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PETRIFYING IMPACT OF CAPITALISM IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

***Abdullah Jassim Muhamed Banimansoor, **Longhai Zhang**

*Department of English Language and Literature, College of Foreign Language and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen, P R China.

**Vice President of Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 363000, P R China.

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ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on impact of capitalism on American society and how it enforces racial discrimination to subject the majority of people and use them as a commodity in the hands of fewer as portrayed in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. This article also attempts to focus on the effect of war on society as capitalist's tool. It raises a question as to what extent capitalism is successful in deforming the American society. It aims to reveal the role of capitalism in planting social discrimination in American society. It also discusses the atmosphere of racial discrimination at the time of writing this article.

Key Words: Capitalism; Social devastation; Racism; exploitation; Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Philip Milton Roth is a prominent American novelist of twentieth century. He was born in Newark, New Jersey on 1933. He spent his childhood in Weequahic neighborhood. Philip is the son of Bess Finkel and Herman Roth. He studied in Weequahic High School in Newark around 1950. His literary works won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Moreover, his works also received three times the PEN / Faulkner Award. Philip started his literary career with the 1959 novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, which humorously portrays Jewish life in America. Philip's works gained more attention when he received a Pulitzer Prize for the work *American Pastoral* (1997).

The Human Stain is Philip's great masterpiece, it is written in the United States in 1998. The novel is the third in a trilogy, after his novels *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*. In

The Human Stain Philip Roth portrays American morality and its influences through the character of Coleman Silk. During the course of the novel, Silk experiences racist persecution. He hides his real identity and goes as a white man to live only as an individual. It is observed that Silk becomes a prey of capitalist American society that oppresses him. Role of capitalism is significant as it plants social discrimination in American society. The present paper discusses the atmosphere of racial discrimination at the present moment.

Through the last two decades, it has been observed that Philip Roth's works have attracted the attention of critics and scholars. Journals such as *Shofar*, *Studies in American-Jewish Literature*, the bi-annual journal *Philip Roth Studies*, published by Heldref Publications and the French journal *Profils Américains* are devoted to Roth's literary works and his portrayal of America society. Lydia Moland in her article entitled "Grasping

the "Raw I": Race and Tragedy in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* " highlights the atmosphere of racist discrimination in the United States during the time the novel was published. Moland exposes in her study how culture of a specific society plays a crucial role in social discrimination. She also acknowledges that racist discrimination is rooted in American culture and she gives examples of how African Americans suffered due to this phenomenon. Mark Shechner in his paper "Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth" (2003) exposes some issues in American society that force a man to hide his background to his friends, family and even his children. Silk is an example of this fact, hides his history to follow an independent path unconstrained by racial restrictions, but he has become what was once hated.

RACISM IS A REMARKABLE TOOL IN CAPITALISTS' IDEOLOGY

To discuss the impact of capitalism in Roth's *The Human Stain*, it is necessary to shed light on capitalist system first. Capitalism existed for most of human eras, it is a social system prevailing all over the world. The issues related to capitalism came in to light as Karl Marx talked about communism in his path-breaking works. He held the view that the bourgeois, factory owners, landowners, the masters

are minorities and capitalists. They usurp power by exploiting the masses, the poor, the marginal and the common man. According to capitalism, the means of productions such as technology, factories, the land, transport system, etc. are owned by the minority of people, are the capitalists and the rest of people (the majority) are the working class or labors.

