Chapter Four

Secrecy, a Strategy for Survival

Secrecy is the element of all goodness, even virtue,

   even beauty is   mysterious.

Thomas Carlyle

Carlyle advocates Secrecy as a component of goodness. Secrecy, often helps in leading a useful existence. The hero of the novel The Human Stain is also compelled by this emotion of Secrecy. The narrator is fascinated by the story of Silk, who adopts a secret policy for his survival.

“[S]tanding in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman’s coffin, I was completely seized by his story, by its end and its beginning, and, then and there, I began this book” (337). The narrator Nathan Zuckerman states this during Coleman’s funeral. He had a startling realization when he caught sight of a black woman at the funeral, Ernestine Silk Coleman’s sister. The fact that she is black naturally makes clear that everyone’s assumptions about Coleman had been entirely wrong. Nathan Zuckerman begins this novel to set Coleman’s record right of being called a racist in spooks incident. His fight to have Silk’s name cleared and to restore his reputation, his retelling of Coleman Silk’s life is the story of this fiction. Roth returned to Zuckerman in 1997 for a second trilogy of novels. Nathan now becomes a Conradian chronicler of the central historical moments in
postwar American life, the late 1960s radicalism, the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s and their equivalents in the late 1990s culture wars.

The novel projects the vision of the most fundamental aspect of the human condition. Philosophy of life that looms large in the narration does not acknowledge the inevitability of the filthier sides of existence. This concept gives the title of the book, *The Human Stain*:

> 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. (242)

The mistake Zuckerman’s protagonists make is to identify the human stain in their lives in the context of the tribe to which they belong. They believe that by severing themselves from the inhibitions and limitations placed on them by the tribe, they are eradicating imperfection from their life, and laying life open to perfection. In Brett Ashley Kaplan’s phrase, the human stain is “the indelible mark that goes beyond the fictions of the self”.
Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) is a fitting final part of the novelist’s recent trilogy comprising *American pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998). In an interview marking the publication of *The Human Stain*, Roth states, “I think of as a thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation”. It dramatizes powerfully the interplay of secrecy and self-transformation that determines human identity. Identity in its varied performative guises had always been the focus of Roth’s fiction. Telling a poignant tale of men and women driven by despair and angst in contemporary multicultural America, *The Human Stain* focuses on the constitution of identity and difference by negotiating the definition of self and the distortions in the perception of the other. In this second novel of the American trilogy, Zuckerman is more a passive agent than an active participant. No reimaginings or recreations forge the narrative. The book bears all the markings of Roth’s later fiction: a provocative subject, a larger than life tragic protagonist, and an ethical subtext pertaining not only to a particular historical moment but to American culture.

In this novel, Philip Roth elaborates on these themes in an entertaining, convincing and erudite manner. Roth succeeds magnificently in creating a richly detailed and complex story flowing effortlessly to its conclusion. Roth foregrounds the claim to an identity that refuses to be socially constructed and instead seeks privileging of its own narrative. Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* is
saturated with images and themes bearing on the multicultural America of the late twentieth century.

*The Human Stain* tells the story of Coleman Brutus Silk, he is a classics professor and sometime Dean of faculty at Athena College in western Massachusetts, who is hectored by the forces of political correctness and hate. Roth’s portrayal of his protagonist ultimately challenges contemporary conceptions of freedom, specifically those entailed by the American Dream.

The story begins as a third person narrative told by Nathan Zuckerman, a novelist living in rural New England, not far from fictional Athena University. Zuckerman first meets Coleman soon after the death of Iris, Coleman’s wife, following a stroke. Visiting Zuckerman, a paranoid Coleman requests him to author “the spooks” book on his behalf and expose the atrocity of the racist charge laid against him by the Athena academic community that had claimed his wife’s life. Though Zuckerman refuses, he finds him irresistible and soon becomes his friend and well-wisher. Zuckerman paraphrases his request as:

