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IMPLODING THE MEANING OF IDENTITY IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

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Abstract: The multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and racially mixed nature of contemporary American society is accountable for a troubled history of 'identity.' Identities are shaped on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, class, and gender, all of which are still paramount and alive in the US. Identity has often demarcated between the ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed, the white and the black, the male and the female, often subjecting the latter in the relationships to a prejudicial treatment and identifying it as the 'other.' The demarcation questions the fixed, coherent and stable nature of 'identity' based on monolithic categories, thereby, necessitating a redefinition of interpretive patterns and existing theories of identity. In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk is intent on keeping his disadvantaged African-American identity a secret from all, including his wife and their four children. He, for the most part of the book is seen as deconstructing and challenging his existing Negroid origin. His desire for purification and for freedom convinces him to pass as white. This paper studies the complexities of contemporary identity where individuals are caught hanging tantalizingly between the 'given' group identity and the 'chosen' self identity.

Keywords: African-American, Ethnicity, Identity, Language, Philip Roth, Race.

1. Introduction

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) is a fitting final part of the novelist's trilogy comprising *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I*

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Married a Communist (1998), and like the other novels of the trilogy, it too, tragically deplores an aspect of self-transformation that determines identity. 'Identity' with its troubled history has always been a central focus of literary debate. Introduced by the works of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead, 'identity' has evolved and grown central to current psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and cultural materialist criticism, in areas ranging from postcolonial and ethnic studies to feminism and queer theory. 'Identity' is theoretically incoherent and unstable as well as politically pernicious. In the name of identities, lines have been drawn between who may govern themselves and who is enslaved, who can live in the neighbourhood and who is excluded, who can and who cannot vote, and who does and who does not have basic human rights. Embracing racial, ethnic, linguistic or gender identities implies an acceptance of roles that have been defined by the system; similarly any organization around identities too repeats the exclusionary and divisive practices of the dominant culture.

Black racism of the US, which has its roots in the country's long history of slavery, is part of such dominant culture. "Racism," refers to an amalgam of "an attitude or set of beliefs" with a set of "practices, institutions and structures" that takes into account ethnic, cultural or linguistic differences as "innate, indelible, and unchangeable."[1] The "practices," include "unofficial but pervasive social discrimination at one end of the spectrum to genocide at the other, with government-sanctioned segregation, colonial subjugation, exclusion, forced deportation (or "ethnic cleansing") and enslavement among the other variations on the theme."[2] It is not unanticipated then, that people of African origin residing in the US and possessing a distinct language that becomes a carrier of their cultural patterns in the American society, are often treated as the 'other.' They are subjected to racial prejudices like racial segregation, disfranchisement, exploitation and violence, which underscore

[1]George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, 6, 5.

[2]Fredrickson, *Racism*, 9.

the point that ""African-American" is only a political/cultural construct."[3]

Pivotal civil rights organizations in the US aspired over a long period of time to end racial discrimination. The effort by the black people to seek better lives is continuing even today with the strategy of public education, legislative lobbying, and litigation broadening to a strategy that emphasizes "direct action": primarily boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, mass mobilization, and civil disobedience. Moreover, there is the most alluring American dream of radical self creation fostering the cult of individualism, whereby, any African-American with light complexion may transgress his racial origin, pass as white and enjoy the prerogatives of whites. Lured by the American dream of a society advertising to promote change and personal control over the ideological, the socio-political and historical circumstances, there have been some instances of African-Americans passing as white and using it as the base for future meaningful adult life. Reclaiming identity here, frequently moves from the desire for white privilege to the tortures of racial denial and has close association with "identity politics," "linguistic foundations of identity," "the politics of difference," and "the politics of recognition," which are pervasive even in the small world inhabited by Coleman Brutus Silk, the protagonist of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain.* Coleman feels that his colour stains him in a society where being the 'other,' an African-American, makes one the object of prejudice. So, he, like many light coloured African-American, seeks to press his claim on the American dream and strives to reshape the contours of his black identity. He even intensely monitors his speech to make it markedly different from the language of the racialized population including his family. Coleman, for the most part of the book, is seen as going beyond the limits of his existing Negroid origin, alienating himself from

[3]Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 15.

family and ethnic in-groups, passing as white, shifting social identity, and relying heavily on secrecy.

