

**BAŞKALARINI KURBAN ETME İHTİYACI VE BUNUN PHILIP ROTH'UN *İNSAN LEKESİ* İSİMLİ ROMANININ KAHRAMANI ÜZERİNDEKİ TRAJİK ETKİLERİ**

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**ABSTRACT**

World history is full of different versions of victimization that actually derive from humans *fears*. For instance, as people *feared* natural phenomena in ancient times, sacrifices were offered as a way of placating the forces of nature and purifying the elements that were thought to cause the outrage of nature/gods. In ancient Greece this was practiced by exiling a goat loaded with the metaphorical sins of the town. The practice of sacrifice has embedded itself in human history so deeply that in modern times it survives in a variety of different forms such as “othering” of women, non-white races, and political dissidents. American history itself is laden with such victimization-sacrifice deliria, the most known of which is the Salem witch trials. Though the act of victimization still stems from *fear*, in our modern world, rather than the forces of nature, people fear social and political forces which threaten to ostracize them if they do not fit. Therefore, social and political misfits are the new victims to be sacrificed.

Philip Roth, the most celebrated of Jewish-American fiction writers, sheds light on the ongoing practice of victimization in contemporary world and its catastrophic effects on the protagonists' lives in *The Human Stain*. This paper aims at analyzing the reasons and the effects of victimization on the protagonist, Mr. Coleman, the College Professor having an African-American heritage. Being brought up witnessing the discrimination against blacks and experiencing its tragic consequences in his personal life, Coleman decides to “pass” as a Jew in order to climb up the hierarchal ladder and enjoy the status he *is allowed* to earn as a Jewish College Professor. Though his passing functions as a way out of racial inequity for some time, ironically, Coleman is victimized due to making racial discrimination to black students in his class.

**Key Words:** Victimization, Philip Roth, Fear, Racism, Political Correctness.

**THE NEED FOR VICTIMIZATION AND ITS TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES ON THE  
PROTAGONIST IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN***

World history is filled with stories of victimization, which actually derives from humans *fears*. For instance, as people *feared* natural phenomena in ancient times, sacrifices were offered as a way of placating the forces of nature and purifying the elements that were thought to cause the outrage of nature/gods. In ancient Greece this was practiced by exiling a goat loaded with the metaphorical sins of the town. The practice of sacrifice has embedded itself in human history so deeply that in modern

times it survives in a variety of different forms such as the “othering” of a wide range of minorities such as women, non-white races, and political dissidents. American history itself is laden with such victimization-sacrifice deliria, the most known of which are the Salem witch trials. Though the act of victimization still stems from *fear*, in our modern world, rather than the forces of nature, people fear social and political forces, which threaten to ostracize them if they do not fit. Often victims are those onto whom such fears are projected by those who can act as if they fit in. Therefore, social and political misfits are the new victims to be sacrificed.

Philip Roth, the most celebrated of living Jewish-American fiction writers, sheds light on the ongoing practice of victimization in contemporary world and its catastrophic effects on the protagonists’ lives in *The Human Stain*. This paper aims at analyzing the interwoven reasons and the tragic effects of victimization on the protagonist mainly due to rejecting his African-American heritage, his failure to be politically correct and his capacity to see inside-out other people’s faking.

Professor Coleman Silk of Athena College, a light skinned African American who has tried to leave behind his black ancestry. Being brought up witnessing the discrimination against blacks and experiencing its tragic consequences in his personal life, Coleman decides to “pass” as a Jew or become a “self-made man” by changing his heritage in order to climb up the hierarchal ladder and enjoy the status he *is allowed* to earn as a Jewish College Professor (Sollors, 1997: 250).

Coleman Silk is a born victim because of his racial status, for being an African-American in the US is one’s ticket to victimization. American history is not the only victimizer in the novel, though. Coleman functions as a character that is both a victim and a victimizer. By leaving his family-- especially his mother-- abandoned and betrayed, Coleman, though not fully comprehending the effects of his decision to pass as a Jew on his family, victimizes and tortures each family member psychologically. Coleman, by rejecting his racial background, leaves behind a heritage and family, especially a mother on whom this act takes a heavy toll, for her own son rejects her and she loses a son while he is alive. Next, Coleman becomes the victim by the academic atmosphere of the 90s dominated by an obsession with political correctness towards minorities.

