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PHILIP ROTH 'S *THE HUMAN STAIN* AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BLACK AFRO-AMERICANS

DHANASEKAR.S¹, S. BANU DEVI²

¹M.Phil scholar in VELS University,

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, VELS University



ABSTRACT

This article confronts the Impasse of Race and Ethnicity in "*The Human Stain*". It demonstrates how Coleman desire to create the self anew is placed with a certain class and race in *The Human Stain*. In turn, I will look at how such a conflict finds important parallels in the life of Roth's narrator. By exploring the complications and limitations involved in Coleman's attempt at self-authorship, I would suggest that Zuckerman finds yet another means of rehearsing the painful conflict involved in his own efforts to reinvent his Jewish origins. It is the phenomenon of history within the African-American experience of slavery and racism. By thus examining how various conflicts between self-making and socially constructed identity – what Coleman describes as his determined battle. I will explore the manner in which Roth engages with contemporary cultural debates over political correctness and identity politics.

The Corrupted Blacks- "*THE HUMAN STAIN*"

The Human Stain dramatizes certain challenges that the popularized growth of localized notions of cultural difference within American life. Roth's novel thus locates itself at the centre of recent tensions between broad encompassing ideas of Rooseveltian liberalism and the new conservative Right in America. In addition, certain scholars have undertaken a reevaluation of already canonized texts, in an effort to discuss how such integral components of the dominant literary tradition have been informed by previously overlooked issues such as race, gender and sexual orientation. The critics argue that the concept of difference put forth by what has been called the "cultural Left". It describes how academic proponents of identity politics, having been weaned on the assorted ideologies of the late 1960s. Refusing to entertain the challenges of unity and objectivity within post-structural theories of difference, conservatives criticize strategies of political correctness and identity politics, to regulate cultural knowledge. The established canons of literary history can be re appropriated from their conservative cultural usage by the Right as a means of understanding how various struggles between centre and margin, power and subjection have been ongoing in Western culture. In my discussion of *The Human Stain* that follows this brief discussion on the debates surrounding identity politics, I will explore in greater detail the ways in which Coleman's claim to a universal humanist concept of the self "as real apart and beyond the social determinants defining him" might intersect with this conservative notion of individualism. By presenting the complex ways in which Coleman's decision to pass beyond the

confines of his race is compromised and frustrated in the text, I will examine how Roth approaches both conservative notions of cultural order and politically correct concepts of difference.

In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman sets out to recount the highly complex biography of his late friend, Coleman Silk. The narrative is stimulated by the surprising revelation made to Zuckerman that a secret lie at the centre of Coleman's life. While attending the latter's funeral, Zuckerman is made aware that Silk was in fact African-American by birth and that his racial origins had been concealed to the wider world by his single minded decision, made some fifty years earlier, to 'pass' as a white man. This phenomenon of 'passing' is one that has a long history within the African-American experience of slavery and racism. Coleman's determined commitment to disguise himself as white is, fully consonant with this social tradition. His initial act of passing is made during a post-war period in which American society was still structured hierarchically along racial lines. Silk's sister, Ernestine, makes clear to Zuckerman how Coleman was a part of his time. However, Zuckerman's brief friendship with Silk develops in the late 1990s. Having been accused of racism, he departs from his academic post. Determined to enlist help in writing an autobiography that will prove both a personal defense and a retributive form of vengeance against his accusers, Coleman calls on Zuckerman, the local writer who is himself somewhat in 'hiding' or seclusion from the greater social world. The damning accusation made against Coleman for his unwitting use of a racist term becomes a focus through which Roth dramatizes various tensions in the relationship between race and subjectivity in *The Human Stain*.

THE NATION OF DOMINATION- AFRICAN-AMERICAN

In contrast to the racially sensitive language of political correctness, Coleman's earlier act of passing is largely presented by Zuckerman. Zuckerman thus explores in Coleman's biography on the conflicts between the notions of social origins and acts of self-authorship that have coloured his own life and writing in the past. Unwilling to accept the notion of a degraded racial identity – as it is both assigned by white dominated society and by his African-American environment of family and community – the young Coleman's desire to pass as white finds expression through a universal humanist language. Zuckerman seems to share in Robert Hughes's assessment of the enforcement of politically correct codes as a "process [that] is akin to the old American religious one of shunning and shaming" (Hughes, 51). This prevailing sense in which "life, in all its shameful impurity, once again confounded America" finds yet further evidence for Zuckerman in the atmosphere of gossip and prejudice that surrounds Coleman's sexual affair with Faunia Farley, a janitor at Athena College. In particular, Delphine Roux, a jealous and vindictive former colleague who led the charges of racism against him, accuses Coleman of manipulating "an abused, illiterate woman half your age" (3). Delphine's eagerness to label Coleman as both a racist and a chauvinist forms part of her wider efforts to locate him as an example of the Ur-oppressor: the historically dominant white male to which her morally charged sense of political radicalism finds its point of attack. In fierce opposition to the cultural and moral precepts by which Clinton and Coleman are judged, Zuckerman repeatedly expresses a radical skepticism towards our ability to know people in such absolute terms. By insisting that "our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong" (1).