Roth had attempted rewriting the self in his earlier novels too, like *My Life as a Man* (1974) and *Counterlife* (1986), but *The Human Stain* has received particular attention in light of its focus on intricate issues and opportunities for fluidity surrounding the negotiation of identity as well as the manner in which the self is inscribed on specific determinations of American history. The paper seeks to study the constructions of identity in a milieu where racism continues to structure both the ways in which people are defined and how they see themselves, through Coleman's constant endeavour to recreate the image of the self and implode human identity *vis-a-vis* American national identity. The paper also aims to discuss the relationship between language and identity embedded in a particular race and culture with social ranking; and the mode in which social ranking is played out in the use of their language adds an interesting dimension to Coleman's venture to dissociate himself from the linguistic marker of definite identity in order to escape from the burdens of the dogmas of a predominantly white society.

2. Interpreting Identity

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'identity' as "the set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group; the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity, individuality,"[4] and according to the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* available on the web, 'identity' refers to "who someone is: the name of a person or the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others."[5] Such linguistic interpretations of identity are succinct and clearly understood. These traits are readily apparent on the surface of all individuals we interact with in our daily lives, but research indicates that the construction of

[4] "Identity," *Merriam- Webster Dictionary*. 11th ed., 2011.

[5] "Identity," *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Online* <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity> (5 Nov. 2017).

'identity' and remapping that are much more complicated and convoluted than the simple definition in the lexicon. The concept of identity has a long tradition in western thought, but the notion of an identity that can be fashioned by each and every individual is a relatively new phenomenon. D. Kellner very rightly observes:

> According to anthropological folklore, in traditional societies, one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to one's place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour. One was born and died a member of one's clan, a member of a fixed kinship system, and a member of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance. In pre-modern societies, identity was unproblematic and not subject to reflection or discussion. Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and that was that.[6]

Identity has undergone a sea change from this pristine understanding in approximately the last five decades because different people and cultures have come into contact and mixed with each other in unprecedented degrees via colonialism, slave trade, white settlement outside Europe, war, migration to the West, and globalization. This meeting of cultures has put into question the taken-for-granted ideas of identity and belonging, for it entails, as Chris Weedon points out:

> ... attempts to dominate or assimilate others under the various banners of civilization, Christianization, modernization, progress, and development. These processes have involved a profound 'othering' of colonized peoples as different and less advanced than people of European descent. Often, for example

[6]D. Kellner, "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities," in *Modernity & Identity*, eds., S. Lash and J. Friedmen, Oxford: Wiley- Blackwell, 1992, 141.

in the cases of slavery, genocide and even contemporary forms of racism, it has involved a denial of a common humanity.[7]

From this angle, the centrality of discussions on identity in the humanities and social sciences is symptomatic of the postmodern predicament of living in a world that has become increasingly complex and confusing. 'Identity,' to quote Kellner, has become "both a personal and a theoretical problem. Certain tensions appear within and between theories of identity, as well as within the … individual."[8] Identity research of the past five decades bears testimony to the antithetical discourses which have come up against traditional concerns, thereby, relocating identity studies to the site of the collective, with gender / sexuality, class, and race / ethnicity, forming the "holy trinity" of the discursive field.[9]

3. Implosion of Racial Identity

This paper explores *The Human Stain* in the light of the new trajectory in the recent studies on identity, mainly race / ethnicity. The novel is the embodiment of Roth's lifelong aesthetic commitment to the fluidity of the American (or ethnic) self that calls into question the ideas of 'nationalism' and national identity, which is defined "in an exclusive relationship of difference from others that is most often tied to place or lack of it … It is also linked to language, history and culture."[10] Nationalism and national identity cannot be fully understood if they are simply dismissed as "identity politics." This is discernible in the ostensibly Jewish character of Coleman, who is a born African-American. Coleman, growing up in the 1930s New Jersey, struggles to overcome his disadvantaged racial origin to nurture his passion and aptitude for the classics. With the passage of time, Coleman becomes a classics professor and dean of faculty at Athena College. However, as Lydia Moland observes, "Coleman's

[7]Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, New York: Open University Press, 2004, 3.

[8]Kellner, "Popular Culture," 142.

[9]Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, *Identities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 1.

