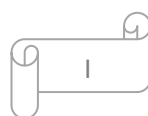




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*To those who have been my source of inspiration, support, and encouragement.*

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**Melissa**

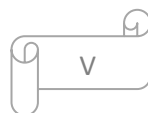


## **Abstract:**

This piece of research is a comparative study of *Sula* (1973) written by Toni Morrison and *The Human Stain* (2000) by Philip Roth, two American novels that explore racial issues. Our purpose is an investigation of the issue of passing white and intersectionality in both works, that Black Americans face systemic discrimination in contrast to the privileges afforded to white Americans across social, economic, and political spheres. To support this analysis, we employ Critical Theory. We structured our work into two chapters, the first chapter applies Cheryl Harris's "*Whiteness as Property*" to examine how whiteness functions as an unearned privilege that reinforces racial hierarchies. This is evident in *Sula* through the exclusion of Black communities, while in *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk's precarious performance of whiteness reveals the instability of racial passing. The second utilizes Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Intersectionality* to analyze how race, gender, and social category compound oppression. We contrast Sula's rejection of Black femininity with Coleman's male privilege, highlighting divergent strategies of resistance within oppressive systems. Despite differences in their protagonists' experiences whether as part of a marginalized majority *Sula* or an assimilating minority *The Human Stain* both novels depict the enduring effects of segregation and systemic racism.

## **Keywords:**

Racial passing, Whiteness as property, Intersectionality, Double consciousness, Systemic racism, Identity erasure.



## **I. Introduction:**

United States racism is a long-standing phenomenon that traces its origins to the period of slavery in the 17th century, when Africans were forcibly transported to the colonies as laborers and purposefully excluded from freedom and humanness. Despite the abolition of slavery in 1865, racial repression did not cease but evolved through new means of domination and exclusion. The institutionalization of Jim Crow laws in the South legalized segregation in schools, housing, and public facilities, and the North also possessed racist attitudes in workplaces, housing, and political participation.

The systems ensured that African Americans were constantly deprived of equal rights and opportunities, consolidating their marginality even more. Apart from legal exclusion, they were subjected to unrelenting racial violence from lynching and mob attacks to the mundane micro aggressions of institutional inequality that cumulatively worked together to prop up white supremacy. Racism in America, thus, is not exceptional but a constitutive aspect of its past, which shaped social, economic, and political life well beyond the elimination of slavery.

Racism is a persistent reality of United States life today, manifesting within the institutions of school, workplace, and criminal justice system, all of which continue to harbor systemic inequalities. The persistence of discrimination confirms that the actual racial equality has not yet been achieved. They were segregated and excluded from society based on their skin color and origins for centuries, upholding a system that favored whiteness and diminished Blackness. The core of this system is a white supremacist worldview built on the flawed belief that white individuals are superior to Black individuals.

This ideology has traditionally legitimated violence, exploitation, and social discrimination and hyped physical and cultural distinction in order to legitimate a division

between so-called "superior" and "inferior" races. The economic foundations of the United States were built on this exploitation, as African Americans were not only enslaved but further systematically denied access to wealth, property, and education. Though transformative movements such as the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement gained significant legal victories, Black Americans' rights and dignity continue to be assaulted by structural discrimination and cultural prejudices that persist today.

American literature addresses issues of race, identity, and belonging against the backdrop of this historical and current reality. In this sense, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) are especially instructive. Though from distinct viewpoints and historical periods, both books address the persistent effects of racism in American culture. Roth examines the social and psychological repercussions of racial passing in prestigious academic environments, whereas Morrison places her story in a Black neighborhood ravaged by poverty, isolation, and segregation. Together, the two pieces show how oppressive structures that still restrict freedom, acceptance, and humanity continue to influence Black people's lives in the US.

## **Literature Review**

Both Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) has each been the subject of numerous critical studies because of the rich political readings retroactive to race, identity, and the consequences of collective trauma, as a short but terrible summary.

Critics believe that both writers discuss how the world encroaches on one's personal independence and finally destroys it, highlighting the psychological and emotional costs of residing in a rigid and sometimes antagonistic social system. Roth illustrates the catastrophic contradiction between self-next to-valuation and public activity in *The Human Stain* by

presenting a guy whose self-invention comes at the cost of personal destruction and community.

The critical question, which critics have emphasized, is whether it is possible to be genuine in a society of racism and rejection. By utilizing very different styles in their presentations of selfhood, Morrison and Roth demonstrate how denial, or exaggeration, of identity can become a destructive force. Utilizing symbolic magical realism, Morrison, moves her characters toward an understanding of "normal" in a racist world, while Roth's virtually fatalistic psychological realism reveals that death of self often translates into death of community. Neither novel allows the protagonists to escape the cycle.

This dissertation shows how each person takes being Black. It uses two novels *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison, about a Black woman's life, and *The Human Stain* (2000) by Philip Roth, about a mixed-race man pretending to be White. Each protagonist acts differently, Sula rejects the norms of his black community, Coleman denies his identity. These novels serve as a basis for this comparison .