As my introduction suggests, Roth's Jewish protagonists often set out to disown their localised ethnic allegiances in favour of the more liberating notions of individual self-possession that they discover in broader values of American democratic culture and high-literary tradition. Interestingly, this struggle between inherited origins and the self-determining subject in Roth would appear to reverse the claims made by certain post-structural critics about how far-reaching and dominant notions of literary and national culture work to stifle and oppress cultural differences. Figures such as Portnoy and Zuckerman are inhibited and frustrated – not empowered – by their sense of marginal and parochial beginnings as American Jews. Through the story that he weaves in *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman explores how certain ineradicable experiences of ethnicity, race and class have worked to frustrate both his own and his protagonist's efforts to perceive their adult lives as being completely separated from the social context of their upbringing. Such a complex examination of Coleman and Zuckerman's longings for complete ownership of the self is highly consistent with Roth's earlier explorations of Jewish social identity. As my introduction discusses, the various journeys of accession into the myth of deracinated and self-determining subjectivity that many of Roth's characters make are, ultimately,

frustrated by a residual sense of a wounded or marginalised Jewish experience. It is in this particular manner that the idea of a common and universal cultural inheritance that transcends more parochial experiences of Jewish belonging is made highly problematic in Roth's fiction. Through the distinct parallels that enmesh the stories of both Zuckerman and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, Roth explores the manner in which this highly complex and divided sense of Jewish-American identity impacts upon arguments about commonality and difference in recent cultural debates in America.

I IMAGINE- THE CRITICAL RACISM

Zuckerman reflects upon the role that his literary imagination has served in bringing his now deceased friend back into (narrative) life:

"For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know.

I imagine, I am forced to imagine"

This declaration of his narrative intention to "imagine" a biography for Coleman recalls similar statements made in *American Pastoral* about having "dreamed a realistic chronicle" of the Swede's life. Despite his efforts to free his art from certain autobiographical conflicts in these texts, the mixture of longing and anguished frustration that has marked Zuckerman's life as a Jewish-American subject continues to be made palpably evident in *The Human Stain*. Just like Coleman, then, Zuckerman's efforts to 'pass' over the complications of his marginal origins for greater purposes of creative (self-) invention are subject to a clear degree of frustration.

However, his attention is eventually arrested by the unexpected revelation of the sexual affair that Coleman is carrying out with Faunia, a woman who is thirty five years his junior. By re-evoking a deeply buried past life – "the oldest adult Coleman there ever was" – in which "his considerable talent for conscientiousness was spent garnering pleasure alone" (6), Silk's renewed sexual voracity supplies evidence to Zuckerman's overreaching claim that our knowledge of others is fundamentally inhibited by a sense of something hidden or unknown.

According to Zuckerman, it is the "contaminant of sex" that inaugurates "the falseness, the dissembling, the dual being, the erotic *professionalism*" (2) by which any innocent and unitary forms of self-knowledge are made to appear inadequate. The connection between desire and fiction as counter-drives to death is made further evident by Zuckerman's vicarious sense of involvement in the sexual affair between Faunia and Coleman.

In many ways, Zuckerman's growing narrative obsession with Coleman and the latter's renewed form of erotic longing in old age has the effect of re-awakening his own dormant sense of sexual/aesthetic desire. What he calls his deliberately altered, relationship to the sexual caterwaul undertaken by means of his experiment in radical seclusion, is unexpectedly disrupted by Zuckerman's friendship with and artistic interest in Coleman.

An example of how this close proximity between death and desire is marked out in *The Human Stain* is evidenced by a scene in which Zuckerman – describing himself as play[ing] the part of the walk-on, an extra, directs his narrative gaze as a larger frame for the spectacle of Coleman watching Faunia at work, milking cows on a dairy farm.

NOTHING LASTS AND NOTHING PASSES, EITHER

Zuckerman describes how the unvanquished libidinal yearning of the aged Coleman marks a suspension of limits – namely of aging and death – by recalling "the injunction upon us ... not merely to endure but to *live*" within "the enigma" of "the pointless meaningfulness of living". Recalling this episode after its two protagonists have been killed, Zuckerman highlights its significance as a stay against the concrete limitations and ultimate futility of existence:

all was recorded as real by tens of thousands of minute impressions.

