
Race and Identity Crisis in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

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Abstract

The Human Stain is the story of a passing Jew who struggles all his life to escape the humiliation of being a “colored” man. The protagonist wants to find solution in passing and ultimately gets trapped in his own scheme. The identity he wants to throw away into oblivion, ironically, always lives in the depth of his heart. Coleman Silk is the product of racism in this novel. In his whole life, he wants to slip the punch of racism which results in his decision of passing as a Jew. The characters in the novel take passing or identity change as potential emancipation from social humiliation or a kind of way out which lets them enjoy the privileges and comfort of society. However, that decision of identity change creates a dilemma, an identity crisis in their mind which eventually proves fatal for them.

Keywords

Racism, identity crisis, passing, color, Jew

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* is the story of a passing Jew named Coleman Silk, his inner anguish and his thirst for assuring an identity in post war American society where race and ethnicity were a predominant factor in evaluating human being.

Coleman Silk himself is a victim of racism which is evident in his denial of his genealogy and culture. The fear of being subjugated, the fear of being belittled as a black man develops in the depth of his mind in his early childhood. His early childhood association in his neighborhood has a long-lasting effect on his mind. He grew up in East Orange, New Jersey. Coleman Silk family's establishment in East Orange is itself an example of racial hatred and

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discrimination. They bought the house from a landlord who wanted to punish his neighbor by selling the house to a “colored” family. The thought of punishing someone by using the weapon of someone’s skin color is itself a racist act. Coleman Silk saw deep hatred in the eyes of the white neighbors surrounding him in his childhood and it left a deep impression on his subconscious mind which molds later his decision of passing as a Jew:

Coleman Silk passes as white, so as to be free. Just what he means by this is always an enigma to his mother. After Coleman’s death, his sister Ernestine tells Zuckerman that Coleman possibly wished to avoid being the object of prejudice, as one can assume was the case with his college-educated father, who, once he lost his optician shop, never was able to get a better job than being a waiter on a train. (Safer, 2002, p. 213)

As a young man, seeking his own voice in the society, Coleman experienced the first blow of racial hatred when he goes to Howard College. He is called “nigger” and was denied food and the impact of that incident was catastrophic for him. “Refused a hot dog at Woolworth’s in downtown Washington, on the way out called a nigger, and, as a result, unable to divorce himself from the feelings as easily as he did in the ring” (Roth, 2000, p. 102). The way Coleman experiences his own insult and sees his father suffering and being humiliated result in a kind of weird feeling in his mind about his own identity. The fear of being dominated and humiliated because of skin color starts to control all his actions of life. His deep-rooted anxiety of finding his own self as a nonentity in the society which ultimately develops into a kind of identity crisis is also fueled by his father’s speech:

...no matter how well intentioned he may be, there is the presumption of intellectual inferiority. Somehow, or other, if not directly by his words then by his facial expression, by his tone of voice, by his impatience, even by the opposite- by his forbearance, by his wonderful display of humaneness, he will always talk to you as though you are dumb, and then if you are not, he will be astonished. (Roth, 2000, p. 103)

When Coleman wants to know what keeps his father frustrated, he is answered by his mother that can’t be even uttered for the second time (Roth, 2000). It is such a feeling which one can’t even think of. What could be more horrifying than feeling ashamed of someone’s own identity? Coleman’s father describes it in such a manner that it seems as if there is no alternative for a “nigger” but to feel like a lesser being even if he is intellectually superior to a white man. This is the beginning for Coleman to search for an identity which is not subject to prejudice. Coleman wants to take advantage of his light skin color and decides to take a new identity as a Jew which he is not. That changing of identity in post-war America, where race was a significant criterion in determining the value of an individual, results in endless suffering in his subconscious mind. The changing of identity leads him to a kind of mental or social vacuum, to a place of nowhere. He neither can turn into a Jew, nor can he remain black in his identity. His whole life has turned into an unbearable pretension of being a Jew. He achieves the identity of “Silky Silk.” “Silky,” which represents fluidity in identity, is burdensome in its nature. Identity

demands to be static, a solid background and platform one always searches for throughout his life. That strong foundation and self-confidence is something Colman always misses in his life. The “silky” and “fluidity” are the characteristics of identity which can also be interpreted as an identity that is rootless, and that rootlessness Coleman experiences throughout his life by leaving his family.