From the beginning of *Sula*, Morrison establishes how identity is expressed as excess, as a burden the community cannot tolerate: "They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart" (Morrison 1973, 10). Characters like Eva Peace represent impossible physical sacrifices Black women must make when confronting identity "*To come home dragging three young ones would have to be a step one rung before death for Eva*" (Morrison 1973, 33). The path of suffering, survival, and sacrifice fuels the discovery of identity. To this end, Roth illustrates in *The Human Stain* the psychological ramifications of "passing," while Coleman Silk hides his true identity to escape the prejudice that otherwise confines him. Just as Sula refuses her community's moral beliefs, Silk attempts to fashion a new life without the cultural constraints of origin and race. In both cases, attempts at self-invention result in the destruction of the

characters by the very aspects they attempted to escape. The characters' isolation demonstrates the catastrophic toll paid by denying the imposed identities of others.

Peter Berard provides an extensive commentary on Roth's treatment of identity in *The Human Stain*. Berard describes the novel as an examination of "the terrible effects of political correctness," whereby the life and career of Coleman Silk are ruined by one misunderstanding (Berard 2015, 156). Berard believes that Roth's narrative is not merely the account of one man's demise but one in which social convention, cultural coercion, and reputation interact to create a human being's life. Through Zuckerman, Roth's narrator, Berard argues that the novel addresses "the discrepancy between inner self and social appearance" (Berard 2015, 159) and highlights how identities are constructed, judged, and ultimately shattered by the community. Understanding it in this way, Silk's victimization is not just personal, it is cultural; it is a story of how societies make identity unlivable.

In evaluating *Sula*, Nasrullah Mambrol explores the ways in which Morrison renders complex narratives about race, identity, and community. He observes that the novel is "a complex narrative of the Black experience in America" in which the two main characters face the conflict between "an individual's need for autonomy and the obligations imposed upon that individual by society" (Mambrol 2018). Nel Wright embodies conformity and shared obligation in a community; Sula plays the role of rebelliousness by repudiating the roles of wife and mother. Mambrol also points to the significance of Bottom a Black town that is separated from other forms of life and existence as a reflection of the more profound, racialized experience of America. Ultimately, Mambrol states that despite Sula's negation of the community standards, i.e. negating gender norms of the community and claiming individual autonomy, this autonomy becomes isolation and rejects Sula's contribution to the community, which shows the dangers of embracing individuality without a sense of belonging.

Deborah E. McDowell too reads *Sula* as a deep meditation on the tension of Black female identity in a community that obliterates women's voices. She claims that Morrison "places a Black female at the center of narrative authority, yet shows how that authority is threatened by the community's expectation of conformity" (McDowell 1988, 82). For McDowell, the tragic consequence of *Sula* is not only her outlawed identity of self, but also the impotency of the community to imagine freedom apart from prescribed gender and racial roles. Her reading also echoes the notion that *Sula's* destruction is experienced individually and collectively because her society punishes women who authorize themselves.

Together, Berard, Mambrol, and McDowell reveal the common theme of these two novels - the tragic limitations of identity in oppressive social contexts driven by race and societal expectations. Coleman Silk and Sula Peace both seek to define themselves outside the expectations placed on them by others, but upon rejecting social roles, they are not liberated, but isolated, betrayed, and meet tragic deaths. Their journeys are tragic, not because they have not met some form of societal expectations, but because they are punished for imagining a different way of living. Roth and Morrison, in their different narrative approaches, give voice to the disastrous consequences of seeking to exist in a place where freedom and identity cannot exist without community engagement.

### **Issue and Working Hypothesis:**

The preceding literature review reveals that Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Philip Roth's *The Humain Stain* have been extensively analyzed from social and psychological perspectives. It is evident that a previous comparative study of these two works has already been done from the perspective of the complexities of racial identity and its consequences in the United States. Our working hypothesis is that both *Sula* and *The Stain* examine the ways in which racial identity is constructed, imposed, and fought against in the United States, albeit

through varied narrative perspectives. While Morrison's book explores the independence and communal strengths of Black people in a segregated community, Roth's book interrogates the passing in a predominantly white academic environment. Both books expose the ways in which racism is experienced, forcing the characters to confront the fact of being Black either through resistance or concealment. While Sula is seen as a symbol of rebellion and resistance, in seeking her freedom she rejects the norms of society, Coleman Silk decides to pass for white and denies his Black Jewish identity to avoid racism.

This is a comparative analysis of the two works, emphasizing the concepts of segregation and passage, ingrained oppression, and racial enforcement. Kimberley Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality and Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as Property" are two examples of critical race theory that we will utilize to examine how these works highlight the difficult lives of Black Americans. The purpose of this research is to illustrate the distinct yet connected challenges of Black and mixed-race individuals by comparing these works side by side. The primary goal is to show how Toni Morrison and Philip Roth examine American racial hierarchy and the psychological effects of racism via their individual stories. This research will advance our knowledge of how American literature both confronts and reflects the racial stereotypes that still exist in the country.

