

# Discursive Formation of Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*<sup>1</sup>

## Philip Roth'un *The Human Stain* Adlı Romanında Kimliğin Söylemsel İnşası

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Öz

Philip Roth'un *The Human Stain* (2000) adlı romanında sözde ırkçılık iddialarıyla işinden ayrılmak zorunda kalan New-England'lı bir profesör olan Coleman Silk'in hikâyesi anlatılır. İddia asılsız olsa da Silk hakkında daha şaşırtıcı başka bir mesele ortaya çıkar. Buna göre ne Yahudi ne de beyaz ırka mensup biri olan Silk aslında beyaz tenli bir siyahidir ve bu gerçeği tüm yetişkinlik hayatı boyunca bir sır olarak saklamıştır. Romanın adında bulunan leke kelimesi ten rengimize ilgili ironik bir çağrışımı aklımıza getirirken, öznel yaşanmışlıkların işareti olarak da düşünülebilir. Bu çalışma, leke kavramından hareketle kimlik meselesinin hem sosyal hem de öznel tecrübeler ile söylem düzleminde nasıl inşa edildiğini tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Leke, Kimlik, Sosyal Baskı, Sınıf Ayrımı, Ön-yargı, Irk, Philip Roth

**Abstract**

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*<sup>2</sup> (2000) simply tells the story of a New England classics professor, Coleman Silk, who is forced to quit his job for alleged racism. The charge is a lie, but the truth about Silk is more shocking because it turns out that for his entire adult life, Silk has been covering up the fact that he is neither Jewish nor white although he is actually a very light-skinned man. The stain given in the title of this novel stands for both a mark on the skin and the mark of our experienced based stories, and which, consequently construct our identities. This paper, therefore, analyzes how the idea of 'stain' is ironically inscribed both socially and individually into our identities.

**Key Words:** Stain, Identity, Social Pressure, Class Distinction, Bias, Race, Philip Roth

### The Idea of Identity 'Self, Social, or Attached'

'Who am I? Am I the one I believe that I am?' These are undoubtedly some of the common questions that have preoccupied mankind since the ancient times. They however seem to have been studied and analysed to further extent in more philosophical circles from the seventeenth century on with Descartes's epoch idea of "Cogito ergo sum." In other words, the idea of identity, in general, has always been an intriguing matter preoccupying not only philosophers but many persons in general. However, this idea of identity became more intriguing for the modern individual living in circumstances of modernity 'or post-modernity' because in the modern period, given Beck's definition of modern society as a 'risk society', living now in a risky society has come to mean "living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence" (Giddens, 1991, p. 28). Therefore, individuals now are confronted with a variety of different experiences, and 'milieux' and diverse social roles, thereby feeling themselves forced to adjust their appearance and demeanour in different forms and according to the demands of particular settings and roles. In terms of the new understanding of the term 'identity' in the modern world, Giddens also underlines the fact that time and space can no longer provide individuals with some clear-cut definitions of identity: "A person may be on the telephone to someone

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<sup>2</sup> *The Human Stain* Türkçeye *İnsan Lekesi* olarak Suzan Arak Akçora tarafından çevrildi ve Ayrıntı Yayınları tarafından 2011 yılında basıldı.

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twelve thousand miles away and for the duration of the conversation be more closely bound up with the responses of that individual than with others sitting in the same room” (Giddens, 1991, p. 189).

The concept of identity has been one of the most discussed ideas among the scholars particularly in the last a few decades. According to Cote and Levine a research indicates that there is “a steadily increasing number of hits on the keyword ‘identity’ including ego identity, social identity, and ethnic identity” (Cote et al., 2002, p. 11). As it is argued in *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture* “prior to the mid-1980s, there are 742 hits on identity keywords, but between 1985 and 1989 alone, there are 4186 hits. Since then, the number of hits has risen to 5650 between 1990 and 1994 and to 7894 between 1995 and 1999. Moreover, since the mid-1990s, several journals have been founded with ‘identity’ in some form or manifestation as their focus” (p. 11).