Throughout “The Human stain,” Coleman Silk is troubled by these questions about authenticity and voice- the consequences of his decision to pass. His reliance on and discomfort with theatrically and mimicry are at the heart of “The Human Stain.” (Glaser, 2008, p. 1471)

Coleman wants to be free from the burden of his own identity. It is burdensome for him. It is burdensome not because he hates his race, but because he doesn’t want to be hated. The way he and his siblings were reared by his father, the continuous indoctrination of the typical white English ideology, the parroting of Shakespeare and other literary pieces have created a kind of double consciousness within him. He cannot cope up with his own community, nor can he find himself as a part of white supremacy. He sees the prejudice against colored people and wants to slip the punches of racial hatred and insults which were a common phenomenon where he was growing up. It is his passionate struggle throughout his life to deconstruct and reconstruct his identity. After Coleman’s death, his sister Ernestine shares with Zuckerman the agony her brother felt because of his fake identity.

It is the irony of Coleman’s life that, the life he wants to leave is the life he lives always throughout his life. He becomes the subject of public humiliation for uttering the racial slur, “spook,” to his students though he never knew the identity of those students. But is it really an innocent remark? Why doesn’t he choose the word “ghost” instead of “spook”? The identity crisis he goes through in his subconscious mind finds its way out through his choice of words. In the depth of his heart, he is continuously being torn apart between his black identity and his changed identity as a Jew. It is the irony of fate that “the Black,” the identity, he wants to forget all through his life, he carries it all his whole life in his subconscious mind. If he were known as a black man, wouldn’t the “spook” incident have been interpreted in opposite way? And that could make all the difference in his life. Even if the word “spook” were interpreted in its literal meaning, it could have a different connotation. Ghost means something which doesn’t exist, a kind of nonentity. As he never sees the students whom he addresses as spooks, it might be interpreted that he is referring to his inner self by the word “spook.” His own decision of passing as a Jew to avoid any humiliation proves reverse in his life. His identity as a Jew makes the incident more complicated and he is accused of racism which brings his downfall. It is the irony of his fate that he is accused of insulting the black race which he really belongs, at least biologically.

His inner conflict, which he goes through his whole life, is also very vivid in his constant fear of getting exposed. His romantic love affair with the eighteen-year-old exile from Minnesota, Steena Palsson, is simultaneously a

source of pleasure and torment for him. A simple, innocent, almost childish poem by Steena makes him tremble with horror. "How much can I tell/of what I see in him?" (Roth, 2000, p. 112), a simple sentence by Steena but it becomes a trauma for Coleman. His fear of being exposed forces him to find the double meaning of the poem. In his excitement he even misreads the words of the poem "neck" as "negro." It is actually his inner identity crisis which haunts him everywhere, in his every relation:

You take off your clothes, and you are in bed with somebody, and that is indeed where whatever you've concealed, your particularity, whatever it may be, however encrypted, is going to be found out, and that's what the shyness is all about and what everybody fears. In that anarchic crazy place, how much of me is being seen, how much of me is being discovered? Now I know who you are. I see clear through the back of your negro. (Roth, 2000, p. 113)

He is almost intimidated by that eighteen year old girl. His fear proves true to himself eventually when he is mercilessly refused by that girl only because of his ancestry. In spite of Coleman's family's all out efforts of welcoming her, she throws him out of her life only because of his ancestry. "I can't do it!" (Roth, 2000, p. 125), is all she tells him and leaves him forever. That incident created an everlasting impact in his mind. The fear of losing someone whom he really wants in his life haunts him like a ghost throughout his life. That incident defines every relation, each move he makes in his life later. His marriage with Iris, many years later, can be interpreted as a shield Coleman wants to use to protect his Jewish identity. In the depth of his heart, he is insecure and vulnerable for his own identity. He gets married to a white woman simply because he wants his children to understand that their physical appearance and white skin color can be interpreted as the representation of the suppressed inner crisis of Coleman Silk. His decision of leaving his family behind and his family's decision to abandon his "lily-white" face take his inner crisis into its climax which is evident in what Ernestine, Coleman's sister, tells Nathan Zuckermann after Coleman's funeral.