### **Methodological Outline:**

The methodological approach of this study is to provide a comparative examination of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* by using a critical race theory. The introduction expose the two novels used written by Toni Morrison and Philip Roth. The premise of work is that while *Sula* engages Black independence and collective resistance within a segregated society, *The Human Stain* engages racial passing and its psychological

results. The theoretical framework invokes Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Intersectionality* and Cheryl Harris's *Whiteness as property* .

The results section highlights significant findings on racial performance, systemic exclusion, and psychological trauma, revealing how each of the books critiques race in different manners, Morrison through communal resistance and Roth through individual erasure. The discussion has two thematic chapters. Chapter One considers Whiteness and the Perpetuation of Racial Inequalities in *Sula* and *The Human Stain* ; the second, Intersectionality vs. Legal Systems in both Books. The conclusion synthesizes these observations arguing that both novels, in their different narratives, expose the continuing violence of racial classification in America, with Morrison highlighting Black resilience and Roth exposing the cost of racial denial. This study provides a detailed analysis of how literature reflects and resists systemic racism, contributing to existing discourses on identity.

## **II. Methods and materials:**

This part of our research is concerned with the presentation of the theoretical concepts and the method on which we will rely to guide our study. Cheryl I. Harris's theory of *Whiteness as Property*, presented in her 1993 article of the same name, offers a critical lens on how whiteness has historically functioned as a form of legal and social capital in the United States, shaping access to rights, opportunities, and recognition. It will be supported by Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of *Intersectionality*, as developed in her foundational text *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (1991), which provides a framework for understanding how race, gender, and social class interact in shaping individual identities. This section also presents the summaries of the two literary works under study, namely Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), which both examine racial identity, social exclusion, and the consequences of societal judgment in the American context, biographies and the historical background.

### **1. Methods:**

#### **▪ Critical Race Theory : Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as Property"**

One of the most significant authors of Critical Race Theory who has written extensively about the concept of "whiteness" and its structural function in the US is Cheryl Harris. The idea of "whiteness as property," which she developed in her landmark work "Whiteness as Property" (1993), is among her most innovative interventions (Harris , 1995). According to Harris, being white in the US serves as a type of property that is protected by the law, society, and the economy in addition to being a racial categorization. According to this view, being white turns into a valuable asset that grants its owners both material and intangible advantages, sometimes at the direct expense of people of color. These benefits,

which have historically been denied to non-white communities, include preferred access to housing, employment, education, and legal protection .(Harris , 1993)

Harris bases her case on historical practices of landholding, segregation, and slavery, where whiteness was clearly associated with entitlement (Harris , 1993 , p1777-1778) Africans under slavery were legally prohibited from owning property, and white people were the only ones allowed to inherit and purchase land. Whiteness became ingrained in this system as a property right that could be monopolized, guarded, and inherited throughout time. Harris goes on to argue that American legal and social structures still perpetuate this racial property logic, establishing whiteness as a resource that has to be protected while excluding Black people and other minorities. The end effect is a persistent system of structural inequality in which race functions as both a form of capital and identity.

#### ▪ **Kimberlé Crenshaw Intersectionality “Mapping the Margins”**

Kimberlé Crenshaw is best known for her pioneering work on the creation of Critical Race Theory. From her seminal work "Reader", she presents many of the critical concepts that have aided heavily in discourse surrounding race, law, and social justice. One of the most significant of Kimberley Crenshaw's contributions to Critical Race Theory is the Intersectionality theory, which she first presented in her 1989 paper "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.*" Intersectionality is the theory that individuals are often affected by more than one intersecting type of discrimination and oppression. For instance, Black women's lives cannot be examined in terms of racism or sexism alone; the racisms and gender oppressions intersect and constitute particular experiences of marginalization. Crenshaw argues that the justice system often fails to respond to these intersecting forms of discrimination, as the justice system wants to respond separately to categories such as race and gender, rather than in some intersectional or interactive way that will engage multiple individuals and experiences.

## 2. Materials:

### ▪ Toni Morrison's Biography:

Toni Morrison, whose real name Ardelia Wofford was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, and was a celebrated and popular American author; her work had profoundly influenced American literature. She was inspired by Black tradition and the conditions of racial oppression. Morrison explored various themes such as theme of Identity, memory, and the Black experience throughout her life. She studied at Howard University and earned her master's degree from Cornell University, where she had written a thesis about Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. She continued to teach English literature at Howard and Texas Southern University. She began writing in Howard; her first novel is *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She wrote *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Morrison was the first African American woman to serve as a senior editor at Random House in 1967. She is noted for the psychological depth used in her books, thanks to which she has won several awards, such as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Her latest works, *Jazz* (1992) and *Love* (2003), addressed the legacy of slavery and community politics. She was also a powerful public intellectual, known for her insightful analysis of race, language, and culture. She passed away on August 5, 2019.