When considered in a broad sense, the general definition of identity tells us that identity is something simply defining who an individual is. However, such a definition seems to be too weak and too insufficient to define and name such a psychologically, intellectually and socially complicated being’s epistemological conscience of selfhood. Identity is not simply one thing that can be understood from only one viewpoint. Therefore, such a definition, as it both stabilizes and limits its scope and merits, instead of clarifying what identity is, by not covering its interrelated role with culture, the idea of identity should rather be thought of as a cultural biography of a self. Giddens’s elaboration of identity posits that identity is not possessed, but is actively constructed and lived ‘in and with’ certain groups of peoples. Hence, acquiring an identity requires selecting some choices out of options predetermined commonly among the members of any community. Societal influences including traditions, moral codes and established beliefs and behaviours shape our perception of our choices out of which we can develop a self-identity. The very same social factors also concurrently shape themselves by means of the individuals participating in constructing social rules and developing a self-identity therein for themselves.

If the formation of identity is considered from the Freudian idea of id, ego and super-ego, then the role of superego seems to play a highly significant role in the formation of our identities as it comes to function as our ability to contemplate on our actions, to make our judgements about those very actions, and to perceive whether they are in tune with the moral codes, mores or rules of the society. All such moral codes are constructed within the societal teachings, and thereby suggesting the common expectations of a society and which eventually result in emerging an individual’s self-identity in accordance with social rules, rather than our internal contemplation. In other words, as individuals are highly under the control of external factors, they indispensably become heavily dependent on these factors even though they believe that they have developed their authentic self-identities. As Beck argues “what looks like the outside world becomes the inside of an individual” (Beck et al., 1995, p. 40).

Turner argues that people tend to define themselves and others in accordance with several “categories such as professional membership, religious affiliation, gender and age groups” (1985, p. 77). These categories according to Turner are abstracted from the members themselves. Identification, therefore, comes to become the perception of attachment to a group including its all positive and negative aspects. However, as Ashforth argues, this way of identification has its own mishaps, and therefore provides an incomplete answer to the question ‘Who am I?.’ “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). She perceives herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group(s), and she perceives the fate of the group(s) as her own” (1989, p. 21). As such, social identification can provide only a limited answer when

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the idea of identity is considered from the both ends of the idea of selfhood both as a social self and also an interior self.

All humans as social beings acquire an identity through their affiliations and memberships in social groups consisting of their families, friends, schools they attend, professions they have, and neighbourhoods they live in, political ideologies they support, racial and ethnical ties they are bound up with etc. All of which, in this respect, both help and force people to define themselves in the eyes of both others and themselves. However, as also definers of culture, these affiliations serve to shape identities by first creating the culture itself, and then the identities come to be formed through that culture. Undoubtedly, all societies are united by the fact that their members are organized in structured social relationships according to a certain culture. Culture and identity are highly related to one another. Although they are distinguished from each other in scholarly examinations as social identity and self-identity, they spring from similar conditions. While social identity is commonly regarded as an identity type that is formed with respect to other peoples' expectations for an individual, thereby legitimizing the concept of generalized others; self-identity refers to the process of self-development where any individual recognizes his/her identity by considering oneself as an object conducting a communication by use of that self.

Likewise, racial identity, which no longer is examined today through biological terms, is deeply related to social construction as Helms posits it "[racial identity] refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (1993, p. 3). However, racial identity has very frequently been considered as a scaffold where individuals categorize others depending on their skin colour. As this is also an issue highly relating to social construction, this paper, in the following section, also discusses the cultural parameters of racial identity through some direct examples from *The Human Stain*.

Similar to racial identity, ethnic identity is widely regarded as a social construct as well since it means a kind of identification a person makes with "a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients" (Yinger, 1976, p. 200).

No matter what kind of identity it is, the concept of identity including both self and social identity including ethnic, political and even racial identity as a revelation of cultural imposition seems to be formed and at the same time practiced within all societies' collective learnings. The role of the collective consciousness of societies therefore functions as a means of surveillance, thereby, ordering, pleasing, and scaring the individuals in general. Therefore, all actions and behaviours not incorporated into a system become alien and thus all "rough edges" are required to be tamed (Giddens, 1991, p. 150).