Growing up witnessing his parents’ social, professional and economic deprivation only due to their skin color, Coleman unwittingly forms the idea that he will not have the chance to live up to his own potential as long as he is known as an African American. Therefore, when Coleman seizes the opportunity to pass as a “Jew” for the first time thanks to his boxing coach, Doc Chizner, he steps into a different world, which marks a sharp break from his racial origin. From then on, Coleman follows his coach’s advice and “if nothing comes up, [he] doesn’t bring [his race] up” (Roth, 2000: 98). Since both Coleman’s physical appearance allows him to pass as a Jew and his immediate acquaintances happen to be Jewish, the only thing he has to do is to behave like a stereotypical Jew, which would be natural for him as he is brought up in a Jewish neighborhood. Therefore, all he has to do is to emulate what he observes in his immediate environment, a habit that he sees dominate the 1990s at its worst. Coleman describes the 1990s in America as a time when “the sincere performance is everything” (Roth, 2000: 147). Hence, Coleman’s success at passing results from his conviction and sincere performance of acting as a Jew. Once he believes in his own performance, others follow his lead.

Coleman's passing is made possible by the death of his father, who had stood as the biggest reminder of his racial status. Rejecting his father's legacy along with his wish for his son to attend Howard College, Coleman thinks he can now begin to author his own life. His entrance into whiteness is finalized with his "playing his skin however he wanted and coloring himself as he chose and" marking his race as "white" in the Army enrollment form, after which he *officially* becomes a white man (Roth, 2000: 109).

American history victimizes Coleman by entrapping him at the lowest strata of life. The stigma of being black inevitably is reflected on his personal relationships. Though Coleman's fears of being stuck in the lowest parts of the hierarchal ladder and social ostracism play major roles in the formation of his new identity, the fear of losing someone he loves becomes the last straw that motivates him to reject his family and past identity. Upon his revelation of his racial past after a visit to Coleman's family, Steena, the first woman he passionately loves, cannot deal with what she learns and finalizes their relationship bursting into tears and repeating "I can't do it" (Roth, 2000: 125). This event serves as a milestone in Coleman's life since, from then on, he decides to turn his back on his family totally and live as a Jew. By constructing a Jewish identity and rejecting the identity he is born to, he starts writing his own life story at the expense of losing touch with his past.

The threat of being stuck in stereotypical jobs reserved for the underdog, particularly blacks, promising a future with no self-satisfaction and fulfillment, the fear being left out as a social outsider and the trauma of being rejected by his lover due to his race are all reasons why Coleman chooses to pass as a Jew. First, witnessing the racial prejudice against his parents and then experiencing racial discrimination first-hand pave the way to his passing. He becomes "two men instead of one, two colors instead of one and therefore possesses a double or a triple or a quadruple personality" (Roth, 2000: 130). Philip Roth shows that Coleman's fears do not elude his victimization; instead they indirectly lead to his own victimization and also to the victimization of the people in his immediate environment. Though there are "gains as well as the costs of jumping over the ethnic fence," tragically, the costs of the victimization of his *family* overwhelm both Coleman and his African-American and Jewish family members. (Pinsker, 1999: 475). For instance, Coleman deprives his mother of the right to meet his wife and his children by passing as a Jew. When Coleman tells his mother that he is going to marry Iris, a Jewish girl who believes Coleman's parents are dead, his mother feels desperate. However, once Coleman explains that his mother will never see her grandchildren since Iris does not know Coleman descends from African American parents, Coleman "perpetuates metaphorically the ritual murder of his mother" (Neelakantan, 2007: 33). Five years later, Coleman allows his mother to see her grandchildren only if she silently sits on a bench by which Coleman would walk with his children. Like Coleman's mother, his wife, Iris, is also victimized by Coleman. By keeping his racial origin as a secret, he deprives both Iris and his children of their birthright. Due to Coleman's made-up persona, none of his children knows their background and they are deprived of the truth.