Coleman suffered for his decision. Nothing ever escaped Coleman's attention, and that held true for his own feelings. He could cut himself away from us but not from his feelings. And that was most true where the children are concerned. I think he himself came to believe that there was something awful about withholding so crucial to what a person is, that it was their birth right to know their genealogy. (Roth, 2000, p. 320)

Coleman Silk is not ashamed of being black; he is ashamed of having lied to find a new identity for the social advantages attached with it. It is the shame derived from the fear of being discovered. Lying and self-deceiving hypocrisy are "stains," but in the case of Coleman, we could easily say that he is not as guilty of racism or the exploitation of women as he is of deconstructing and reinventing his own past. (Safer, 2006, p. 128)

Coleman Silk is a victim of racism in society. "Passing" can be an independent choice, but in Coleman's life it is not actually his choice, rather he falls victim to his surroundings and to escape the fate, which is common to most of the black people, he decides to change his identity as a Jew. His whole life is an endless suffering and struggle of getting free from the arbitrary prejudice imposed by racist society; nevertheless, ironically each time he falls victim to his own fate. He wants to create his own fate. But alas! His fate deconstructs him each time in his life. Elaine B. Safer (2002) also argues in his writing that:

When Les, several months later, kills Faunia and her beloved we recognize that Coleman, who sought freedom under the fabricated identity of white and Jew, now, ironically, is killed by the anti-Semite Les as much for being a Jew as for being Faunia's lover. (p. 214)

All he had ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white-just on his own and free. ... The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intention of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms? (Roth, 2000, p. 121)

However, it is irony of fate that the mark, the stain, the private consciousness which Coleman wants to throw away into oblivion is the mark he carries all his life. Roth, through the character of Faunia gives the most significant message of the novel. "We leave a strain. We leave a trail, we leave our imprint" (Roth, 2000, p. 242).

Roth makes a comparison between Coleman Silk and King Oedipus to make him as a tragic hero. It is true that both are victims of their fate, but in a different way. Oedipus unknowingly delves into of his identity; however, Coleman, very consciously, wants to deviate from his own identity.

Whatever Mark himself thinks (and we never discover), Zuckerman – a novelist by trade – is clearly interested in considering whether the professor of Greek's life can be viewed in terms of classical tragedy, or more particularly, as a version of Oedipus the King. As several critics have pointed out, Silk resembles Oedipus in that he willingly performs a series of action which lead to his own ruin. Unlike Oedipus, though Silk has always known about his own identity than anyone else. (Boddy, 2010, p. 42)

But what Boddy does not mention in her writing is that unlike Coleman, Oedipus is not an escapist. He faces the truth even at the cost of the light of his life. Yet Coleman, tormented between two binary identities, tries to deny the most obvious truth of his life- his genealogy.

His lifelong denial of family history is compared by Safer (2006, p. 123) with Oedipus the King, a guided comparison due to Roth's epigraph from Sophocles, talking about purification and exile of man". The reference is to a professor of classics whose apparent transgression caused his banishment from Athena academic community, a dominant contrariety of the novel, as it is called by Elaine Safer (2006, p. 123)... human stain and people's idealistic desire for perfection; crime and purification. ... Coleman feels that his color stains him in a society where being

other, an Afro-American, makes one the object of prejudice. His desire for purification – and thus for freedom – convinces him to pass as white. Just as Oedipus believes he has escaped the destiny of marrying his mother and killing his father, so does Coleman assume that he has avoided the fate of a black man by passing as white. (2006, p. 124). (Constantinescu, 2014, p. 51)

Jenifer Glaser (2008) in her writing makes a comparison between Coleman and the crow named Prince in the book. Like Prince, Coleman wants to imitate the voice of others and as a consequence, he lost both the voice of his own as well as the voice of others.

During the funeral of Coleman Silk, the prayer for the departed soul is also a proof of post war American society's attitude toward race and racism. "A Jew is dead. Another Jew is dead. As though death were not a consequence of life but a consequence of having been a Jew" (Roth, 2000, p. 314). Race and ethnicity are more valued in the then post-war America which affected Coleman's life also. Coleman's whole life is a struggle to be a Jew.

Faunia's character is another example of passing in "*The Human Stain*." Though she is not the subject of racial prejudice like Coleman, her struggle is also to get a place in the society to live. She passes into an illiterate unintelligent janitor, which she is not. Her lifelong struggle to escape the abusive step father, tormentor husband and the tragic death of her children leads her to pass into a different identity. Both Coleman and Faunia's passing into different identity, their struggle to survive with the new identity only bring their downfall.

Secrecy is at the very heart of what identity means in this novel. Secrecy is related with shame in a specific way: shame of not being discovered, and also it is the shame of not being authentic. Amy Hungerford emphasizes that the problem of "identity plot" is the problem of "I" and of "We." It is a constant process of definition of "I" through "We"- family, ethnic group, society, nations, but, first of all, race. (Constantinescu, 2014, p. 51)

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