In this light, one's identity either self, social or political is "learned by interpreting the responses of others in situated social interactions," and individuals, by this token, learn how to ascribe socially constructed labels (...) to themselves and others (Ashfort, 1989, p. 27). Consequently, any person's identity is formed through insecurely attached identities, which, as Gergen argues, as a result distorts "the general notion of the self-concept as a unified, consistent, or perceptually 'whole' psychological structure" (1968, p. 306). Individuals inevitably slide from one identity to another. However, sliding from one identity to another, they "may fail to integrate the values, attitudes, norms, and lessons inherent in the various identities." This in turn, according to Ashfort, "suggests the likelihood of (a) double-standards and apparent hypocrisy. For example, in assuming the identity of foreman, one may eventually forget the values that were appropriate to the prior identity of worker that now

contradict the demands of the new identity; that is one unlearns tendencies that interfere with the ability to embrace the new, valued identity” (1989, p. 31).

### **Identity Crisis in *The Human Stain***

In terms of attaining an identity social control plays an essential role, and individuals, however hard they claim for their authentic selfhood, seem to be dependent on some outer social factors. On this ground, Philip Roth’s well-known novel *The Human Stain* represents Coleman Silk’s struggle for claiming an identity authentically selected by and for himself contrary to the characteristics ascribed to him by the society. In the novel, Roth and Zuckerman simply tell the story of Coleman Silk who is originally an African-American, but surprisingly a light-skinned person. When he goes to Washington D.C. for college education, he, as an adult, confronts the widely practiced racial discrimination. As a light-skinned person also with some Caucasian features, Coleman decides to pass himself off as a white man. Centring around self, class and racial identity, *The Human Stain* primarily tells the story of *everyman*. Coleman Silk as the mouthpiece for everyman refuses to be constructed under the pre-determined societal demands, and looks for alternate ways to claim his identity.

By avoiding his black history, including his family, friends, and community, Silk attempts to escape from the calamities of societal bias; however, sliding into a new community, Silk, contrary to his future vision for himself, does not find freedom at all. His avoided history seems to haunt his life at an unexpected moment like a ghost to remind him that there is no way to escape from the social calamities and restrictions. Searching for his freedom through reconstruction of a new identity, Coleman Silk, according to Zuckerman’s interpretation pursues an authenticity as follows: “[h]e was sure he could make her\* see why he had chosen to take the future into his own hands rather than to leave it to an enlightened society to determine his fate- a society in which, more than eighty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, bigots happened to play too large a role to suit him” (Roth, 2000, p. 120). His decision to identify himself as white by this regards according to Zuckerman comes to be understandable: “He would get her to see that far from there being anything wrong with his decision to identify himself as white, it was the most natural thing for someone with his outlook and temperament and skin colour to have done. All he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white- just on his own and free” (p. 120). Desiring neither any personal benefit nor having any hate-filled plan for the others, Coleman Silk’s only desire is to gain his own authenticity:

He meant to insult no one by his choice, nor was he trying to imitate anyone whom he took to be his superior, nor was he staging some sort of protest against his race or hers. He recognized that to conventional people for whom everything was ready-made and rigidly unalterable what he was doing would never look correct. But to dare to be nothing more than correct never had been his aim. The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms? (p. 120-121)

In Roth’s story, Coleman Silk who is actually a black man passes as a white Jew and nobody including his wife and children knows anything about his secret. Under the latent pressure of dominant groups (dominant role of white race in this context), racial passing in order to acquire a ‘legitimate’ identity, is, however, not a new idea but rather a well-known concept having been discussed in American media from the mid-twentieth century on. Gunnar Myrdal argues that racial passing “means that a Negro becomes a white man, that is, moves from the lower caste to the higher caste. In the American caste order, this can be accomplished only by the deception of the white people with whom the passer comes to associate and by a conspiracy of silence on the part of other ‘Negroes’ who might know about it” (1996, p. 683).

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\* Steena, Coleman’s girlfriend and from whom he hides his ethnicity for several year.

Passing comes to mean a kind of denial of one's own identity by turning one's back on one's own culture and ethnic identity, thereby misleading everybody to be met in the future, however by first constructing a self-hatred. With such an attempt for passing, individuals, accordingly, ensure that they will have no more contacts with their background, which otherwise can jeopardize their plans for reconstructing their new identities as Mills puts it "maintaining contact with black relatives, childhood friends, and neighbourhood acquaintances will obviously jeopardize this endeavour, so it will be necessary to move away from them, sever all relationships and give one's children a highly pruned version of the family tree" (1998, p. 56). Moreover, being recognised immediately as a black man would always jeopardize the identity that he actually wants to introduce. The identity he wants to introduce is that of only Coleman Silk with no primary ethnic, racial ties. The fear that he --as Coleman Silk-- would be minimized under his recognition as a black man seems to be devastating for him because "he was Coleman, the greatest of the great pioneers of the I" (Roth, 2000, p. 108). As a "pioneer of the I", he wants to escape from "the impositions. The humiliations. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame" (p.109) by avoiding his historical family ties.