[10]Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 20.

success is at the price of a betrayal of self and family: Coleman is black, but light-skinned enough to "pass" and so to take advantage of the upward mobility offered to white men of his generation."[11] To understand the power of identity, it must be borne in mind that tied to racism and ethnocentrism exclusive forms of identity can often lead to discriminatory behaviour towards others, repress them and subject them to violence of all kinds. In the words of J. Weeks, "identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality"[12] but at the same time, "identity becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty."[13]

In Coleman's case the trans-figuring of a new identity from African-American to Jewish-American happens accidentally and is advocated to him by a well-meaning white man, a Jew, Doc Chizner. Chizner is the boxing coach of Coleman at a Newark gym who accompanies the uncommonly gifted Coleman for a match involving the Army and the University of Pittsburg. It is on the drive up that Chizner advises Coleman not to tell anyone he is black. He does not suggest his student to say he is white, either, just not to mention that he is coloured: "If nothing comes up, you don't bring it up. You're neither one thing or the other. You're Silky Silk. That's enough."[14] Initially Chizner's advice startles Coleman, but later on it eventually becomes Coleman's credo, or his "secret" as branded by the narrator of *The Human Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman. Possessing the secret of his identity is what gives Coleman freedom. Only Coleman possesses Coleman and

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[11]Lydia Moland, "Grasping the "Raw I": Race and Tragedy in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Expositions* 2, no. 2 (2008): 190.

[12]J. Weeks, "The Value of Difference," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 88.

[13]K. Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, 43.

[14]Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000, 98.

so, strengthened by the secret, he appropriately exchanges his freshly minted self in the heady sensual world of desire and women. After considerable deliberation and hoping to attain "identity negation," Coleman contracts a matrimonial alliance with Iris Gittleman, the daughter of unconventional Jewish parents, who is to serve as the means to explain his (future) children's curly hair: "that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than Coleman's."[15] After Coleman successfully fathers four children with Iris, all with white skin tone and convincingly Jewish look, his relief is explicit: "The family was now complete. They'd done it – he'd made it. With not a sign of his secret on any of his kids, it was as though he had been *delivered* from his secret."[16] Coleman rejects to be a part of the blacks, their 'we' in order to search the 'raw I', someone who is neither white nor black: "He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I."[17] In fact, it is only after his death towards the closure of the novel, that one realizes 'Coleman Silk' has been all the while a particularly tell tale name. According to Tim Parrish, "'Coleman' refers, almost archly, to his black identity and Silk to the elegance with which he strives to comport himself."[18] It remains no longer the struggle for equal rights or racial equality for Coleman; it is about transforming the confined constrictions of racial discourse as Mark Maslan suggests: "neither the idea of taking pride in his race nor that of his race taking pride in him holds any attraction for him. On the contrary, he considers the very idea of membership in "Negro society" arbitrarily confining,"[19] for "he

[15]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 136.

[16]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 175.

[17]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 109.

[18]Tim Parrish, "Becoming Black: Zuckerman's Bifurcating Self in *The Human Stain*," in *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal, London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005, 214.

[19]Mark Maslan, "The Faking of the Americans: Passing, Trauma, and National Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2005): 375.

cannot reconcile himself to the confines of a world in which race matters."[20]

Interestingly, emanating from his secretive self, the lies of Silk actually facilitates his upward mobility. He is able to seek the draft without arousing any kind of suspicion in the draft board about his racial genesis. What establishes Coleman is his job as a classics professor and sometime dean of faculty at Athena College. However, the same "secret" earns Coleman disrepute as well and disintegrates his make belief world for he loses his job due to a mistaken allegation. Inquiring after two students who have not attended a single class for six consecutive weeks, Coleman asks whether they are "spooks," in the sense, whether they exist. "But "spooks" has also a nastier, racial meaning, and, unbeknownst to Coleman, the students in question are black."[21] Eventually these students bring suit for racial abuse and discrimination. Coleman declines to apologize or admit guilt: "The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous … the charge is not just false — it is spectacularly false."[22] The irony intensifies and the tragic outcome of the self secrecy and the f(r)ictions of identity looms large in Coleman's life when he counter-charges the students with black anti-Semitism. The paradox in the situation is highlighted because Coleman is not a Jew, hence, his students too, cannot successfully be black anti-Semites in this case. Just as Coleman did not have the slightest inkling of the black identity of the students; they, too, on their part, had no idea that Coleman is not only not Jewish but black. Though the accusations against Coleman appear to be ridiculous, his allegation against these students of black anti-Semitism is even more asinine. For Coleman has always known about his fake Jewish identity. Both their accusations that Coleman is racist and the students are anti-Semites strangely flop though the

[20]Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Reading Race and the Conundrums of Reconciliation in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," in *Turning up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, eds., Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005, 181.

[21]Moland, ""Grasping the "Raw I," 193.

