation effect, primarily to those dimensions that will result in self-enhancing outcomes for the self (Sturts and Burke 225). Axler tries to "identify" himself in relation to the group he belongs to. The significant category that he can belong to is the group of actors. Sitting there amid his books, he tried to remember plays in which some characters commit 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 Atony and Cleopatra*, the grandfather in *Awake and Sing*!, Ivanov in *Ivanov*, Konstantin in *The Seagull* (Roth 38-39).

For Axler, public performance was a strong marker of his personal as well as public identity. He was a public figure, a celebrity, who rarely has his private life. He was part of the social groups. In course of doing and fulfilling his duty, he has lost and forgotten 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. So, a person has his identity; public and private identity. The private or the individual identity is related to 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

beings which is related to nothingness. After Axler faces aging, he is playing in his own parody. He goes on acting various roles in his lifetime and now life has made himself a parody:

> Once alone and in the room assigned 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? (Roth 10)

The uncanny loss of talent, i.e., his recognitions, disillusions him. When he compares with the characters he previously played, and the seminal characters of plays, he finds the comparison loose, and finds that in his social environment he is without the role. Playing the role was the only *role* he could act out to maintain his identity.

Seen this light, a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group constitutes his or her social identity. A social group for Axler 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 tries to belong to groups. However, the groups do not prove his existence sufficiently so that he could feel comfortable in the social surroundings. His attempt to identify himself as part of social groups is frustrated on many occasions.

Conclusion

To sum up, Axler is contemplating his existence after suffering the universal nightmare—probably a colossal loss of his life from which it is nearly impossible to come out, as the doctor described it. After losing his talent, he was in dire need of social affiliations. For example, while he was at hospital for his spinal condition, Pegeen goes in, puts a bandage Axler's hand after he trips and cuts it, and gives him a glass of water. This simple act of kindness prompts him to reflect how bereft of such gestures his life has been of late. He ponders how much he has missed the social and familial association and connections. To compensate the loss, he tries to strike the connections in different forms: being a sexual partner, a husband, a sugar-daddy, and more. However, humbled by his failure in his profession, he loses other significant social identifications and affiliations. Tempted to take the easiest, desperate escape to blow his brains out he still has enough sense to look for some other escape. However, to his disappointment, he becomes successful in none of the occasions. Loss of social belonging placed his existence in jeopardy many times. A complete absence of social belongingness pushes him to get rid of this isolation. Therefore, he contemplates suicide.

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