He is speaking loudly and in a rush… I had to write something for him… If he wrote the story in all of its absurdity, altering nothing, nobody would believe it, nobody would take it seriously, people would say it was a ludicrous lie, a self-serving
exaggeration… But if I wrote it, if a professional writer wrote it…. (11)

His goodwill for Coleman is strengthened by the discovery that they share not only a love for jazz but also a similar ethnic upbringing, as contemporaries in the suburbs of New Jersey. When Coleman first asks Nathan to write about his misfortunes, he refuses: “his ordeal wasn’t a subject I wished to address in my fiction” (13). Two years later, after Silk’s death, Zukerman is “completely seized by his story and commits himself to its telling” (337). Zuckerman’s desire to plunge into Coleman’s story is synonymous with his desire to plunge into America’s story. Resurrecting the silenced voices of the unwritten world by bringing them into the written world is what Zuckerman does.

The epigraph of the novel is taken from the Sophocles play *Oedipus the king*.

Oedipus: What is the rite of purification?

How shall it be done?

Creon: By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood…. 

These lines are an appropriate reference for a novel about a classic professor whose transgression has caused him virtual banishment from Athena College. The lines also help establish the novel’s major contrariety, *The human Stain* and the people’s idealistic desire for perfection, crime and purification.
Oedipus tries to avoid the calamity of killing his father and marrying his mother. Once he realizes that this has happened, he blinds himself and banished him to pass as a Jew. Just as Oedipus believes that he has escaped the destiny of parricide, so does Coleman assume that he has avoided that fate of a black man passing as Jew. He thinks that by marrying a white woman and begetting white children, he can attain freedom and purification. To do that, Coleman leaves his parents and starts a new life in white community.

Coleman Silk willingly performs a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Unlike Oedipus, Silk has always known more about his own identity than anyone else. Born and raised in a black family in 1948, Coleman Silk decides to pass as a Jew inorder to pursue an academic career. The true nature of Coleman’s ethnicity is described as, “the small- nosed Jewish type with the facial heft in the jaw, one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white” (15-16). If Coleman Silk might be compared to Oedipus, then the administration of Athena College seem to resemble the citizens of Thebes in their dedication to the task of cleansing the community of the pollution ingrained within.

The novel takes place in the year 1998 with the Clinton – Lewinsky scandal as background. Indignation has become the nation’s emotional life. Coleman Silk was the valedictorian of his high school graduating class in Newark, New Jersey. As Roth says, such a person would receive special
privileges by virtue of being black, but that was not the case in the 1930s and 1940s. Coleman described as a precocious teenager growing up in 1930s New Jersey, has been called a nigger for the first time at Howard University. His first intimations of a racial identity shrouded in secrecy reaches him through Chizner. While accompanying Coleman for a match involving the Army and the University of Pittsburgh, Chizner suggests Coleman to mention that he was colored. Reinforcing his sense of self grounded in secrecy, Coleman is unflinching in his aggression and triumphs over his opponent. Musing over his success at the end of the day, Coleman would think:

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. Was it because the Pitt coach didn’t know he was colored? Could it be because who he really was entirely his secret? He did love secrets… The power and pleasure were to be found in the opposite, in being counter confessional in the same way you were a counterpuncher, and he knew that with nobody having to tell him and without his having to think about it. (99-100)

At his father’s insistence, however, Coleman attends Howard, the all-black university. On one of his trips to downtown Washington, he is refused a hot dog at Woolworth’s for being a “nigger” (102). Quitting Howard in 1944, Coleman decides to seek the draft immediately, even if it means lying about his
age. Further, he is guilty of the sinister taking advantage of his light complexion. In self-fashioning his identity from African-American to Jewish American, Coleman exploits his light skin at a crucial historical juncture and thus presses his claims on the American Dream. Roth’s narrator, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman reports:

Then he went off to Washington and, in the first month, he was a nigger and nothing else and he was a Negro and nothing else. No. No. He saw the fate awaiting him, and he wasn’t having it…. 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. (108)