And Coleman and Faunia, who are now dead, deep in the flow of the unexpected, day by day, minute by minute, themselves details in that superabundance.

Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either. And nothing passes just because nothing lasts. Zuckerman's vicarious form of narrative desire is displayed by the way in which the text seems to join with the enclosed and a temporal world of erotic enjoyment that Faunia and Coleman inhabit.

However, in mentioning the irredeemable fact that Coleman and Faunia "are now dead," Zuckerman reminds us of how the eternal present of the "superabundant" into which his narrative has placed the lovers is made perishable by their eventual demise. His summation that "nothing passes just because nothing lasts" provides an interesting way of understanding Zuckerman's aesthetic mode in *The Human Stain*.

However, this sense of the creative/erotic pleasures afforded by writing in opposition to notions of death and unknowing is set against his acute awareness of the thanatological limitations affixed to his narrative means of detailing 'real' lives and experiences. Zuckerman's sense of ambivalence and uncertainty as author in the text is demonstrated by the manner in which he is drawn to Coleman and Faunia's sexual courtship. Zuckerman's fascination with the affair between them is underwritten by certain anxieties about his role as the parasitical writer who seeks to unearth some fictional possibilities from the private and secret lives of others. At times, Zuckerman can be seen to inhabit a dual role as both the artist who preserves in his fiction the transcendent moment of the lovers' erotic union, as well as serving as a kind of intrusive onlooker to their intimate privacy. It is important to note that all scenes of sexual intimacy between Coleman and Faunia are re-constructed in the novel by Zuckerman, who does not have direct access to events, but for whom such moments act as important examples of the metaphorical relationship between Eros and as counter-drives to death. There is a preserving impulse at work in the way that his narrative seeks to capture and, in some way, make immutable the lovers' momentary rejection of time and loss. Yet as the literary voyeur, Zuckerman in a way makes mutable this erotic scene by re-introducing it to the narrative time with all the sense of provisional meaning that it implies in *The Human Stain*.

This suggestion that Zuckerman's fiction has a certain destructive or corruptive effect – as well as a life-affirming and redemptive purpose – is underlined by comparisons that are made between him and the figure of Lester Farley as stalkers who prey upon and violate Coleman and Faunia's intimacy. Farley is a traumatised Viet Nam veteran and the separated husband of Faunia. His obsessive jealousy leads him to spy upon Faunia and Coleman in a manner that implies a constant threat of violence toward them both. While he attempts to identify his narrative role with the erotic sense of renewal that Coleman and Faunia's affair represents, Zuckerman also suggests a certain kinship between himself and Lester as destructive interlopers.

Zuckerman indicates the ambiguous position that he, as narrator, inhabits in relation to the lovers:

"[a]s I reconstruct it, Coleman, so as to be certain that no one was spying on the house, was himself in and out the front door and the back door and the kitchen door some six or seven times in the hours after Faunia's arrival" (10).

By impersonating Coleman and imaginatively inhabiting his inner reflections, Zuckerman brings his deceased friend temporarily into existence in a way that places him at an elusive distance from "all this ridiculous antipathy he and Faunia had aroused" (11). However, by exteriorising within the narrative what he sees as Coleman's internalised desire to escape the judgment of others, Zuckerman has in many ways violated that protective space of secrecy and sexual "craving" in which Silk and Faunia have sought refuge.

As an agent of destruction and violence in the novel, Les Farley not only torments Coleman and Faunia's erotic union, but he also comes to represent a thanatological counterforce within Zuckerman's narrative account. Following Coleman and Faunia's deaths, Zuckerman's thoughts become dominated by his suspicion that it was Les who murdered the two lovers. However, his attempts to incorporate Les and his suspected actions within the narrative lead to a certain faltering of the fictional prowess that Zuckerman has demonstrated in his treatment of other, equally unknown lives in the novel. While standing at Coleman's graveside and contemplating the horror of his friend's death, Zuckerman speaks of Farley in terms of his being both a literal and narratological misfit:

"I couldn't go myself because of Les Farley ... he muscled on undisturbed, uncharged with any crime, manufacturing that crude reality all his own, abrute being colliding with whomever he liked however he liked for all the inner reasons that justified anything he wanted to do"