[22]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 7.

consequent uproar caused by the "spooks incident" leads to Coleman's resignation as well as the death of his wife. Had Coleman retired "in his own good time … there would have been the institution of the Coleman Silk Lecture Series, there would have been a classical studies chair established in his name … He would … be … officially glorified forever."[23] However, "the bitter truth is that", as Elizabeth Martínez points out, "in a racist society where a brown skin (along with other colours) can cost lives, people will embrace any ideology that seems to offer the hope of change. Even when that ideology proves counter-productive, the hope persists."[24]

Trying to escape the "great American menace" of racism,[25] Coleman is acting within America's "great frontier tradition" of "accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness."[26] Coleman's decision to exploit his white complexion and the concomitant "Jewish" identity are the consequences of a choice he makes as an African-American in response to the historical situation in which he has come of age. Coleman's racial secret is undoubtedly embedded in a deep-seated psychic malaise, but at the same time, his yearning for white entitlements is, catalyzed by the socio-cultural and political ethos of the first half of twentieth century America. During his brief stint in the Navy he suffers a bruising experience in a whorehouse in Norfolk, where a white prostitute correctly identifying him a black passing for white, throws him out. Enraged, Coleman in his wrathful imagination conjures up America into 'the other' which he thinks can be hoodwinked only by strategically playing the game its own way. Moland writes the following on Coleman's quandary:

> Part of the vice-like grip of racial identity is that one *usually* cannot simply walk away from it the way one can (theoretically) walk away from or hide a religious, political or

[23]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

[24]Elizabeth Martínez, *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998, 239.

[25]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 106.

[26]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 334.

> sexual identity that might limit one's life chances … His refusal to let the "little they become a we and impose its ethics on [him]" might make us flinch a bit: a struggling black community needing his talents does not in itself generate obligation, but his callous dismissal of this community seems intemperate.[27]

It is possible that Coleman, as many assume, and as William G. Tierney and Mark Shechner also suggest, in part is loosely modelled on former *The New York Times* book editor Anatole Broyard,[28] who like Coleman, was an African-American and made a life of passing as well as of deliberately distancing himself from his parents. The literary critic and scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written about the Gatsbyesque position of Broyard who, as his wife explains, "saw the world in terms of self-creation."[29] Coleman, on his part, passes as white to be free. Dean Franco puts the issue in perspective, "Coleman's whiteness and Jewishness are established by the erasure of his blackness— an identity itself contingent, the being of which is a being- under- erasure."[30]

Coleman wishes to avoid being the object of prejudice, as one can assume is the case with his college-educated father, who, once he loses his optician shop, never is able to get a better job than that of a waiter on a train.[31] The whites and the blacks, both are a cause of agony for Coleman. In a Washington, D.C. Woolworths,

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[27]Moland, ""Grasping the "Raw I," 191.

[28]William G. Tierney, "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus," *The Journal of Higher Education* 2002, <www.jstor.org/stable/1558452> (11 July 2017).

Mark Shechner, "Roth's American Trilogy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed., Timothy Parrish, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 153.

[29]Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, New York: Random, 1997, 200.

[30]Dean Franco, "Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*; Or, It Depends on What the Meaning of 'Clinton' Is," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2004, <www.jstor.org/stable/30029861> (1 December 2016).

[31]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 317.

Coleman is called a "nigger" for the first time; and while still a student at the all black university, Howard, he envisions himself as a Negro for the first time, and he finds that he wants neither. The denigrating racial epithet troubles him; his racial identity bothers him when he realizes how his fellow black students make him feel black. Roth's narrator, Zuckerman, reports:

> Then he went off to Washington and, in the first month, he was a nigger and nothing else and he was a *Negro* and nothing else, and he wasn't having it. No. No. He saw the fate awaiting him, and he wasn't having it. …You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you.[32]

Then there is Steena Palsson, the beautiful white woman whom Coleman initially longs to marry, but who stops seeing him, rather rejects him for being the 'other,' after he invites her to have Sunday dinner with the Silk family.[33] It is what Toni Morrison describes as "a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American."[34] Propelled by such racial biases and insults, and the "politics of difference," at the age of twenty six when Coleman finally makes up his mind to pass as white, his mother tells him "You're white as snow and you think like a slave."[35] Coleman's decision may have been enigmatic for his mother and the situation sad as he is lost to the family but it is ironic too. For as Louis Althusser claims, "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects."[36] That is, ideology as propagated by institutions such as families, churches, schools, mass media, and so on all "call" individuals in particular ways that prescribe and enforce thinking in specific ways about

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[32]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 108.

[33]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 125.

[34]Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Vintage, 1992, 38.

