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A Study of Antiracism in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

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ABSTRACT

Violator or Volunteer: A Psychological State of Stepping into Darkness to Illuminate Life in *THE HUMAN STAIN* by Philip Roth

The unexplainable state of mind, right from the early days, is dominance of one being over the other, both externally and internally. Man always wants to rule everything; whether it's human or non-human, no matter, he or she wants to be the ruler. Denied opportunities to dominate others, create many psychological complications. Man becomes violent even wild and ends to be harmful. To satisfy one's power and dominance over everything, many a times, man goes to the unimaginable extent of indulging in evil actions. Philosophy and literature always provides aid to understand one's self and to be better being in one's existence. This study tries to analyze the scale of socio ethical aspects and how far circumstances makes an individual to be a violator of values and on the other hand makes an individual be a volunteer to travel a psychological journey to wipe out the darkness and to illuminate a self- dignified life in spite the harsh realities of stains in one's life.

Keywords: Human psyche, Racism, Identity, Stain

Violator or Volunteer: A Psychological State of Stepping into Darkness to Illuminate in *THE HUMAN STAIN* by Philip Roth

Philip Milton Roth, an American novelist, started his literary career from 1959 with a successful maiden novel which brought him an award, a National Book Award in 1960 for his debut novella, *Goodbye Columbus* that portrays the Jewish American life. Later Roth experimented with the themes in his writing like semi auto-biographical themes, Jewish-American life, and a satirical treatment of the patriotism and idealism. Martin Green praises Roth as follows “But what makes Roth special is not only that his critical sense ... His imaginative creations. His stories are full of beautiful insights into books and authors, into the business of teachings and criticising, and into living the works of literature over time”(Green IX). The novels of the Roth bring out the human emotions like fear, anxiety, making a choice, freedom, alienation, and also suicidal instincts. The style of narration of Roth is undoubtedly incredible due to his choice of diction and thus George J Searles observes rightly in his *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike*, “Like any good stylist, then, Roth achieves his effects consciously, through craft and his novels and stories abound with examples of his stylistic virtuosity” (119). Trying to analyze the problem of today’s world which is often known for disloyalty and infidelity nature of human beings that frequently play a havoc in someone’s life, this paper studies the social values on the basis of racial discrimination.

Observing Roth, Martin Green says,

Philip Roth seems to me the most gifted novelist now writing at least if one puts a stress on tradition in using the word “novelist.” He translates his intelligence and his feelings into the terms specific to serious fiction He has at least one special claim on all serious readers, that he is himself the

serious reader as writer His stories are full of beautiful insights into books and authors, into business of teaching and criticizing, and into living with works of literature over time. (Green 156)

Philip Roth, the Jewish American writer, is widely known for his Jewish back ground novels. In his novel *The Human Stain* (2000), the protagonist Coleman Silk, the classics professor, at Athena college, America, is forced to resign from his profession for the utterance of the derogatory word ‘spooks’. Roth depicts the novel *The Human Stain* in the backdrop of racial discrimination in the African-American society. Coleman silk, the Jewish protagonist, is actually an African-American. Roth portrays Coleman as a Jew, when the novel opens. As an academician, the college dean Coleman rocks Athena. No one is unaware of Coleman’s heroism in the subject. As a classical professor Coleman authoritatively speaks and uses English language while teaching. Expressing his irritation at two students who had failed to appear for his class six weeks into the semester, he sarcastically asks the rest of the class if the missing students are real or only ‘spooks’. ‘Spooks’ connotatively refers to ghost however figuratively, refers black. Mary George , the author of Contemporary American Literature says about Roth’s writings as this; “In Roth’s fiction, the exploration of “ promiscuous instincts” within the context of Jewish –American lives mainly from a male viewpoint plays an important role” (49CAT).

The whole Athena campus took this as a denigrating epithet to denote blacks. His own colleagues led by a French feminist namely Delphine Roux, brands Coleman as a racist. But Coleman did not even show any regret on apology for his usage of the word ‘spooks’ moreover he defends his rights to use English language as he pleases. This resulted in provoking his enemies more. Unable to continue his work he resigns in disgrace. During this ordeal his wife was killed by the racists. Coleman blames the college for this and he fantasies about writing a revenge–memoir, which ironically titled as

‘Spooks’. Coleman shares his anger and grievance with his neighbor Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, who after the death of Coleman wanted to publish the book not as ‘Spooks’ but as ‘The Human Stain’.