The labors have to subject their ability and work hard to earn living, they have to produce goods and services and their goods are to be sold by the owners for a profit. So as it is mentioned above, the profit is gained by the capitalist class, so, they are able to make more money by selling what labors produced. Thus, a fewer people exploit the majority of people. According to Marxists, capitalism is a system which is based on the exploitation of the majority of people by the minority of people, the masters. Because the system itself is built on inequality and class divisions, various tools are needed to divide the majority. Racism and injustice under capitalism serve this purpose of this ideology. In *The Human Stain*, Roth exposes a period of American life in the 20th century which was the years of McCarthy, War of Vietnam and the impeachment of the president Bill Clinton. Roth gives a detailed scenario about the harshness and difficulties of working class and how the

African-Americans were exploited and faced racist discrimination during that time. The novel is considered as a typical substitution in fictional argument to resolve identity. It surpasses the confined tradition and represents a comprehensive critical review of the white racism consistently stranded in race. The remarkable struggle as portrayed in the novel stems from the dispute based on the ability of the characters whose identity is kept on secrecy and directed by self-innovation.

In her work, entitled “Confronting the Failures of a Professor Who Passes” (2000) Michiko Kakutani acknowledges that in *The Human Stain* Roth "explores identity issues and self-invention in America which he had long explored in his earlier works." She further states that the novel shows how the public Zeitgeist can shape and destroy an individual's life. The novel takes all of Roth's favorite themes of identity and rebellion and generational strife and refracts them not through the narrow prism of the self but through a wide-angle and a lens that exposes the fissures and discontinuities of the 20th-century life. When stripped of its racial overtones, Roth's book echoes a story he has told recurrently in other novels. It closely parallels the story of Nathan Zuckerman, a dutiful, middle-class boy from New Jersey who rebels against his

family and finds himself exiled, 'unbound' from his roots. American society was under the influence of capitalism, the ideology which plays a crucial role in racial discrimination. The story is told by Nathan Zuckerman, a writer who lives in New England. The protagonist Coleman Silk is his neighbor. Zuckerman begins his tale as he moves to New England. He desires peace and wants to be able to write without distraction or stress.

But he suffers from prostate cancer and he must subject to a surgery. Unfortunately, after the surgery he becomes impotent and incontinent, the physical deformity which makes him live in depression. Coleman Silk knocks on his door one day and tells him that he wants him to write a story. The story about how his colleagues did murder his wife.

Coleman Silk works as a professor at small but prestigious Athena College before the accusation of racial discrimination which brings his background to an early end. Coleman Silk is innocent of all the charges against him, which result from his use of a word “spook” that once held bigoted connotations, however, the investigation which is held by the stuff of his collage ends Coleman's enthusiasm for continuing his work.

Due to the investigation Coleman's wife suffers a stroke while supporting him

during the investigation and that leads to her early death and then Coleman silk blames on the college and the investigation as they were the main reason for his wife's death. Coleman becomes mad with grief, and then he determines to set the record straight. Coleman wants to write a book about the entire affair and everything that has happened to him, so, he asks his neighbor, Nathan Zuckerman, to write it. When Nathan refuses, Coleman silk decides to write the book by himself.

However, two years later, when he finishes the first draft of the book Coleman no longer has the anger to continue. "Eventually, Zuckerman turns out a book, but not the one Coleman requested; it is written after Coleman's death, and it is *The Human Stain*, the book we are reading" (Zucker, 8).

Coleman Silk was hiding a secret, the secret which has been kept for fifty years from his wife, his children, his colleagues, and his friends, including the writer Nathan Zuckerman. "As he and his wife begin their family, Coleman prays that his children's bodies not betray his betrayal of his own family" (Moland, 192).

The truth is revealed when Zuckerman attends Coleman's funeral when he meets a black woman at the grave of Coleman. He comes to know that she is Coleman's sister Ernestine. Then he realizes the fact

that Coleman silk was a black man passing as a Jew. He had done that when he lost his fiancé Stena, as she did not accept a mixed marriage when she discovered his real race as a black man. The incident forces Zuckerman to reassess all his ideas that he had about Coleman, and his reassessment is the novel. "Zuckerman discovers Coleman's secret. But there is a reason that he is the one who does so – he has namely been on the lookout for a secret to uncover, both with regards to Coleman and Faunia" (Zucker, 40).