As explained in "Possible Selves" by Markus and Nurius, although one's self is made up of the past, present and future selves, the idealized future self primarily represents 'a person idea' of what s/he might become and what s/he wants to become, or what s/he is afraid of becoming. Overall, all the selves bring out an individual's wishes, fears, principles, aims, objectives, and threats for their present selves (1986, p. 9). Coleman Silk, out of his possible selves pursues to achieve an idealized future self. For this end he plans to cut all his ties with the past and he thinks that he should tell everybody that his parents are dead. When he reveals this to his mother, his mother certainly feels an extreme pain:

"You are never going to let them (her grandchildren) see me." "You are never going to let them know who I am (...)That'll be my birthday present five years from now. "sit there, Mom, say nothing, and I'll just walk them slowly by.' And you know very well that I will be there. The railroad station. The zoo. Central Park. Wherever you say, of course I'll do it. You tell me the only way I can ever touch my grandchildren is for you to hire me to come over as Mrs. Brown to baby-sit and put them to bed, I'll do it" (Roth, 2000, p. 137).

However, her mom's satirical emphasis on the fact that she has no ability to change her skin colour takes her pain to a further degree as it represents her love now as an unrequited love for her baby --Coleman Silk--. She therefore even seems to agree to enter the house as a cleaner as long as she keeps seeing her son and her future grandchildren. She has no choice, if she had one she seems to be ready to disown even herself although she pretends that she could not be that ruthless with herself:

"Tell me to come over as Mrs. Brown to clean your house, I'll do that. Sure I'll do what you tell me. I have no choice." "Don't you?" A choice? Yes? What is my choice, Coleman? "To disown me."Almost mockingly, she pretended to give that idea some thought. "I suppose I could be that ruthless with you." Yes, that's possible, I suppose. But where do you think I'm going to find the strength to be that ruthless with myself?" (p. 138).

However, as the narrator describes, "it was not a moment to allow himself to be subjugated by the all-but-pathological phenomenon of mother love. (...) It was not a moment to think thoughts other than the thoughts he'd come armed with (...) There was no explanation that could begin to address the outrage of what he was doing to her. It was a moment to deepen his focus on what he was there to achieve" (p. 138). In order to accomplish what he has planned to achieve, Silk, continues his struggle for self-achievement without expressing any sign of regret or grief. Therefore, when he makes his decision about saying that his parents are dead, and his having no sign of regret about this, Silk seems metaphorically murdering both his parents and all familial ties: "Throw the punch, do the damage, and forever lock the door. You can't do this to a wonderful mother who loves you unconditionally

and has made you happy, you can't inflict this pain and then think you can go back on it. It's so awful that all you can do is live with it. Once you've done a thing like this, you have done so much violence it can never be undone—which is what Coleman wants” (p. 139).

Maria Luiza, in her article focusing on the idea of passing, argues that Coleman Silk's passing should not be considered as “selfishness or betrayal to his own race” as she argues that his struggle should be viewed “as a possibility of freedom from categories that, most of the times, are arbitrary and condemn an individual to live in a permanent condition for the rest of his life without offering possibilities of change and mobility” (2011, p. 12). Luiza, in this respect, refers to Hostert's explanation of the concept of passing as he believes that “passing is a refusal of the given, it is also an opportunity for renewal and growing” (p. 12). However, despite Hostert's reasonable allegation suggesting that passing could provide an opportunity for renewal and growing, Gergen's thesis is worth remembering where he posits that no identity is “unified, consistent or whole” (1968, p. 306). On this ground, then one could very righteously argue that an escape from a pre-established notion of identity can never guarantee an individual to develop a consistent and whole identity. It might rather be considered as a trial for renewal yet it never comes to mean that a renewal can fully be secluded from the hidden characteristics of an older identity lurking secretly under the subconscious memories of any individual.