### ▪ Philip Roth's Biography:

Philip Roth a Jewish man who passes as a White , born on March 19, 1933, in Newark, New Jersey. His parents, Herman and Bess Roth, were Jewish Americans; he grew up in a working-class community that motivated a lot of his writing. He went to Weequahic High School and then studied at Bucknell University and the University of Chicago. Roth became one of America's most famous writers, known for his courageous, humorous and often debatable novels. His first big success was *Goodbye, Columbus*, which won a

significant prize, but his greatest shocking and popular book was *Portnoy's Complaint*, a wild tale about a man's struggles with family, guilt, and desire.

Across his long career, Roth wrote several renowned novels, such as *The Ghost Writer*, *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*, and *Nemesis*. His books often combined fiction with his own life experiences, particularly via his famous character Nathan Zuckerman. He won nearly every big literary award, including two National Book Awards and three PEN/Faulkner Awards. Roth lived much of his later life in the Constitution State and stopped writing in 2012. He died on May 22, 2018, in New York City. It is important to highlight the author's biography, because in Roth's case, he was inspired by someone close to him.

### **Summary of *Sula***

*Sula* is a novel written by the American author Toni Morrison, first published in 1973. It explores themes of identity, race, gender, and friendship within the Black community of the Bottom, a neighborhood in the hills above the predominantly white town of Medallion, Ohio. Through its characters, the novel displays the emotional and social consequences of racial injustice, internalized norms, and societal expectations. The Bottom, a Black community in Ohio, sits in the mountainous area above the wealthier, mostly white town of Medallion. Its origin is quite ironic: a white slave owner "gifted" the deserted land to his former slave and the land grew into a vibrant community afterwards. Now, years later, rich white developers want to destroy it to build a golf course.

Shadrack, one of the Bottom's earliest members, returns from World War I deeply traumatized. Confused, he invents National Suicide Day, a strange ritual meant to separate death from life. Though first seen as crazy, the town eventually comes to terms with it. Nel and Sula, two childhood friends from very different families, form a deep bond despite their contrasting realities; Nel's life is strict and traditional; in a household led by her rigid mother,

Helen, her feelings of restriction become tenser after meeting her grandmother Rochelle, a former prostitute who defies their morals. While Sula's background is chaotic and free-spirited, it is deeply influenced by her strong grandmother Eva. A tragic accident during their youth, a boy, Chicken Little, who drowns, begins to loosen their friendship. Later, Sula's mother dies in a fire, marking another turning point in her life.

As adults, Nel settles into a traditional life, marrying Jude, while Sula leaves town seeking independence. When Sula returns, ten years later, she becomes a controversial person with her unethical attitude, which is closer to prostitution, and then has an affair with Jude and Nel's marriage collapses. The town labels Sula as immoral, yet her presence strangely unites them. Their fractured friendship reflects their different paths and the weight of societal expectations. Nel, hurt by betrayal, cuts off their friendship. Just before Sula dies in 1940, they share a tense moment of reconciliation. After her death, the fragile peace in the Bottom crumbles. By 1965, white developers prepared to erase the community. Nel visits Eva in a nursing home, where Eva accuses her of being as responsible for Chicken Little's death as Sula. This forces Nel to reconsider her judgment and recognize that she, too, carried guilt. In the final scene, Nel visits Sula's grave, grieving not just her friend but the part of her lost in trying to be "good".

### **Summary of *The Human Stain***

*The Human Stain*, the last part in Philip Roth's American Trilogy, is a compact novel exploring issues of identity, lies, and social hypocrisy in 1990s America. The story follows Coleman Silk, a notable classic literature professor at Athena University, whose life is turned upside down when he is blamed for racial discrimination for naming two absent students 'spooks'. Despite his protests, he was ignorant that the students were African American; the event turns into a scandal and drives him to resign. Coleman confides in Nathan Zuckerman, who progressively reveals his secret past: Born into a middle-class Black family in Newark,

the light-skinned Coleman deliberately broke away from his roots in the 1950s to avoid systemic racism. After abandoning his family and falsifying his documents, he established a life as a white Jewish man, even lying to his wife, who died without knowing the reality. This existential lie, motivated by a desire for freedom, turns into a cruel contradiction when he is accused of discrimination.

Solitary and bitter, Coleman starts a relationship with Faunia Farley, a 34-year-old woman employed as a cleaner at the university. A previous agriculturist from a wealthy background but marked by a traumatic past, Faunia embodies marginalized America. Their relationship shocks those around Coleman, particularly Delphine Roux, a feminist colleague who sees it as an evidence of his deviance. The real danger, however, comes from Lester Farley, Faunia's previous husband, a mentally unstable Vietnam warrior. Possessed with his wife, he spies on them and finally causes a deadly accident in which both Coleman and Faunia are killed.

### **Historical Background of Racism in America:**

The struggle against racial stratification in America dates back to the 17th century, and it starts with the arrival of European colonists who, by force, displaced native peoples and introduced enslaved African populations to build the colonial economy. Early racial frameworks were established by law and violent measures orchestrated to advance white supremacy. As plantations expanded in the Southern states, Black people were under brutal exploitation and treated as property by law. The racial separation spread over centuries in intensity with the application of systematic brutality, economic poverty, and legal segregation. Although the 13th Amendment officially ended slavery in 1865, white supremacy ratified itself at Reconstruction through Black Codes criminalizing African American life and through

terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction, including political office holding and land ownership, were forcibly reversed.