With the realization that, unless Coleman reveals, he will not be assumed as black by the strangers, he resolves to grasp “the raw I with all its agility” (108). He decides to choose to be white, to shed his burdensome identity as a black man. He “was Coleman, the greatest of the great pioneers of the I” (108). Similar to the incident of racial insult at Woolworth’s, his being thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black further exacerbates Coleman’s bruised ego. Denying his basic humanity in refusing him food and sex, American in Coleman’s wrathful imagination conjures up into “the other”. On his discharge from the military in 1946, Coleman enrolls in classics at New York University, though given an option he would have gladly settled in Greenwich Village as a poet or a playwright. Dean Franco puts the issue in
perspective: “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” (91).

The earlier Norfolk incident momentarily weakens his resolve, leading him to characterize himself as a prodigal son:

This was what came of failing to fulfill his father’s ideals, of flouting his father’s commands, of deserting his dead father altogether. If only he’d done as his father had, as Walter had, everything would be happening another way. But first he had broken the law by lying to get into the navy, and now, out looking for a white woman to fuck, he had plunged into the worst possible disaster. (182)

Roth states, “He is repowered and free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue the hugest aim …. Free now not only of his father but of all that his father had ever had to endure. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame – all the inward agonies of failure and defeat” (109).

When Coleman enlisted in the Navy during World War II, he simply declared himself to be Caucasian and maintained the deception to his death. Having grown up in a largely Jewish neighborhood, passing for a non-religious Jew was the easy part. He abandons his parents and siblings for the
white world. When Coleman at twenty-six makes the decision to pass as white his mother tells him “You’re white as snow and you think like a slave” (139). Painful as this separation is Coleman muses on the bizarre and black humour side of the situation. Overcoming disadvantaged origins, he becomes a successful college professor, scholar and dean at prestigious Athena College. But Coleman’s success is at the price of a betrayal of self and family. Coleman’s sexual conquest of women both before and after Iris, dramatizes tellingly the centrality of the project of secrecy and self-invention to his identity. Even while enrolled at New York University, he has an affair with a white girl named Steena Palsson. Having decided to invite Steena for Sunday dinner with his family at East Orange, Coleman is gripped by a compulsive need to justify his act of passing. “He would get her,” so muses Coleman, “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 color to have done” (120). To his dismay, Steena breaks her relationship with him, unable to overcome her racial prejudice. Meeting her again a few years later, Coleman, by then already married and settled in New York, is gripped by a reverie:

That is, he walked away understanding nothing, knowing he could understand nothing, though with the illusion that he would have metaphysically understood something of enormous importance about this stubborn determination of his to become
his own man if...if only such things were understandable.

(125-26)

After his prospects with Steena fail, Coleman seeks Ellie Magee, a black girl, though his enthusiasm for her wanes soon. Only when he meets Iris he is convinced that he has found the woman who would “give(s) him back his life on the scale he wants to live it” (136). To Iris’s queries about his family, he blatantly lies that his parents are dead and that he has no siblings. Thus Coleman, is searching for the “singularity” that has “been his inmost ego-driven ambition” (131).

He then married a non-religious Jewish woman and fathered four children. All four looked convincingly Jewish and Coleman’s relief is explicit: “The family was now complete. They’d done it – he’d made it. With not a sign of his secret on any of his kids, it was as though he had been delivered from his secret” (177). He almost confesses his secret to his wife Iris, resolving to present his wife with the greatest gift he possessed. He would tell the mother of his four children who their father really was. But he is saved from making the confession by watching Iris reaction to the crisis of a friend whose husband had secretly fathered another family. Iris description of the betrayal elicits one of Coleman’s many analogies to Greek tragedy. Iris dies never knowing that her husband was black.
One of the most unforgiving moments the book depicts is when Coleman’s son Mark says ‘kaddish’ over Coleman’s grave, the ancient words conveying the sobering message that ‘a Jew is dead’. Passing as a Jew, Silk first lost his job and then his life. Listening to the kaddish at Silk’s funeral, Zuckerman hears only “Another Jew is dead. As though death were not a consequence of life but a consequence of having been a Jew” (314). But Coleman was no Jew and Mark is rendered pathetic in his observant grief. Roth also gives the picture of Coleman’s older brother Walt, as a parallel life against the ethics of Coleman’s decision. In the decades preceding the civil rights movements, he fights segregation by becoming “their first Negro principal. And subsequently their first Negro superintendent of schools” (322). Unlike Walt, Roth describes Coleman’s list of accomplishments in a warped comparison: the first Jewish classics professor in the country, among the first Jewish faculty at Athena College and by the 1990s, its first Jewish dean of faculty. Gladys Silk admonishes Coleman thus: “you think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You’re white as snow and you think like a slave” (139). On her deathbed, she rants, “I got a sick baby at home” (321), unable to repress her anguish over how her son is completely lost to her.