The fears that trigger Coleman to pass as a Jew do not totally vanish from his life. Instead, Coleman's fears generate new fears. After passing as a Jew, Coleman fears that his secret will be

revealed as a result of some signs. For instance, the birth of his children “brings him to the very brink of giving the whole thing away” (Roth, 2000: 177). However, when there is not a sign of his African-American heritage on his children, Coleman feels relieved and continues to act as a Jew.

Additionally, the process that witnesses the rise of Coleman as a Jew brings forth new political agendas marked by multiculturalism and the postmodern tendency to question the center, especially the Eurocentric values, a tendency that creates its own issues of political correctness. Political correctness becomes almost a new cult with the new fad of the public humiliation of those who fail to live by its decrees. Ironically, Coleman’s blending in mainstream society with his new identity fails the moment he fails to be “politically correct.” Born as a Black-American, Coleman Silk, then the ex-dean of faculty at Athena College, is accused of racially discriminating against two students who have been absent for five weeks and happen to be black. Taking attendance, Coleman asks: “Does anyone know these people? Do they really exist or are they spooks?” (Roth, 2000: 6). This word, with its double meaning marks the beginning of the personal victimization of Coleman by his Athena College colleagues. Though Coleman does not have the intention of racially discriminating against the students, since he does not even know the ethnic background of these students, still he is charged with racism. In response to accusations, he says “I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: ‘spook’ as a specter or ghost rather than using it as an invidious term used fifty years ago,” but his colleagues in the academia are so blinded and conditioned by political correctness towards the race issue that Coleman is forced to retire in the end (Roth, 2000: 6).

Coleman’s victimization by American history continues with the shifts and turns of the meanings of words. The shadows or ghosts of the meanings of the word “spooks” ironically haunt Coleman like his racial past. Political correctness is closely related with the usage or avoidance of some words. In fact, the political correctness of the 90s starts as a corrective to centuries of discriminatory attitudes such as racism and sexism. “Politically correct language claims that it is a civilizing influence on society, that it discourages the use of words that have negative or offensive connotations and thereby grants respect to people who are the victims of unfair stereotypes” (O’Neil, 2011: 279). In Coleman’s case, however, this corrective becomes a means of victimization; it becomes an absurd reversal into its complete opposite, for not only does Coleman know the skin complexion of the students, but also the alleged rudeness of the word “spooks” is no longer available to the ordinary speakers of contemporary English. Though the word lexically does not denote negative a connotation, it brings to surface the *fear* of the resurrection of racist attitudes. “In reality, the obsession of political correctness creates a fear of saying something socially unacceptable” (O’Neil, 2011: 281). In short, like fears that derive from social, political or economic motives, there are also collective *fears* that societies share. Since racism has always been a delicate issue in America and people feel “they live in the heritage of the original racial guilt, the black slavery, the racial segregation,” they make Coleman a *scapegoat* as a retribution for a historical sin or guilt, which they try to leave behind by paying homage to the new cult of political correctness. In today’s world, Roth shows that people tend to victimize “others” as they see the reflections of their fears in them. Therefore, though nearly everyone believes that Coleman has used the word “spooks” in its first and widely used meaning, even one of the academic staff who is hired by Coleman says: “I can’t be with you on this Coleman. I’m going to

have to be with them” (Roth, 2000: 16). In other words, the fear of being socially unaccepted and politically incorrect overweighs not only his gratitude to Coleman but his sense of justice.

The cycle of the victimization process is completed in different patterns throughout Coleman's life. He paradoxically pays for his own *victimization* of his *family and heritage* by inadvertently becoming a victim of society even after his forced retirement when Coleman understands the futility of not only social titles and ranks but also identities, thanks to his affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old illiterate janitor. But the 1990s is not the right time to reject identity politics. Motivated by sexual jealousy and misdirected feminist compassions, Delphine Roux, the colleague who heads the literature department at Athena College, evaluates Coleman's affair as misogyny and sends Coleman an anonymous letter stating: “Everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half of your age” (Roth, 2000: 38). Roth's juxtaposition of Coleman and Faunia's affair with Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair also exemplifies that victimization is not fictional and illusory; instead it takes place in our daily lives almost every day and at every level.