By the end of the 19th century, racial ideologies had been entrenched in national policies. The Jim Crow regime printed a series of legislations and traditions to segregate Black Americans politically, socially, and economically. This era often called the *Nadir* of American ethnicity ties, was marked by general denial of rights, racial violence in the form of more than 4,400 lynchings between 1877 and 1950, and again, over normalization of Black financial exploitation. The Great Migration, in which millions of Black Americans departed the South to find more opportunities in Northern and Western urban areas, proved that racial discrimination was a national process, as in urban communities Black migrants experienced racial profiling, job discrimination, and racially segregated communities, institutionalizing the racial order outside of the South as well. Despite great gains in the Civil Rights Movement, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, institutionalized racism continued and adapted. From the 1970s on, "law and order" rhetoric fueled the growth of mass incarceration. Laws such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act specifically targeted Black communities, and the prison residents exploded the number of Black Americans incarcerated from 2025 remained at five times the number of whites.

Several major social and legal institutions bore main responsibilities to create and institutionalize systemic racism in America after slavery was ended. Shortly following the Civil War, the Black laws were imposed upon states of the South for the purpose of limiting the freedoms of formerly enslaved people so that they would still be a low-cost, compliant workforce. These legislations restricted Black people's rights to own property, travel freely without restriction, and earn justly, reemploying a new form of enslavement. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Supreme Court decision in 'Plessy vs. Ferguson' justified ethnic segregation by giving birth to the "separate but equal" philosophy, authorizing state

and municipal powers to create double communities that were quite unequal. In the 20th century, discriminatory practices like racial discrimination and restrictive agreements created domestic segregation. Black families were systematically excluded from mortgages and relegated to disadvantaged neighborhoods that kept them from accumulating wealth through homeownership.

In addition to statutory laws, cultural norms reinforced racial divisions. Police recruitment policies and media representations systematically excluded African Americans and reinforced stereotypes. For example, discriminatory policing strategies such as «stop-and-frisk» disproportionately targeted Black individuals. The racial reckoning after George Floyd's killing in 2020 revealed the deep-seated roots of America's racial problems in all domains: education, criminal justice, and environmental policy. Protests such as Black Lives Matter highlighted the persistent injustices and called for systemic change, showing that the promise of Reconstruction-true racial equality remains unfulfilled.

### III. Results

Throughout our dissertation, we tried to investigate the issue of racism , rebellion , freedom and Intersectionality in *Sula* by Toni Morrison (1973) and *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth (2000), by drawing the similarities between the two works. To reach our aim, we relied on *the critical race theory*, using Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as a property", and concept of Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Intersectionality*, for a better understanding of the issue of Black people in America.

In the first chapter of our research, we analyzed how whiteness maintains racial inequality in the United States through Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. The second chapter analyzed race as a social construct through the two novels. In *Sula*,

the characters are burdened by racial history and social expectations but find strength in community. *The Human Stain*, on the other hand, showed how racial passing reveals that identity is negotiable and dependent on the gaze of others.

We found that racism profoundly shapes individual self-protection, both novels illustrate that racism extends beyond external experiences. Whiteness affords systemic privilege and security, Cheryl Harris's theory, the text reveals that whiteness is accompanied by implicit advantages. Chapter Two shows that race is a socially constructed product of prescribed and generated oppression, and intersecting and related oppressions. In *Sula*, identity is tied to the community and history. In *The Human Stain*, identity is an act of passing, or situationally vulnerable to the perceptions of others, and thus fragile. Drawing upon Crenshaw's 'Intersectionality' and Harris's "whiteness as property" .

The second chapter demonstrates the way intersectional factors and systematic oppression establish race as a prominent social category. The history of race and the social responsibilities that go along with it in *Sula* makes people into caricatures who are weighed down by structural injustice while also enabling the group to forge a tenuous bond and feeling of togetherness. The act of passing, on the other hand, emphasizes the flexibility and contingency of identification in *The Human Stain*, showing how perception and recognition, rather than substance, define racial membership.

The claim, which draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm, demonstrates how racism, sexism, and classism are intertwined systems of dominance that exacerbate the difficulties that people like Sula and Coleman Silk experience. However, Cheryl Harris's concept of "whiteness as property" highlights how racial privilege functions as a resource that grants certain people rights and opportunities while denying others. Combined, these viewpoints show how Morrison and Roth reveal race as a structuring force of inner

existence rather than just an external social marker, forming layers of lived experience that people must negotiate in environments of exclusion, vulnerability, and erasure.