It is true that Coleman Silk succeeds in hiding his real identity for around fifty years of his life but he has to pay the price of hiding it. He betrays his family, his girlfriend, his wife, his children as he deprives them from their real roots. In other words, Coleman's success is at the price of a betrayal of himself and family.

Coleman Silk preferred to hide his real identity despite of the disagreement of his parents. The situation is doubly ironic because Silk wanted to live his life as a white man, thereby in a sense establishing his own racism. Silk's aim is to live as an individual and not as a representative of his race, but in the matter of denying his roots, perhaps Coleman Silk's guilt is deeper and more complex than the realization of his pursuers at Athena College.

Social injustice pushes Silk to hide his real identity, to free himself from the racist restrictions or racial discrimination imposed on black people which caused social devastation in American society. Silk's act of changing his identity is not as a protest against his race, but what he really wants is freedom only. As the narrator says: "All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white-just on his own and free" (Roth 2001, 120). Silk knows the truth that he becomes the object of prejudice due to his color, so he decides to pass as white individual. Coleman Silk grew up in East Orange, as the second son of a well-educated black couple. His parents' wished him a better future and wanted him to study in Howard College. When Coleman Silk attains it according to his father wish, he experiences racial discrimination and feels ambivalent about being part of the black community. He feels annoyed and decides to take his life into his own hands once his father passes away.

Silk enlists in the Navy as a white man, as his skin allows him to pass as white. After his time in the Navy, Silk enrolls in NYU. Coleman falls in love with a tall girl from the Midwest and becomes deadly afraid that she would learn the truth about his racial heritage. He starts his relation with her but she believes he is a white man.

After dating for two years, Silk decides to introduce the lady to his family, when she learns his real race she breaks up with him and leaves him. So her behavior shows the idea of superiority which is prevailing and rooted in American society. Through Silk's suffering Roth reflects the suffering of black community.

The Human Stain "shows up" the way black Americans were made the silent exception to the claim that "all men are created equal." It was a silence that "marked the limits of an existent regime of knowledge": 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. The silence was indeed "necessary for a certain social or legal order" namely, segregation and institutionalized racism "to exist" (Molan, 2003).

Colman could find relief for a short time only, when he returns to his race through his relation with a black girl "with her he can be himself". However, their relationship does not last long time and Coleman meets the Iris girl who becomes his wife. Colman's suffering with previous girls forces him to hide his race again. He decides to not tell the Iris girl about his

black race and he pretends that he is an orphan. Here, Roth impliedly delivers his readers a message that the minorities cannot live peacefully with other majorities. Some of them live with double identity. They can be happy only with people of their race or they live their lives with a lie of hiding their identity as it happens with Colman.

In one of the scenes of the novel, Colman Silk decides to return to the classroom. During the spring semester Coleman notices that two students have not come to class for several weeks. He asks the other students if the missing students are real or if they are “spooks.” The students whom he asks are African American, and the word “spooks” is interpreted as a racial slur, although in his mind Coleman meant spirits or ghosts. Silk is accused of being a racist and the entire community of the college is incensed by his insensitivity. There are angry demonstrations and rallies against Silk by the student's community and an investigation is opened against him.

So the demonstrations and the rallies which take place against Colman reflect the deep rooted racism in American society, it is a reaction for an action, the African American people become very sensitive about any word that may refer to their race like "negro" and "spooks". They do not look for the other meanings of the

word “spooks” in which Coleman silk meant the spirits or ghosts. Here, Roth appeals “political correctness” on a wide range. Higgins states that political correctness is among Roth’s priorities. According to Raymond Williams, “race has no entry of its own” (qtd. in Nonini, 158) hence, it is the human beings who stand against the other human beings under the name of racism unnecessarily.