On this ground, “‘If nothing comes up,’ Doc --Silk's boxing trainer-- said, ‘you don't bring it up. You are neither one thing or the other. You are Silky Silk. That is enough. That is the deal’” (Roth, 2000, p. 98). This is what Doc tells Coleman Silk when he advises Silk that he may pretend not to be black because it is not his racial ties but his identity as Coleman Silk that matters. Silk seems to agree with this idealized renewal for himself. However, we should note that for the sake of a desired new recognition by means of a name such as Silky Silk, and by denying the self-history, identity formation still comes to include the denial itself as a component of one's identity. Therefore, a desired identity inevitably includes a non-desired reality as the primary premise of the newly constructed identity. In relation to Coleman Silk's identity crisis Dean Franco argues that “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” (2004, p. 91). Likewise, Amy Hungerford rightly points out, “Coleman could only conceal because secrecy is his identity” and that “he [w]ould only reveal more secrecy” (2003, p. 14).

Denial, ambition and anger secretly come together to bring out a new identity that, allegedly, seems to have no connection with a particular history as it is labelled now from a different social gaze. In other words, when Coleman Silk is boxing in the ring, he seems to be announcing his legitimate name as Silky Silk with each harsh fist: “It was that something he could not even name made him want to be more damaging than he'd ever dared before, to do something more that day than merely win” (Roth, 2000, p. 99). Moreover, the aggression imbedded in his behavior seems to be related to the secret gnawing his mind. “Could it be because who he really was was entirely his secret? He did love secrets. The secret of nobody's knowing what was going on in your head, thinking whatever you wanted to think with no way of anybody's knowing.” (p. 100)

A renewal, in this respect, requires a murder of the very existing identity, which consequently means that that denial as an important part of the identity will secretly be attached to one's future identities.

The new environment where Silk creates a new identity for himself can no longer provide some room for his old ties as they remind him of his ex-identity. Getting escaped from the atrocities of the society by avoiding his history however does not help him escape

from his self-slavery. He, in this respect, seems to become a slave of his own lies and secrets. Freedom is achieved through authenticity. However, the freedom acquired comes to justify Giddens's allegation of a risky life because "living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence" (Giddens, 1991, p. 28). Confronting the negative possibilities of action, Silk learns a lesson as such: "Freedom is dangerous. Freedom is very dangerous. And nothing is on your own terms for long" (Roth, 2000, p. 145). With respect to freedom 'regained' by Silk, his mother's explanation represents how the idea of slavery fixed innately in his self-hatred: "You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were. Now I see why. Even that might delay your escape. There was always something about our family, and I don't mean color – there was something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You're white as snow and you think like a slave" (p. 139).

As deduced from his mother's explanation, Silk seems to have never been strongly connected to the black community he was born into; nor with the expectations of that community that inevitably would ascribe him an identity. Knowing that he would somehow need some certain human relations in order to be able to develop both a social and a self-identity for himself, Silk seems to avoid those pre-determined bonds with his black community, thereby having a chance, by means of his light skin, to develop a new identity among the ones with whom he believes he would possess his 'authentic' identity. Through the institutions he would be welcomed into with his new and preferred identity, such a passing would bestow upon him a desired profession (a university professor in Silk's case), a desired marriage (a white middle class woman in Silk's case), and some desired new friends who might help him forget his old ties and enable him to feel proud of his success fabricated secretly and sealed in his file of self-creation.

In this respect, the deception seems to function in a triple direction: one is a deceiving of white people, another is a deceiving of black people, and the third one is a layered deception of the self. All such dissembling shoves into the foreground an identity created by the schemes of outsiders, not by Silk himself. The scheme becomes a common story of any man passing for white, rich, smart, desired etc. All desires in general are created and written by outsiders, and our decisions which we think authentically belong to our own selves come to represent, in a Lacanian reading, the desires formed and taught by and within the collective memories of societies, coaxing forth an endless circle of desires to circulate constantly, insipidly, and viciously among individuals. Amy Hungerford's definition of desire is worth remembering here. She notes that desire is a "permanent looking towards the other thing, the thing that you are not, the thing that you do not have, the thing that is absent from you .... You can't have desire if you already have the thing. Desire is that force that's always reaching toward something that is separate from you" (Hungerford, 2008).