Disgusted by Coleman’s resolve to leave his African-American ethnicity behind in adopting his putative white identity, Walter Silk literally shouts him out of the house with the reprimand: “Never. Don’t you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again!” (145). If mores and values of the
white race govern Coleman’s elected identity, he is nevertheless unable to exorcize fully his ethnic modes of relating to the world. Ernestine, Coleman’s sister, voices this sentiment aptly: “He could cut himself away from us, but not from his feelings” (320). Roth has presented Silk as one who made a life of passing and of keeping his parents at a distance. Critic Henry Louis Gates wrote of Roth: “So, here is a man who passed for white because he wanted to be a writer and he did not want to be a Negro writer . . . In his terms, he did not wanted to write about block love, black passion, black suffering, black joy; he wanted to write about love and passion and suffering and joy” (181).

The irony of the novel is when Coleman late in his career, is accused of using a racist remark to describe black students. In 1995, nearly four decades after Coleman has settled for a life of passing, his nemesis catches up with him in the guise of an utterly innocent question he raises concerning the absence of two black students. Noticing the continued absence of two students, Coleman speculates aloud that these absentee students must be spooks. He wonders: “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks? “(6). His enquiry is overlaid with racist intent and he stands persecuted for uttering a term that is perceived to be hatred toward the blacks. Coleman points out that he could not have meant his comment as a racial insult since he did not know they were black as they had never been to class. He rails against the black anti-Semitism. Coleman did not know his students were black and they in turn do not know that he is not Jewish but black. So both their accusation that he is
racist and his accusation that they are anti-Semitic strangely misfire. As Zuckerman observes:

    Spooks! The ridiculous trivialization of this masterly performance that had been his seemingly conventional, singularly subtle life- a life of little, if anything excessive on the surface because all the excess goes into the secret. No wonder the accusation of racism blew him sky high. As though his accomplishment were rooted in nothing but shame. (335)

Unable to suffer the irrational forces of hate, Coleman prefers to quit Athena in indignation rather than to submit to the indignities heaped on him. Iris dies shortly when a stroke suddenly seizes her and Coleman blames the college for her death. “Creating their false image of him, calling him everything that he wasn’t… they had killed his wife of over forty years. Killed her as if they’d taken aim and fired a bullet into her heart” (11).

The notions of subjectivity in Roth would be profitable to comparison with that of his fellow American writers like Don Delillo, John Barth, John Updike and Saul Bellow. In DeLillean fiction, human identity is overridden with hyperrall presences of technology. Barth’s delineation of identity is inscribed with unending archetypal experiences. In Updike, identity is negotiated through the person’s sexual and religious experiences. Bellow portrays a fragmented identity that can be recouped only under susceptibility to
the benign intimations of life. Like these postmodern writers, Roth “redefines
the human self as an entity constructed by, and not simply reflected in a
culture’s social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices” (2).