WAR AS SOCIAL DISASTER

Through the course of the novel, Roth states the horrendous impact of Vietnam War on American society through the critical situation of Lester, the ex-husband of Faunia. Lester is a veteran soldier in Vietnam and has some psychological disorder caused by the war. He used to beat his ex-wife Faunia and always stalks her. Through Lester’s character, Roth shows the effect of Vietnam War on the soldiers particularly and on society generally. After a hard military mission of spreading peace and freedom in Vietnam, Lester returns to New England all shattered, he becomes a drunkard, unable to socialize and gets aggressive. The war ruins his emotions even towards his children. He does not save his children when they get burned in a fire. Although he smells smoke, he focuses more on Faunia, who was sitting in the car with her

new boyfriend. The following lines describe Lester's destroyed emotions:

'Numb,' he said. 'Fuckin' numb. No emotions. Numb to the death of my own kids. My son's eyes are rolled in back of his head and he has no pulse. He has no heartbeat. My son isn't fucking breathing. My son. Little Les. The only son I will ever have. But I did not feel anything. I was acting as if he was a stranger. Same with Rawley. She was a stranger. My little girl.'

He blames the war as responsible for destruction of his family. He gets infuriated and emotionally disturbed. His words speak of the disturbed condition and his madness. He says that he has lost all emotion and has become numb about everything and his mind has gone blank. He vents out his disgust further saying:

"He was five and she was eight. I said to myself, 'why can't I feel?' I said, 'Why didn't save them? Why couldn't I save them? Payback. Payback: I kept thinking about Vietnam. About all the times I think I died. That's how I began to know that I can't die. Because I died already. Because I died already in Vietnam. Because I am

a man who fucking *died*." (Roth, 73)

Lester Farley is the incarnation of Vietnam's War on American society. Roth makes him haunt Americans on personal as well as social level. "America's bad conscience coming back to haunt it" (Higgin, 2000) Wars are products of the capitalist mindsets of the rulers causing severe problems to the common folks. One of the most prominent characteristics of capitalism is that a part of society tries to overcome and subject the other part to impose its ideology and obtain economic privileges. Therefore, for Roth, capitalism deforms society, it rips the community into struggling social classes. War represents an economic market and is used by capitalists as a means of exploiting lower classes and the masses of society by using them as a commodity. Adam Smith, the father of economics, in his book *The Wealth of Nations* (2003) states that the purpose of capitalism is to create an immense social transformation which is in fact disastrous for common classes. He also acknowledges that unfettered capitalism projects to destroy the centers of traditional economy, shatters people and creates wars to obtain new markets. Finally, Roth ironically makes Lester Farley brutally murder Colman Silk. Colman is a hard worker who believes in freedom and Roth makes him the

embodiment of American Dream, gets killed by Lester Farley, who is the embodiment of after effect of Vietnam War. The irony of Silk's fate embodies the fact that his death is the after effect of capitalism. Capitalists, as mentioned above create wars to exploit other classes in society, wars destroy the lives of soldiers, and consequently affect the entire society as soldiers constitutes an important part of society. Colman Silk and Lester Farley both are victims of capitalism. Thus, Roth impliedly warns the Americans that war (which is one of capitalism characteristics) may shatter "American Dream" and destroy American society.

CONCLUSION

"All men are created equal" is a famous quotation by Thomas Jefferson in the US declaration of independence in 1776. The quotation seems to be the condition of Philip Roth's mind while he was writing *The Human Stain*. It reflects an important period of American society. It highlights the suffering of black people and the effect of capitalism by reinforcement of racism and discrimination in society. Capitalist ideology tends to shatter society in to conflicting parts to subject people for their advantages. Wars and racism serve capitalist's purposes. On one hand, Roth makes Colman Silk an embodiment of African-American Suffering of racism. On the other hand, he makes Lester Farley as an embodiment of those

people who are ruined by war. Both Silk and his killer Farley are directly or indirectly the victims of capitalism. Silk, in spite of his success pays the price of racism while Farley paid the price of war. Therefore, Roth through exposing the suffering of people in American society appeals for political correction to establish justice and equality among all social classes.

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