Quite paradoxically for the sake of an independent self, ruining the self itself through ambition and self-hatred makes the plot structure of the story more complicated, and thereby suggesting the layered personality of everyman with fears, dreams, desires and conflicts. Silk's relationship with women from different classes and ethnicities and hence from different identities reveals a lot in terms of his ambitiously enigmatic search for an identity. Having been disappointed with his relationship with Steena who leaves him soon after she learns that he is colored, Silk meets Ellie Maggie, "a petite, shapely colored, tawny skinned girl." He has good time with her, so he is "alive again" (Roth, 2000, p. 132). He realizes the reason why he feels so comfortable while she is around because it is easy to tell Ellie everything that he could not reveal to Steena; "even about his being a boxer, which he could never tell Steena" (p. 133). "She is not conventional and yet so sound. He is dealing with someone utterly

unnarrow-minded” (p. 134). He tells her about his family, about Howard University and how he could not stand the place. He feels completely very comfortable with her, yet when he meets Iris the woman he marries to, he figures that it was more than a comfortable relation that he was searching for. “It has been fun with Ellie, and it continues to be fun, but some dimension is missing. The whole thing lacks the ambition- it fails to feed that conception of himself that has been driving him all his life.” “He has the secret again.” He is back on the trajectory outward. He has the elixir of the secret- it is being somewhere that is constantly fresh to you” (p. 136).

However, what Silk desired for himself was not a life he could lead as his father or any other man African-American man did in his community that was complying with societal expectations of the community. Therefore, as Zuckerman tells, his relationship with Ellie was fun, “but insufficiently everything else. Sure, he’d regained his innocence. Ellie gave him that all right. But what use is innocence? Iris gives more. She raises everything to another pitch. Iris gives him back his life on the scale he wants to live it” (p. 136). Otherwise it was obvious that he would have a respectful life labelled in accordance with the expectations of his family and community: “He went to Howard anyway. Had he not, his father would—with words alone, with just the English language—have killed him.” Social oppression seems to be at work by ascribing the father a manager like role: “Mr. Silk had it all figured out: Coleman was going to Howard to become a doctor, to meet a light-skinned girl there from a good Negro family, to marry and settle down and have children who would in turn go to Howard. At all-Negro Howard, Coleman’s tremendous advantages of intellect and of appearance would launch him into the topmost ranks of Negro society; make of him someone people would forever look up to” (p. 102).

With Iris, Silk regains the dream he wants to live. It is something beyond the given labels, and therefore it is against all the names carved into selves by birth. It is against all the ties culturally ascribed. Last but not least it is against the dialectical understanding of the ‘we’ and ‘they’ opposition. In other words, it could be said that he resists his being socially constructed regardless of what causes invent him. Silk seems to construct an identity through an experimental attempt by not giving permission anybody to ascribe to him some attributes except for his own ascription for himself. At Howard, he’d, in this respect, “discovered that he wasn’t just a nigger to Washington, D.C.—as if that shock weren’t strong enough, he discovered at Howard that he was a Negro as well. A Howard Negro at that. Overnight the raw I was part of a we with all of the we’s overbearing solidity, and he didn’t want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either” (p. 108). He does not want to get involved in any kind of attachment to force him to have a recognition belonging to a group. He, therefore, doesn’t like the idea of ‘we’ as it pushes him to get engaged with a social, political, or racial camp. So in Washington and, in the first month he realises that his engagement with the residents of this new refuge will be very similar to what he left behind. While attempting to get rid of a ‘we’, he feels that he is on the verge of getting involved in another “we”:

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. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious E pluribus unum. Neither the they of Woolworth’s nor the we of Howard (p. 108).

He rejects any kind of inauthenticity emerging out of groupings. Instead, what he is after is an inconstant self-made identity: “Instead the raw I with all its agility. Self-discovery— that was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular



animal. The sliding relationship with everything. Not static but sliding. Self-knowledge but concealed. What is as powerful as that?" (p. 108).

His resistance to any given ascription can, by this regard, be viewed also as a refusal of 'the name of the father' suggesting the authoritative function of the systemic codes which begin to be inscribed in an individual's subconscious from the birth onwards. The name of the father, in this respect, consists of the ideals highly valued in societies in general and consequently desired by the executors of those ideals in particular. His refusal of the ideals corresponds to his father's own ideals. His father's ideals for his son to value his status in an African American community are consequently denied: "I am not one of you, I can't bear you, I am not part of your Negro we credo. The great heroic struggle against their we—and look at what he now looked like! The passionate struggle for precious singularity, his revolt of one against the Negro fate—and just look where the defiant great one had ended up!" (p. 183). His hidden desire to kill the father as the symbol of authority, and attachment is actualized when his father dies while working on the Pennsylvania Railroad dining car.