[35]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 139.

[36]Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, eds., Aradhana Sharma and Anil Gupta, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 105.

their identities, relationships with other individuals, and their connections to social institutions, and acting accordingly. Since, as Althusser continues:

> Ideology is eternal … ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects … That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality … and not a paradox at all.[37]

Coleman too, like an interpellated subject never denies to himself his black identity. He lives in a society of shallow people whose prejudice against the 'other' is perceptible, yet, they need a strict verbal adherence to the dogma of absolutely equal worth of all categories and groups. In such a social scenario where people define themselves against the 'other,' Coleman learns it the hard way that the quest for the "raw I" will be dangerous, especially, when he has embarked on a lifetime of specious identity and betrayal necessitated by his decision to be white. He views his mendacious identity as part of a powerful self: "Self-knowledge but *concealed*, he says. "What is as powerful as that?"[38] Here, Coleman fails to register that identity is also about one's relationships and one's complex involvement with people. As such with Coleman's decision to pass as white, and shed his burdensome identity as a black man once and for all, as well as his resolution to grasp "the raw I with all its agility,"[39] the discomfiture of his mother, brother, and sister escalates. Coleman is admonished by his elder brother, Walter, not to show his "lily-white" face again at home.[40] Walter serves as the perfect foil to Coleman. The former gives the readers a glimpse of the parallel life against which to assess the ethics of Coleman's decision. Walter returns home in East Orange, New Jersey after finishing college under the rehabilitation benefits offered to World War veterans by the United States government and as declared in the

[37]Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 106.
[38]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 108.
[39]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 106.
[40]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 145.

Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, widely known as the G.I. bill. In the decades preceding the civil rights movement, Walter fights segregation locally, becoming the first black teacher in a white district, then the first black principal, then the first black superintendent of schools,[41] whereas, Coleman's list of achievements is given in a warped comparison: the first Jewish classics professor in the country, among the first Jewish faculty at the prestigious Athena College, and, by the 1990s, its first Jewish dean of faculty, who, towards the end of his career, is accused of using a racist remark to describe black students. Musing on the black humour in the situation, Coleman's sister, Ernestine sees him as a victim of the long standing history of 'othering' and the desire to implode identity. Faunia, the thirty-four year old janitor of Athena College, in whose love Coleman glories towards the end of his life, sees Coleman as cursed simply because of his humanity: what marks him is not his hidden blackness but the universal burden of his "human stain." Weeks' argument on identity is pertinent to Coleman's case:

> Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, 'British' or 'European' . . . The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings."[42]

Coleman chooses to estrange himself from the past and transcend history. It is his fabricated world that becomes Coleman's downfall. He has to endure the inevitable punishment of staging his "revolt of one against the Negro fate."[43] Very rightly does Michel Foucault remark that, revolution is not necessarily a simple freedom from oppression, a challenge and an overturning of power relations; instead "revolution is a different type of codification of the same relations."[44]

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[41]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 322-323.

[42]Weeks, "The Value of Difference," 88.

[43]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 183.

[44]Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972- 1977*, ed., Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, 122.

4. Redefining Linguistic Identity

Coleman's father has always understood that a range of relations emanating from several aspects of the lives of people are built in a society, which tend to position them in ways that constitute their identity on specific terms, both socially and politically. Of all aspects, language happens to be one of the strongest determiners of identity. Language cuts across cultures, social norms, religions and races, social classes, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, disability, education, friends, and life-style, therefore, plays an important role in the formation of group identity more in the sense, how groups see themselves. Consequently, Coleman's father has to undergo a lot of trials and tribulations in order to make the Silk family a "model Negro family"[45] in the East Orange neighbourhood. He is not someone who has ran away from his race, rather Mr Silk is exceedingly proud of his racial identity as a counter-reaction to a racist American society: "For as long as Coleman could remember, his father had been determined to send him, the brightest of the three kids, to a historically black college along with the privileged children of the black professional elite."[46] Despite finding contentment in his racial identity, one of the main principles of Mr Silk has been to focus on the singularity of words, the unambiguous, precise use of language: "The father who never lost his temper. The father who had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech."[47] Mr Silk has consistently known that language, in reflecting the membership of a particular race as distinguishable from the other races showcases an unmistakable larger ethnic identity. People who speak a variety of English which differ from the so-called Standard English are an example of this pattern. However, as a father, Mr Silk "was very fussy about his children's speaking properly. Growing up, they never said, "See the bow-wow." They didn't even say, "See the doggie." They said, "See the Doberman. See the Beagle. See the Terrier." They learned

[45]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 86.
[46]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 99.
[47]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 92.

things had classifications. They learned the power of naming precisely."[48] This illustrates the fact that any language and its relationship with identity are at least twofold. On one hand, the creolized variety of English spoken by the African-Americans in the US establishes one's identity as black, and on the other hand, distinguishes the already formed identity as a black speaker in contrast to the speakers of Standard English in the country.