For nearly every character in *The Human Stain* the *motive* of victimization arises from *fear*; however, everyone's victimization *process* takes place differently. Ironically and tragically, Coleman becomes a scapegoat those who identify with-victims in order to avenge their own real or imaginary victimization by putting all the blame on Coleman. For instance, Delphine Roux, Coleman's colleague and the head of the Literature department at Athena College, is a lonely French academician, who has arrived in the USA to prove her intellectual capacity to her over-achiever mother and her relatives in Europe by challenging particularly male academicians, puts an extreme effort into destroying Coleman. Being also sexually attracted by Coleman, Roux constantly interferes in Coleman's life and scrutinizes every aspect of his *personal* life even after his forced retirement. Roux hides her own victimization by appearing as a real intellect and a defender of Coleman's victims. Since there is already Coleman to victimize or sacrifice socially, Roux's sense of her own victimization remains veiled from society. By revealing Coleman's affair with Faunia and accusing him of abusing Faunia, Delphine actually abuses Coleman by intruding upon his personal space. In other words, Delphine conceals her real motives while trying to frame Coleman as a racist and a harasser and, therefore, turns Coleman into a scapegoat. However, what makes Delphine a victim while trying to victimize Coleman is her lack of self-awareness and self-evaluation. Although she becomes the chair of the humanities department, she does not know herself as a human being. Surpassing her mother and proving herself only through this way becomes her only life motto; thus, she is not in touch with her inner feelings, her present state and her future.

Coleman's passing as a Jew enables him to see the fake performances of other people around him, especially Delphine Roux. Coleman, the master of performance, disturbs other people faking in his immediate environment because he sees through their bad performance. That is what makes these people feel almost naked in front of him and the major reason why they collaboratively destroy Coleman and/or remain as inactive spectators during this process.

Coleman's punishment, which starts with academics, is completed by a party at the opposite end. Lester Farley is another character that is both a victim and a victimizer like Delphine. Being a

Vietnam War veteran, Faunia's ex-husband Lester suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and tries to survive after returning to his homeland. However, witnessing the death of his friends in Vietnam War and seeing the futility and pointlessness of war and the postwar policies of American government make his survival process difficult. Lester becomes callous and numb to everything and everyone after his return from Vietnam. He also becomes a threat to Faunia as he cannot forget the death of his children in a fire, which, according to him, is definitely caused because of Faunia's negligence. By both trying to cope with this disturbing thought and trying to adapt to civil life, Lester Farley ends up being a *victim*. However, his psychological quest to identify a guilty person rather than himself and give a face to his mental problems and, therefore, find a little peace leads him to twist his role from being a *victim* to being a *victimizer*. As a result of developing scenarios in his mind, Lester comes to believe that Coleman might be the man with whom Faunia was on the day of the fire that caused the death of his children. In an attempt to make both Coleman and Faunia pay for the death of his children, Lester causes their death in a tragic car accident. Hence, both Delphine and Lester function as agents that victimize Coleman.

In conclusion, in *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth shows how the system marks and stigmatizes human beings due to affinities or dividers such as race, gender or class. Although these are human constructs, every individual falls victim to one or more of these stigmas or "stain"s. Coleman Silk's is a story of irony, for it shows that people, though differing in their motives, end up being a victim to these exactly as they try to avoid them. Not only Coleman, though, every major character in the novel demonstrates grades and shades of being stained by such human constructs that divide and set apart. By presenting victims whose reasons of victimization range from racism, politically incorrect language and behavior to lack of self-evaluation, Roth reveals the fact that the ancient rites of sacrifice and victimization still prevail in modern people's lives, determining still who is socially acceptable or not. The story of social acceptance and ostracism is as old as when the humans created among themselves those that we now refer to as the "other"s. By centering his novel on the Coleman Silk's tragic victimization ironically for the very reason he tries to avoid throughout his life, Roth successfully mirrors the most horrifying tragedy of modern man, which is being branded as "other."

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