## Discussion

### Chapter One: Whiteness and the Perpetuation of Racial Inequalities in *Sula* and *The Human Stain*

Race in America is more than just a matter of skin color; it operates as a normalized system of power that determines possibility, belonging, and identity. Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* show the way in which whiteness functions as a structuring force over lives, through as either a publicly-sponsored system of segregation or, more insidiously, the pressure to assimilate into whiteness by "passing." *Sula* highlights the troublemaking figure of a Black woman, we know this despite how Morrison connects each character to their community, a woman who refuses to accept the moral and social code of both her community and white society, suggesting the interconnectivity of racial oppression and gender expectation. "she had no center , no speck around which to grow" (*Sula* , P119)

In *The Human Stain*, a Black man, Coleman Silk, reveals the tragic consequences of passing as white, when he does experience the tragic consequence of his life, identity and relationships dismantled as his truth emerges. These two novels effectively teach that race has no biological basis, rather it is a socially constructed identity used to stabilize systematic hierarchies and justify social inequality. Morrison and Roth's novels argue the importance of race as an external constraint and internal struggle; it distorts personal freedom, fractures communities and imposes significant psychological burdens that stay with the characters.

For many generations, racial inequality has long been a characteristic tension in American life that tangentially shapes the experiences of culture, politics, and society in ways that have ramifications in both the public arena and private life. It does not constitute only some

historical anomaly at high risk of lapse; rather, racism is a recurring element that consistently produces inequities in access, visibility, reception, and in-group , out-group status.

In Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, whiteness functions not as a category devoid of meaning but as it serves as a method of exclusion and as an instrument of systemic oppression in the governed rules of who has full access and attribution in society, and who is denied. Morrison places this force in the lived experience of all black neighborhood where segregation and racial boundaries determine opportunity, while Roth dramatizes the destructive pressures of assimilation through the character of Coleman Silk, who relinquishes his blackness in order to gain social standing.

Despite narrative strategies employed by each author and their distinct contexts, both novels reveal that racial identity is not an abstract social construct, but an embodied condition with significant, and often catastrophic, consequences. Each novel demonstrates that racism sustains itself through myriad mechanisms, including segregation, which enforces discoloration, assimilation, which requires self-negation, and institutionalized mores, which reproduce discrimination from within, thereby exposing the persistence of racial hierarchy across different times and spaces. “ *to have to make your self , to have to be the author of your own identity . To be obliged to be your own father . to create your own birth certificate*” ( *The Human Stain* , p108)

In her novel, Morrison illustrates the racial divisions in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, by using the Bottom, a land situated in the hills, which was once assigned to the Black population. The very naming of the Bottom is a direct reflection of the deceptive thinking of racial domination, as Morrison writes “*It is called the suburbs now, but when Black people lived there it was called the Bottom*” (Morrison, p.22). This designation is here to help us understand how whiteness functions through hypocritical narratives that defend

Black dispossession. The name "Bottom" was a lie. White people gave Black folks bad land but called it "bottom" to hide the trick. Later, when white people wanted it, they renamed it "suburbs" to make it seem nice.

In the very first chapter, the slaves are denied access to productive land, an act that reinforces the systemic nature of ethnic inequality at that time. Toni Morrison illustrates this through the story of a deceitful transaction between a white farmer and his enslaved worker.

Toni Morrison writes

*A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy—the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land was Bottom land (Morrison,p,5)*

This section illustrates how racism operates through not only physical violence and overt exclusion, but also through deception, distortion, and unfulfilled promises. The white farmer uses words purposely to confuse his slave, implying that the mountainous, infertile land is “bottom land” so he can keep the fertile land for himself. This is not merely the wickedness of a single individual, but signifies a national pattern . African Americans were given formal freedom, but could not acquire material resources for a self-sufficient and meaningful life. Morrison reveals that racism often exists alongside, and is hidden by, seemingly benign acts of social generosity. Oppression can survive without open brutality, but instead is sustained by “clever” word games, unfulfilled promises, and institutional trickery that maintain white power and Black marginalization. The irony of the “Bottom” then becomes a metaphor for America’s racial history freedom has been professed, but opportunity has been denied. Morrison’s story also reminds the reader that even after the civil rights movement, forms of deception that characterized this historical moment persist in contemporary forms of systemic

inequality. Structural barriers to opportunity appear under the guise of the language of equality and progress.

Although Nel is usually represented as obsequious and non-violent qualities often associated with femininity "*Except for occasionally taking on a leadership position with Sula, she had no aggression. Her parents succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had*" (Morrison, 1987, p. 83), she is always conscious of her compliance, and even collaborative submission to societal responsibilities based partially on white middle-class ideals. However, her overtly compliant and collaborative persona, in tandem with the recollection of constantly striving for social norms, offers her little legitimacy against that marginalization.

Before long, Nel collapses, literally and figuratively, into profound despair and disillusionment, during what should have been an emotionally safe place when Sula was buried; the emotional wreckage reaches its horrifying pinnacle when Nel observes herself alone as the only Black person present until the rest of the Black community arrives to intersect with her. As she sits isolated physically amongst white mourners highlighting how perilous her position is caught between white and Black communities to whom she belongs fully to neither. Perhaps more importantly, the emotional consequences of the isolation signal the psychological damage attainable through society's inhumane socio-political racial constructs: the disintegration of Nel's identity is contemplated by curricular and sentimental pressures to acculturate or devote to conformity, suggesting that whiteness isn't just present through oppression in systemic policies, but in the rust of identities, from the inside. Morrison illustrates race positions even in private relationships and friendships which also pair to isolation and alienation as collateral damage unique to a racially stratified system and society, creating a legacy, unavoidable, as an experience.