Zuckerman soon learns of his friend’s affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty
-four–year-old janitorial help with the Athena College and also a cleaning
woman in the local post office. Zuckerman is racked by insomnia after
Coleman has told him about his Viagra-fuelled passion with Faunia, and he
realizes how much he misses life, he is “hypnotized by the other people and
comparing them to my own washed-out state” (37). The juxtaposition of
Nathan’s impotence and Coleman’s Viagra-fueled affair is profoundly
significant. After learning of his friend’s sexual exploits, the narrator begins to
question his own hermitlike existence and briefly loses his mental equilibrium.
He contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that de-idealizes the species
and keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are” (37). Nathan’s
intimacy with Coleman draws him out of his idealized and sterile reclusiveness
and back into the reality of life’s entanglements. As in most of Roth’s novels,
desire becomes a revitalizing force. Here it not only serves its expected erotic
purpose but as a narrative stimulant.

Coleman’s nemesis is the neurotic French intellectual, Delphin Roux
whose relationship to sexuality is disastrous. Roux is aware of her own
qualities and wants a partner to be her equal. She is over-conscious of how her
mental brilliance is horribly intimidating. Running from the shadow of an over
achieving mother, she has isolated herself in America, a culture she doesn’t understand. Her relationship to Coleman is fraught. Motivated by sexual jealousy and misplaced feminist sympathies Delphine Roux who heads the combined language and literature department at Athena, leads into Coleman’s affair and on impulse, sends him an unsigned scurrilous letter. Coleman seeks solace in the company of Faunia, his fellow traveler and mistress. Overwhelmed with righteous indignation by the false accusation of racism and the tragic demise of his wife, Coleman reengages with life as ‘contaminated by desire’ (20) through Faunia.

As a female counterpart to Coleman, Faunia too has a secret and an authorship of a life all her own. Born into a prosperous white family south of Boston, she has to voluntarily banish herself from her identity to escape a troublesome stepfather and a complicitous mother. Coleman meets her in 1998, the year that witnessed the sexual scandal involving President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. The power of violence and malevolence that have plagued American public life also overtakes the protagonists Coleman and Faunia and brings about their tragic end. Faunia claiming to illiteracy, the diary, discovered, establishes her as no less a match for Coleman in the art of reinventing an identity. As Mark Shechner states:

She’s got the glands of her class. After the wrath of hurricane Delphine, Faunia Farley is the healing, lubricious earth mother, though being half Coleman Silk’s age she is more the earth
daughter. She is also a shanty town Sybil, whose illiteracy conceals a hard-bitten wisdom. She may swab out toilets and talk to crows, but she is full of messages that strike one as odd fusions of trailer park dejection and King Lear metaphysics. (qtd. in Parrish)

Faunia haunted by a psychopathic husband and a traumatic past, lives each moment with grateful for the small mercies of life. The narrator describes the terrain of despair in her life:

Was she thinking about how long it had all gone on? 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. No wonder half an hour in the sun sharing a pizza with the boys is paradise to her. (161)

According to Steven Kellman, “Silk’s life converges and collides with others who also believe in self – begetting”. In many ways similar to Coleman, Delphine exhibits a firm determination to be “the author of own life” (273) and her drama is as profoundly miserable as his. In a mood of intense self – preoccupation, Delphine says: “I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family’s given, I will fight against the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individuality at its best – and she winds up instead in a
drama beyond her control” (273). Delphine’s ambivalent emotional upsurge quickly turns into animus for Coleman, leading her to lay on him the outrageous charge of racism in the ‘spooks’ episode and his sexual exploitation in the Faunia Farley affair. She is ironically as ignorant as everyone else of his essential racial secret. Inspite of her atrocious character, Delphine is strangely too human and that is attested by the pathetic wreck she becomes on hearing the news of Coleman’s death: “What would they think if they saw her now, carrying on like the widow herself” (280).

Coleman feels that his body is again betraying him, by refusing him the sexual prowess that he once enjoyed. Both of Coleman’s rebellions against his race and against his body seem to stem from his insistence on the ‘raw I’. In the case of his body, his defiance seems less heroic and more attributable to pride, stubbornness or intemperance. Viagra enables him to initiate a torrid affair with an apparently illiterate college janitor.