Les is presented here as a type of competing author, whose “crude reality” proves recalcitrant to Zuckerman’s more speculative attempts at re-fashioning experience within writing. Zuckerman longs to redress what he sees as the gross injustice of Coleman’s sudden and suspicious death by seeking to “put Les Farley away for the rest of his life”. His ensuing efforts to uncover the circumstances of what actually happened to Coleman and Faunia signal a sort of impotent frustration in his desire to transform and re-locate (“put away”) Les within the still evolving narrative. Unable to deal with the unsatisfactory lack of information available, Zuckerman begins, uncharacteristically, to look for closure and certainty with regards to the events surrounding Coleman’s demise. He describes at one stage how he became subject to the “foolish illusion” held by the expectation of completion in his efforts to place, Farley as primary cause of Coleman’s death. Numerous references are made in the narrative to Zuckerman’s sleuth-like fascination with the fact that [t]oo much truth was still concealed, about the events leading to Coleman and Faunia’s fatal car crash. He goes on to describe himself as behaving like an amateur detective in search of possible ‘evidence’. That might make Les “legally accountable”(301) for his actions. Earlier associations between Zuckerman’s role as writer and that of a spy or stalker are recalled by this image of him as a kind of popular fiction detective. As with the previous comparisons made between him and Les as intruders upon Coleman and Faunia’s intimacy, Zuckerman makes us further aware in this instance of how the redemptive function of fiction as a quest for meaning in opposition to death is also underwritten by a destructive instinct to purge life of its hidden depths and secrets. As an embodiment of the thanatological drive toward death and destruction, Les thus represents a particularly troubling source of epistemological uncertainty in the novel, against which Zuckerman’s imaginative effortsto reconstruct ‘real’ events as fiction are faced by a harrowing sense of futility.

In this sense, Les’s refusal to reveal much about himself or to impart with any incriminating secret works as a thanatological counter-manipulation to Zuckerman’s desire for some kind of authorial dominance over the facts surrounding Coleman’s life and death. The encounter between the two men ends when Zuckerman’s frustrated efforts to explore what lies beneath Les’s many layers of secrecy are finally balked by a sense of horror at the personal and professional dangers involved:

“[c]ompletely bested, I’d begun backing away” (259).

However, Les does in fact furnish Zuckerman with a secret of his that is even bigger than the secret of this pond. Even more significant in terms of the overall structure of the novel, the contradictory knowledge that “nothing passes just because nothing lasts” defining Zuckerman’s narrative can be understood in terms of the psychological experience of trauma as an

event which has already occurred and been completed, but has yet to fully ‘pass’ into conscious existence for its survivor. Reflecting upon how Coleman’s “art wasbeing a white man” (345), Zuckerman expresses at numerous points in the narrative his view of Silk’s passing as a brave act of creative ingenuity. He is particularly fascinated by the “the elixir of the secret” (135) that drives Coleman’s attempt at self-authoring.

Zuckerman explains how the gift to be secretive. Zuckerman metaphorically relates passing to writing as an erotic urge for potency and self-control, working in opposition to the death-like hypostases of “everyone knows” and “nobody knows.”

By arguing thus, I wish to counter Royal’s observation that *The Human Stain* gets to the heart of Philip Roth’s (post-modern) project of signifying American identity, ethnic or otherwise” (2006, 138).

Of course, Royal is not the only scholar to have read *The Human Stain* as an example of Roth’s “post-modern” interest in the ability of the contemporary American subject to escape his or her social origins and re-define the self in new and more expansive terms.

By drawing upon contemporary debates on the formation of “whiteness” in American culture and history, I hope to show in the remarks that follow how Coleman’s selfcreated identity in *The Human Stain* fits a model of white subjectivity that predicates itself upon a rejection of race as a perturbing marker of what is “non-white.” By following this line of argument, I aim to highlight the manner in which Coleman is made to experience a sense of racial anxiety by means of his relationship with Faunia, whose alien and non-white social existence forces him to re-visit the trauma of his own racial past.

In his study *Colored White Transcending the Racial Past*, David Roediger suggests that certain post-racial theories in contemporary America are based upon deeply encrypted cultural notions about the racial neutrality of white identity. Roediger opposes the claims of the “colorblind right” (2002, 13) which suggest that the benefits of middle-class prosperity in America are non-specific to race and, therefore, accessible to everyone. He argues that this conservative “‘race is over’ stance ignores existing inequalities ... [by] declaring race to be utterly malleable” (2002, 14).

CONCLUSION

Zuckerman in Delphine’s rigid concept of the historically oppressed victim. By contrast, the notion of the ineradicable and impure “stain” in the novel is related to certain experiences of self-division and thwarted desire that attend the inassimilable trauma of Zuckerman’s Jewish origins. In this regard, Roth is interested in the play of creative (erotic) possibilities and thanatological frustrations that define Zuckerman’s repeated efforts to escape his Jewish family home and find a new origin within wider notions of cultural tradition. It is this sense of an endlessly incomplete passage of assimilation into mainstream cultural life –as opposed to the apparently smooth transition from margin to centre involved in Coleman’s passing from non-white to white – that shapes Roth’s creative exploration of his hyphenated experience as a Jewish-American subject.

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