Similarly, in *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth shows how the self-reinvention of the protagonist as a method of survival in society narrates the passing and vulnerable position of whiteness. Coleman decides to pass as white. It aligns with Roth's analysis of racial identity at play as performance rather than simply biology. The narrative sets up passing as the tension between one's disposition and how the recipient of the passing condones the act rather than simply being physical deception. The protagonist is identified as having a "prize-fighter's look" which emphasizes this. Philip Roth, in this regard, writes "*Delphine was very taken by the writer's poetically prize-fighterish looks, to her an outward sign of everything colliding within*" (Roth, p.266).

The protagonist's constant anxiety about potential exposure and the need for acknowledgment expose the frailty of the white ego, as reflected in the following quote "*she is looking for the man who is going to recognize her. She is looking for the Great Recognizer*" (Roth, p.204), here, recognition is a sign of the legitimization of whiteness as a performative social fact grounded in acceptance rather than interior truth. In addition, Roth's narrative situates this act of passing within the wider cultural judgment of appearances and labeling, where age, desirability, and intellectual ability cross awkwardly.

*If she described herself, straight out, as "beautiful," if she dared to be truthful enough to evoke the word that had never seemed extravagant to her lovers who had called her éblouissante (as in "Éblouissante! Tu as un visage de chat"); dazzling, stunning or if, for the sake of precision in a text of only thirty or so words, she invoked the resemblance noted by her elders to Leslie Caron who her father always enjoyed making too much of, then anyone other than a megalomaniac might be too intimidated to approach her or refuse to take her seriously as an intellectual* (Roth, p.264).

In this way, identity categories such as whiteness, for instance are paradoxically both powerful and vulnerable because their power relies on social recognition, but they exist in a state of constant threat or uncertainty, exposure, or the anxiety of rupture. Whiteness may act

as a cloak of privilege, yet it never fully achieves safety because it is underwritten by the instability of exclusion and secrecy. Coleman's observations about the academy illustrate instability; he notes that colleagues deploy prestigious intellectual language not as a method of truth seeking, but rather as a means of self-aggrandizement and social performance. This suggests that social identity is not anchored to an authentic inner self, we act out our identity, performed and reconstructed through the processes of presentation, reputation, and symbolic capital.

Roth, similarly, emphasizes the performative nature of identity, showing that individuals, whether consciously or not, construe identities, manipulate cultural codes, and protect their belonging and authority. For Coleman, however, performance carries an additional weight: his very existence within a racially stratified society rests upon his ability to contest and erase his Black heritage, thereby laying bare the precariousness of identity that depends on secrecy and hiding *"Of course she had the credentials. But to Coleman she embodied the sort of prestigious academic crap that the Athena students needed like a hole in the head but whose appeal to the faculty second-raters would prove irresistible"* (Roth, p.194) It is clear from the novel's examination of fragility, social desire, and self-presentation that, according to Roth, whiteness is a brittle social construct sustained by everyday acts of performance and negotiation rather than a fixed racial core.

## **1. Whiteness as a System of Control**

*Sula* and *The Human Stain* demonstrate not only whiteness as a racial construct but also white supremacy as a means of using power to shape inequality via psychological coercion, assimilation and segregation. In Morrison's *Sula*, this is staged allegorically through the literal containment of the Bottom, a Black settlement placed on rough and unproductive land on purpose. Seemingly a fair arrangement, it is in fact a cruel farce and act of deception — white

landowners exploit a supposed commitment to language to conceal their abuses of the community by denying their access to fertile ground while seemingly keeping their commitments. The Bottom exists as socially and economically sanctioned yet isolated, inhumane, exploitative and poor place spatially illustrating the dilemma of Black life under white supremacy; while Black labor and culture sustain the nation, Black communities are exiled from it and allege benefits or opportunities from it.

A similar dynamic can be found in Roth's *The Human Stain*, with Coleman Silk trying to "pass" as white, only to face the dire consequences of racial policing. Coleman's tragedy of estrangement, misconception, and disintegration indicates the way whiteness functions as an exclusive space that is both impenetrable and punitive. Those who defy, assimilate, or pass who it may be only to encounter estrangement, collapse, and alienation. They are estranged from the communities they left as they cannot be fully accepted into the world of whiteness they sought to move, without fear of repercussion. The system will not let them fail in private; it does this to advance the power of the institution of whiteness and disobedience of its power. The cost of exclusion is the destruction of one's identity, safety, and legacy. Thus, whiteness advances its power by making defiance seem meaningless, and possibly dangerous.