If Coleman had stayed in the black community his life trajectory would not have entailed becoming a college professor and administrator. His life would have been completely different: no graduate school, no professorship, no deanship, no opportunities to pursue the literature. The deception and betrayal he practiced on his family were arguably necessary to the success of the enterprises.
Les Farley, Faunia’s estranged husband, who eventually sends his wife and her Jewish lover to their graves, is himself an embodiment of secrecy. Seeking to avenge the death of their children in a house fire for which he holds Faunia directly responsible, Farley is on her trail. He is infuriated to learn that Faunia’s current lover is an academic, Jewish and much older than her. It is the enduring presence of such a traumatic past in his consciousness that drives him to have both Faunia and Coleman killed. Farley is strangely clueless about Coleman’s African–American racial identity. Zuckerman in Coleman’s grave ruminates thus: “Buried as a Jew, I thought, and if I was speculating correctly, killed as a Jew. Another of the problems of impersonation” (325). This clearly tells that Coleman was killed being a Jew. It is no surprise that even in his death, Coleman is able to carry off his bluff successfully.

Les Farley kills her and Coleman by running them off the road in what the police conclude is a simple automobile accident. Since there was no collision with Les’ truck and no physical evidence, they do not pursue Zuckerman’s assertion that this was no accident. Coleman episode in perspective helps Zuckerman understand that his fictional postmodernist identities pale in comparison with the self–begetting characters he encounters in the real world. Coleman could never write the ‘spooks’ book since “writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time” (345). Coleman fails as a writer because his strategy of secrecy overdraws his creativity. As Amy
Hungerford points out “Coleman could only conceal because secrecy is his identity and that he would only reveal more secrecy”.

In this story, everyone has a secret. Everyone is trying to be something they are not, or something they were not. Coleman Silk is the prime example. Roth asks the reader to consider whether Silk is simply a headstrong individual to con the system or just another American following the American Dream. The essence of the American Dream is the ability and opportunity to change, to become something new, something and someone of your own choosing, though not without a price.

Coleman Silk know his own life only through the fogs of indignation and grief, self-intoxication, self-loathing, self-misunderstanding, occluded desire and self-forgetfulness. Coleman Silk himself is accountable for his own catastrophe as Ira Ringold is for his. The Human Stain does turn into a race, class, and gender novel. As a social novel, the work strays too far outside as the perimeter of Roth’s understanding of Newark, Jews and himself. In this novel Coleman Silk, Delphine Roux, Les Farley rage and America rages over the president’s hubris. The novel tells something about Jews: Jewish history in America, Jewish fanaticism, the Jewish revolutionism of the 1930s, the seething, mutinous and the demanding heart. Zuckerman narrates the theme:

To become a new being. To bifurcate. The drama that underlies America’s story, the high drama that is upping and leaving and
the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands…at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a lake that’s constantly turning over its water atop an Arcadian mountain in America.

_The Human Stain_ is finally a story about the American Dream in a contrary context, a societal phenomenon of great promise and great cost. Only a writer of Roth’s calibre could have transformed the crazed old Jewish professor in chapter one into the brilliant black son of a balanced intellectual family in East Orange in chapter two with such technical smoothness. The father’s guiding of Silk to the Classics as a small boy is beautifully apt. In return, he failed a father who worshipped the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare. If Silk had not renounced his family, the charge of racism could never have been laid against him. The moral fibre of Professor Silk runs the theme of the moral fibre of America and the legacy of Vietnam. There is a monologue by the truck-driver about his broken soul and the souls of thousands like him. In the end of the book, he is seen on the ice of a winter lake fishing in solitude in America’s tiny Arcadia. He broods on the darkness under the ice, the water that is never still. There is nothing cathartic about Coleman’s death as such, for Timothy Parrish suggests, “Coleman is an epic, not a tragic hero, and his death at the hands of another rage-driven cuckold suits his sense of literary form… Coleman dies as one who owns rather than denies his history”. (454-455)
The last section of the novel, concerning the funerals of Faunia and Coleman is called ‘The Purifying Ritual’. At the funeral, Herb Keble who was the college’s first black staffer, hired by Dean Silk, recalls Coleman as:

An American individualist par excellence was once again so savagely traduced by friends and neighbors… it is we, the morally stupid censorious community… besmirched Coleman Silk’s good name… who knew from close contact the depth of his commitment to Athena and the purity of his dedication as an educator… we betrayed him. Betrayed Coleman and betrayed Iris. (311)

Coleman Silk’s reputation is destroyed, his happiness threatened, his livelihood taken away from him for the most ridiculous of charges. Then his relationship with a woman, because it is unconventional, is treated to the full blast of cultural Puritanism. This whole book is a vehement protest against the aggressive policies, society creates to attach irrelevant moral stances to the notion of purity. Roth is brilliant at explaining everything and at the same time repeatedly questioning and undermining the cleverly written meditations and motivation. Roth never flinches from the harshest of language to tell the story, nor from the crullest of insights. Coleman sacrifices his family and his roots for his dream of an ideal self, freed from the shackles of prejudice, only to find himself destroyed at the end of his illustrious life. Coleman’s unfinished text of the self gets to the heart of Philip Roth’s project of signifying American
identity. The implication of the novel’s title is that the representation of identity is already in an unfinished state, marked by the stain of subjectivity.

In the rapid comparison of three different religions Zuckerman concludes that the ancient Greek Gods are preferable because of their proximity to humanity. And he says Faunia is like them. Faunia, the illiterate outcast at the bottom of society with their ideals of cleanliness. Faunia’s illiteracy is another aspect of her alignment with the culture, which is based on the Judeo-Christian holy texts. Zuckerman reflects in this novel: “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!” (183). As Geoffrey Bakewell says: “Zuckerman has given the events in Coleman’s life their tragic shape, casting him as a Greek tragic hero. The most explicit analogy to Greek tragedy comes when Zuckerman imagines Mark Silk’s thoughts at his father’s funeral” (qtd. in Boddy).

Racism is only one example of the overall problem of evil. Roth tells that evil originates in the human quest for purity. When people commit themselves to become pure, more notable or sincere than the other person through political correctness, racism, anti-Semitism, religious fanaticism or even restrictive sexual morality, they sow the seeds of evil. Roth is a terrific stylist. His language is complex, expansive and literate. The social fact that The Human Stain shows up is the way black Americans were made the silent exception to the claim that all men are created equal. The denial of African –
Americans’ basic rights exposed the failure to keep faith with the self-evident truth at the heart of the American political system. American society had a part in Coleman’s cultivation of a character trait that leads to his untimely death. Roth assigns him a death that cuts him off so brutally, so ignobly, from his community, a death, o raw. The Human Stain, the title clearly refers not just to the taint left upon this earth by the species but also to the pigmentation that so arbitrarily colors human skin.

The Human Stain reveals how the personal tragedy of the protagonist is intertwined with dominant American historical events and social movements. As Nathan Zuckerman, Roth’s fictional kindred spirit, relates the story, the struggle of blacks for equality, the Vietnam War, the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton, the feminist movement and the zeal for political correctness on college campuses are collectively tied into the tragedy of Coleman Silk.

The Human Stain seems to be more provocative, as it explores the psyche of its protagonist and his mistress. Faunia’s depression generated by her past. She was forced to leave home at the age of fourteen, as she was troubled and molested by her father. Secrecy is at the very heart of what identity means is this novel. The Human Stain shifts from the national scene, the Clinton White House to the provincial local, a small new England college. The focus is on the highly publicized private misdeeds of a world leader to the disgrace of an obscure professor of classics for an innocent linguistic blunder. The comparison is between the fanatic rush to purify the White House of Clinton
and the pressures to get Coleman to resign. Roth also suggests similarities between labeling Clinton a misogynist because of his affair with Lewinsky who was less than half his age, and making the same allegation against seventy-one year old Coleman, because of his relationship with thirty-four old Faunia Farley. These connections provide an entry to the story of the protagonist Coleman and Faunia who are among the best drawn characters in all of Roth’s fiction.