It is seen that the Silks even refrain from using double negatives in one sentence that is so very characteristic of a black's speech. It is only within the boxing arena, double negatives come out of Coleman's mouth and that too only once. Not implicated by the white manager's casual racism at St Nickolas Arena, Coleman is actually annoyed and irate on being instructed not to knock out his black opponent— a "nigger — too early in the fight but to "carry" him until the audience gets its money's worth. When asked why he knocked his opponent out in the first round, Coleman snaps: "Because I don't carry no nigger."[49] In here, language serves as an instrument that envelopes one's identity and operates in uniting the ethnic black community that shares common or collective identity. It functions to associate one's identity to a smaller group in the American society but Coleman, with the exception of this stray incident, insists on the precision in his language in an effort to supersede notions of race and ethnicity as determining factors for shaping individual identity. He also uses this accuracy of language usage in his defence in an implied interior monologue: "For the thousandth time: I said spooks because I meant spooks … 'Does anybody know them, or are they blacks whom nobody knows?' If I had meant that, I would have said it *just like that*."[50] The "characters are," therefore, "seized by language and literature," as Ross Posnock argues, "seized, that is, by the claims of otherness"[51] with the novel foregrounding the overbearing power of language.

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[48]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 93.

[49]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 117.

[50]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 85.

[51]Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 196.

Coleman referring to the absent students as "spooks," his use of a racial slur is conspicuously intentionally ironic in the light of his education. The "spooks incident" is important because as Posnock asserts, "the prominence of language and of acts of analytical scrutiny in *The Human Stain* alert us to the impact words have, including, as in "spooks" their incorrigible consequences that take on a life of their own, beyond our control."[52] The faltering of the referential language system and the ambiguity with signification showcase the degree to which language affects the characters and their identities. This idea reverberates throughout Coleman's life. He lives most of his life and even dies as a Jew. He is given a Jewish funeral service. However, he never consciously converts to the Jewish faith. There is no mention in the novel of any kind of Jewish traditions or religious belief or adaptations Coleman has or makes in order to pass as a Jew. When his son, Mark, at the funeral, "with the book in his hand and the yarmulke on his head," chants "in a soft, tear-filled voice the familiar Hebrew prayer," it is apparent that "most people in America, including … probably Mark's siblings, don't know what these words mean, but nearly everyone recognizes the sobering message they bring: a Jew is dead."[53] Such an instance exhibits the extent to which identity, like a story can be contrived through the power of language, much like a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this sense, as Timothy Parrish mentions, "no identity, ethnic or otherwise, is stable… *the self is fiction*."[54]

5. Conclusion

Roth's passing narrative *The Human Stain* is remarkable and controversial at the same time because it offers a compelling meditation on the possibilities and limitations of self-making in American culture as well as on the impossibility to engineer

[52]Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* , 195.

[53]Roth, *The Human Stain*, 314.

[54]Timothy Parrish, "Roth and Ethnic Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed., Timothy Parrish, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 128.

reversibility of determinism and of history. The fissures and discontinuities of 20th-century life are exposed when Coleman, despite being born a black in America, decides to invent himself and assume the identity of a Jew. Coleman's action invariably questions the validity of racial as well as linguistic foundations of identity and the influence of socio-political, cultural history of a particular period in shaping one's identity. Coleman takes the promise of the American dream of freedom to rewrite his personal identity and ability to disavow the one essential aspect of his self, that is, his race including its language, at face value. The drama of Coleman when it is revealed that Coleman is never quite who the readers or the other characters assume him to be articulates a sustained critique of white racism firmly grounded in ethnicity. This paper underlines the fact that to risk one's identity in a gesture of affiliation which annihilates the authenticity of race and its language is a hazardous scheme. Identity, in the hands of Roth, undoubtedly, is an outcome of the socio-political, cultural history that pervades one's choices, but that same history repels any attempt to live outside or to abrogate it keeping every subject fettered. Although Coleman's story is based on his doomed efforts to escape his race and its characteristic linguistic usage, it is ultimately universally shared by all fatally stained and equally vulnerable humans.