Being at odds with the ideals and the teachings of his own community, Silk insistently pursues his own ideals and teachings that, however, except for their characteristically resisting nature, still cannot help him claim an authentic and independent identity. Through denial, and resistance, he is forced to suffer from the invisible effects of the very same social demands. The narrator explains how futile it is to try to get rid of those social demands, as every attempt for self-creation necessitates self-denial as well: "Is this where you've come, Coleman, to seek the deeper meaning of existence? A world of love, that's what you had, and instead you forsake it for this!" (p. 183). Instead, Silk seems to be defeated in his struggle to gain a meaning of existence, and what he loses is explained as follows: "A world of love, that's what you had, and instead you forsake it for this! The tragic, reckless thing that you've done! And not just to yourself -- to us all. To Ernestine. To Walt. To Mother. To me. To me in my grave. To my father in his. What else grandiose are you planning, Coleman Brutus? Whom next are you going to mislead and betray?" (p. 183).

Denial of some ideals, codes, or expectations ironically brings out their affirmation through their recognized values. In other words, both denial and acceptance can be considered under the same rubric of the idea of identity formation. In neither of them, an independent character that is free from the influences shaped by social ideals can be actualized. Denial for its own justification and legitimation needs firstly a recognition of the codes to be denied. The teachings and ideals that are avoided come to haunt one's inner self. During Silk and his brother's touching dialogue, we realise, the angry words told by his brother include a confrontation that Silk wants to free himself from: "'Don't you ever come around her,'" Walt warned him, and his voice was resonant with something barely suppressed—all the more frightening for being suppressed—that Coleman hadn't heard since his father's time (...) Don't you even try to see her. No contact. No calls. Nothing. Never. Hear me? Walt said. "Never. Don't you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again!" (p. 145). This confrontation includes a self-referential pain almost ghost-like haunting his identity with his repressed past.

Moreover, Coleman Silk's using the words "nigger", "spooks" and "lily-white", in this respect, can be considered to be his subconscious revelation of his very own secret. In order to be Silky Silk, his subconscious-self reveals the ascriptions that revenge forges in his fabricated self. For example, while boxing, when he is told to go easy on a black opponent "to give the people their money's worth," Coleman refuses and says "I don't carry no nigger" (p. 116). As David Brauner argues that Coleman Silk, who "is carrying the identity of a 'nigger' with him—that is to say, the consciousness of belonging to an ethno-racial group historically

perceived as subhuman by many white Americans,” (2007, p. 158) he, therefore, wants to take a revenge from his own biography, and displays a self-hatred.

Although Zuckerman tells Coleman’s story, he learns from Coleman’s sister Ernestine only at Coleman’s funeral that Coleman was actually a light-skinned African American man having passed for a white Jew and kept it as a secret throughout his life. At the end of the novel, Zuckerman contemplates Coleman’s surprising secret: “I couldn’t imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing” (Roth, 2000, p. 333). Then he continues with several questions about the reasons behind Coleman Silk’s secret: “Was it the social obstruction that he wished to sidestep? Was he merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness? Or was it more than that? Or was it less? How petty were his motives? How pathological? And suppose they were both—what of it? And suppose they weren’t— what of that?” (p. 334)

Certainly he seems to have sidestepped social obstruction by means of his very own creation of his identity. However, while his individualization is actualization through a self-construction, a social obstruction emerging out of his own preferred self, accordingly, establishes the reality-limits for some other individuals recognizing him with his recent identity where he seals his older, disliked, and additional secret identity. Therefore, Coleman Silk’s following explanation can be considered to be an answer to Zuckerman’s open-ended questions:

He [Coleman] said to me that Markie (his son) probably hated him for his own reasons, yet it was as though he had figured out the truth. ‘I got there what I produced,’ he said, ‘even if for the wrong reason. Markie doesn’t even have the luxury of hating his father for the real thing. I robbed him,’ Coleman said, ‘of that part of his birthright, too.’ And I said, ‘But he might not have hated you at all for that, Coleman.’ And he said, ‘You don’t follow me. Not that he would have hated me for being black. That’s not what I mean by the real thing. I mean that he would have hated me for never telling him and because he had a right to know.’(p. 320)