Philip Roth, like Hawthorne points out to the hypocrisy and anger in such stainless people. The hypocritical crowd at the Athena college attempts to purify Coleman. The seemingly puritanical crowds in both novels have hidden motives. In Hawthorne’s Novel the women envy the adulterous Hester Prynne. In *The Human Stain* the academics are championing a political correctness and Coleman is an easy target. The politically correct academicians of Athena college may have assembled to call Coleman Silk a racist so as to cover up their own acknowledged racial prejudice. The academicians are inclined to see African Americans as the other, they desire to see Jews as the other or people of lower economic status such as janitor Faunia as the other. The underlying message is that the zealots of the left and of the right are tainted by the exact same disease-incurable smugness and self–righteousness.

*The Human Stain* connects the downfall of Coleman Silk to the persecution of Bill Clinton. The desire to impeach President Clinton, like the frenzy to banish Coleman from the college is out of proportion to the crime. It is possible that members of Congress who failed against Clinton may have
been covering up their own offences of their inner desires, Zuckerman observes that in the summer of 1998, “men and women are alike... discovered that during the night in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamt of their brazenness of Bill Clinton”(3). Roth’s disorienting movement from the ludicrous to the calamitous are drawn into the tragic comedy of *The Human Stain*.

The secrecy in this novel is related to speech. Speech is a problematic moment of revelation but only when it is out of Coleman’s control. The term ‘lily-white’ is inspired by rage. The same term is used by Walt in a moment of anger when he tells his mother that he is estranging himself from the family in order to marry Iris. He says “Don’t ever show your lily-white face here again”.

Secrecy is also crucial in establishing identity. The hero talks about concentrating and how the secrecy is produced by concentration. His dictum is that if something has to be mastered, that person has to become that thing. He could do that in biology and or in boxing. Roth has not chosen mathematics or chemistry because what Coleman does is to overcome biology. It is the biology of who his parents are. He takes hold of and transforms the biology of American race. Biology thus becomes his secret not as an academic subject, but as a lived experience.

Coleman got trained in English language from his father. But his mode of revelation or his mode of communication is not verbal. It is a physical
performance. The popular term ‘counter-confessional’ Roth uses, to indicate the pleasure and the power. Coleman believes that meditation on identity is a humanist version. In other words it is private consciousness which in fact defines a person. Coleman repeats this phrase several times while speaking of spooks business. He believes that people have the power to form their self – presentation and make their identity an artistic performance.

Identity as secrecy is related to the subject matter of desire and mortality which is the core of Roth’s writing from beginning to the end. The hero enlists the benefit of secrecy:

The secret to living in the rush of the world with a minimum of pain is to get as many people as possible to string along with your delusions. The trick of living alone here, away from all agitating entanglements, allurements and expectations--- is to organize the silence, to think of its mountain top plenitude as capital, silence as wealth increasing, the encircling silence as your chosen source of advantage.(44)

Roth’s calibre as a creative artist is revealed in the texture of his novels through which fiction’s relationship to life, writing’s relation to life and the writer and the work are focused. Roth’s master piece is furious in its telling with an intricate plot and passages of sustained brilliance. Bursting with rage and humming with ideas the writer resorts to non-linear narrative technique
which has given a post-modern backdrop to the work. *The Human Stain* also projects flashes of anti-Semitism and anger the hallmarks of the discussions in the previous chapters. Coleman Silk who shrouds himself in secrecy is compelled to take up the disguise due to the racial climate prevalent in the western world.

The next chapter revolves around the theme of betrayal as exemplified in *I Married a Communist*, a gripping novel of tenderness, harshness, insight and wit. Betrayal from different quarters and varied perspectives form the crux of the discussion in ‘Every Soul is its Own Betrayal Factory’.
Works Cited