Zuckerman admired Coleman’s life and he discovers that his hero (Coleman) was a born African American. Ernestine, Coleman’s sister reveals this secret to Zuckerman after that death of her brother. It is evident that Coleman as an embodiment of multiple histories as well as multiple culture. Coleman’s story starts in the summer of 1998, a year popular for President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky and ends with the violent act of deranged Vietnam Veteran Lester Farley, whose story provides the plight of Vietnams as a result of Second World War. The part of the novel provides Coleman’s Jewish American culture and the other part provides his African American culture. Tim Parrish writes; “For if Coleman lives most of his life and even dies as a Jew (he is given a Jewish funeral service) his “Jewish”. Identify is the consequence of a choice Coleman made to the historical situation in which he came of age” (213).

Coleman, after deciding his draft of ‘spooks’ goes to Zuckerman in order to ask him to write his story. Zuckerman, who at first not so very impressed to write about Coleman decides to write when came to know about his hero’s secret. In the novel Roth writes : “Not quite knowing what was happening, standing in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman’s coffin, I was Completely seized by his story, by his story, by its end and by its beginning and then and there, I began this book”(337). Roth deliberately uses the name ‘Coleman’ that refers his black identity whereas the name ‘Silk’ associates Coleman to the American culture. Coleman’s usages of words throw a light on his secretive identity. For instance, when he says the term “lily-white face” to Nelson Primus, the lawyer of Coleman, Primus could not come out of shock for a long time and was astonished to recall the term “lily-white face”.

Coleman's childhood life also proves how he encountered racial discrimination even at the young age. Against his father's knowledge, Coleman takes up boxing at new gym run by Doc Chizner, a Jewish man. Coleman even at the age of eight, has shone his championship in boxing. He wins several fights against Golden Glove-champion-quality opponents. Doc Chizner is the one who persuades Coleman not to tell anyone that he is a black. But still he does not advice Coleman to say that he is white. "If nothing comes up, you don't bring it up. You're neither one thing nor the other. You're silky silk. That's enough" (98). Coleman at first startled by Doc's advice, later very much convinced and followed Doc till his end. Coleman realized that his black identity would separate him from others. He is called "nigger" for the first time by a white person at Howard University. He was insulted when his own fellow black students make him feel 'Black'.

Roth's portrayal of Coleman reveals that he (Coleman) is not someone who runs away from his race identity. Coleman does not want to hide his black identity instead he feels the danger in revealing it. Except to Coleman's family no one knows that he is from Negro origin but all view him as a Jew professor at Athena College. The whore house incident is another burning issue for him. He was thrown out of a whore house when a prostitute of white race announces that he is not originally a Jew, but a black. Coleman completely disgraced, felt the consequences in the Navy, if they come to know what had happened (that Coleman was severely beaten in the whore house). He seeks refuge in a bar which specifically allotted for blacks.

Another irreparable loss in Coleman's life is losing his love for the only reason that he is a black. Steena, a white girl, who very much desires to marry Coleman, leaves him after meeting his black family. Coleman decides to marry a white Jewish girl, and successfully does it. His wife Iris has ever come across a least suspect about Coleman's real identity who would not inquire or even think about that he has hidden a secret. Coleman skillfully manages to make her believe that he is a white,

indeed he takes no extra efforts to do so. Iris silk, his wife, who belongs to white culture, lived with him peacefully. Roth shows always Coleman as a ‘Man of Pride and Dignity’. Whatever life offers, there is strong possibility of making a choice to be a ‘Volunteer’ of a dignified life by vehemently avoiding to give a space for others to violate values and rights.

Even Coleman’s death bears the mark of dignity. Tim Parrish writes: “Zuckerman is not black, Ernestine is not Jewish; in fact they hardly know each other, still, through Coleman they share a history” (222). There is a stain in every human beings life. The so called stain in Coleman’s, is his race; his black identity. This is only a prejudiced view of westerners but the author shows how all the humans have different darker sides that manipulates the values of the mankind. Coleman courageously steps into the darker side of life by hiding his real black identity as a secret, only to end up in illuminating the concept of not losing his self-dignity at any cost. The study reveals that the stain is not for Coleman alone but its universal, as power and dominance are the deeper stains in human psyche hence becomes *The Human Stain*.

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