Although Coleman Silk may be successful in his struggle to achieve a new identity that is far and away from all of his former ties, he will never feel inner peace, as he cannot escape from his own secrets. Zuckerman notes: “He could cut himself away from us, but not from his feelings. And that was most true where the children were concerned” (p. 321). Moreover, the college cleaning woman Faunia, who is also described as “his comrade-in-arms” (p. 164), becomes the only woman to whom he reveals his mystery: “the first and last person since Ellie Magee for whom he could strip down and turn around so as to expose, protruding from his naked back, the mechanical key by which he had wound himself up to set off on his great escapade. Ellie, before her Steena, and finally Faunia. The only woman never to know his secret is the woman he spent his life with, his wife” (p. 164). They both have secrets and struggle to stay away from their biographical ties. In this respect, Faunia’s escape from “the mother, the stepfather, the escape from the stepfather, the places in the South, the places in the North, the men, the beatings, the jobs, the marriage, the farm, the herd, the bankruptcy, the children, the two dead children” (p. 161) all represent a traumatic past experienced and desired not to remember anymore. The idea of secrecy therefore becomes the focal point in her relationship with Coleman Silk. However, it should be noted that while she avoids her traumatic past, Coleman Silk keeps himself locked away from a life he never wished to have actualized. Therefore, the fear of an envisioned life paradoxically brings out a feared life to be lead with secrets.

## Conclusion

Every identity can be said to have secrets shaped through fears, desires and dreams. Hence, every identity mystifies some untold stories, thereby creating some credible, intact and visual realities while at times revealing some clues of other secret selves lurking like ghosts leaving a stain on every decision made and every action taken:

The human stain, she (Faunia) said (...) we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. (p. 242)

Therefore, as Parrish argues, Silk's struggle for achieving an authentic identity may be likened to a fiction. Roth's characters in general, including Silk in particular, "find themselves revising their theories when they try to live them, which means – and this is why Roth is not a conventional ethnic writer – that no identity, ethnic or otherwise, is stable" (Parrish, 2007, p. 128). Roth's fiction, according to Parrish, betrays the compelling but ultimately futile desire of achieving an authentic identity of any kind (p. 133). By means of Nathan Zuckerman as the narrative voice, Roth seems to have formed a connection between the ideas of identity and manuscript. Neither is stable and constant. Likewise, Derek Parke Royal in "Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity" likens Nathan Zuckerman's role as a narrator to Silk's struggle for composing an identity for himself: "Of course you could not write book," Zuckerman says to a now-deceased Silk. "You'd written the book—the book was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you it could only be concealment and so it would never work. Your book was your life" (Royal, 2006, p. 138). As for the title of the novel, Royal accordingly concludes that it might be representing that "identity is always already in an unfinished state, marked by the stain of subjectivity" (p. 139).

Undoubtedly, every individual is born into a certain social structure where self-awareness is formed by means of a collective awareness. However, depending on social moral codes, cultural roles, power relations, traumas, memories, desires and fears, an individual's identity can justly be said to be always disguised. To conclude, at the very end of Roth's story, when Les asks for the name of one Zuckerman's books, his reply is worth noting as it displays the secret nature of identity like a narrative rewritten continually for both the addressers and the addressees: "What's the name of one of your books?" "The Human Stain" "Yeah? Can I get it?" "It's not out yet. It's not finished yet" (Roth, 2000, p. 356). From this point of view, the self can be conceived of as a disguised entity similar to a text, and hence the self itself comes to be fiction suggesting the seers to ponder on myriad of ways defining or redefining "the human self as an entity constructed by, and not simply reflected in a culture's social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices" (p. 382). Consequently, whether observed or not, identity with its all hidden and changing characteristics becomes a multi-layered idea and it can never be unified under the rubric of a general idealization of wholeness. Identity, in this respect, like Derrida's view of lingual communication, seems to be like a narrative viewed and interpreted in plenty of different ways with continually deferred signified identities that tend to change as they will be the signifier identities for new signified identities depending on individual, time, milieu and cultural story.

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