Both Philip Roth and Toni Morrison confront the ramifications of race and the artificially developed concept of race by demonstrating the processes of racialization that condition and organize power within American life. Morrison offers a particularly keen critique of racial ideology, questioning the very notion that race has any biological validity, demonstrating that race is rather a social construct designed to create and maintain hierarchies of power. Morrison also characterizes the ways in which lived experience is hindered by racial categorization through her characters, such as Shadrack who is labeled "mad" according to the social constructions of white normalcy, and ultimately becomes a signifier of the ways

deviation can become pathologized, or Sula, who rejects notions of respectability politics of black womanhood, refusing the roles of silence, subordination, or virtue.

In doing so, Morrison destabilizes the principles on which race and gender hierarchies are based in ways that demonstrate how identity becomes fragmented and contested within structures of oppression. Roth, on the other hand, investigates the racial construct as performed identity, a demonstration of how we create, maintain, and police identity in the social realm. Coleman Silk personifies the paradox of this performance, despite wrestling with his identity and claiming his Blackness, he ultimately renounces it to gain the respective privilege of whiteness. The disguises Coleman selects as an alternative identity, as he desperately attempts to conceal his otherness, ultimately imprison him and perpetuate the cycle of concealment and alienation. These two novels find common ground through their engagement of race as both an external system of domination and a source of internal conflict that have dynamic structures of lived experience through exclusion, stigma, and self-negation.

In the end, both works offer necessary critiques of whiteness and its disabling inequalities, and reveal how racial power operates both overtly and covertly. The novels show how whiteness reproduces itself not only through explicit forms of discrimination like segregation and exclusion, and material dispossession, but also through forms of action that are less visible that shape identity, regulate behavior, and create psychic costs. Morrison and Roth show that whiteness is more than a racial identity: it is a regime that demands compliance, enforces conformity, and punishes transgression. The consequences of transgressing its boundaries are severe, whether through the physical marginalization of Black neighborhoods in Morrison's case, or the psychic trauma of Coleman Silk's life-long acts of assimilation in Roth's. In both novels, whiteness serves as a controlling force that determines access to belonging, safety, and recognition even while drawing power from that very entanglement, all while operating in the background, undermining the integrity of personal

identity. By dramatizing this dynamic, these two novels advance a critique of the racial order, asserting that its injustices are not only social and political, but deeply personal and existential.

In *Sula*, Racism is exhibited both spatially and materially through a lack of access for the Black inhabitants of the Bottom. They are manipulated into coming to what they believe are her homelands to settle on land that cannot sustain them. Their hopes in obtaining jobs to dig the tunnel are similarly dashed when their potential roles are rescinded because of a white worker agreement. Racism represents itself concretely at this moment through unjust contracts, poverty and segregation, marginalization, and deprivation of opportunity. The hurtful ramifications of these derelictions clearly translate across the economic fissures of living, but, equally damaging, is the overall symbolic meaning and reference of denial of access to resources or legal recourse or protection the referenced positioning of a Black community residing in a marginalized state in the "White American" social order. The meaningful and traumatizing result of access denied, or opportunity denied, demonstrates how generational oppression is normalized whether it is through economic decay or poor social yoke; whether it is cultivating poor mental health from acquiring such generation wealth, the eventual dispossession from one's greatness form a major social component of life.

Conversely, Roth's *The Human Stain* depicts the insidiousness of racism in a more contemporary era, which functions less through state-supported segregation and more through social ostracism and rigid categorical identity. Coleman Silk's story illustrates the psychic violence of this regime: in order to escape stigmatization, he has to reject his Black identity and create a new identity , a distinction that will afford him some temporary privilege and ultimately his own torture and eventual tragedy. If Morrison can represent a communal toll upon the Bottom inherently and structurally estranged to disrupt the integrity of community, economy, and culture, Roth offers a critique of the personal toll of racial oppression. When

read together, these narratives depict a common thread whereby racism adapts to historical moments through its various incarnations, while constantly being able to destroy. In *Sula*, racial injustice can be recognized as externalized through socio-economic structures, while racial injustice in *The Human Stain* is primarily internal for example through suppression, concealment, and estrangement. Ultimately, both narratives reveal that racial injustice persists in every experience whether through the dispossession of a community, or through the disintegration of an individual's self.

## 2. Whiteness, Power, and the Invention of Race

In the United States, race is not a biological reality but a tool of domination that is made and maintained as literature has revealed and law has codified. For centuries, legal institutions of America have treated whiteness like property, which grants white persons both tangible and intangible rewards while formally excluding others, as explained in Cheryl Harris' canonical essay "*Whiteness as Property*" (1993). This legal fiction parallels literature, as novels such as *Sula* and *The Human Stain* indicate the social forces, violence, and insistence on hierarchical roles that shape and constrain identity, thus undermining racial categories. Collectively, these works suggest that race is a means of control that is legitimate in terms of law and explicated in terms of fiction, not a premise that is inherent or unavoidable.

Harris's central argument is that whiteness operates as a legally protected property and unique privilege. Legal frameworks maintained whiteness in mediating such things as the right to vote, own land, and receive an education, from the colonial invasion onwards and through slavery. Whiteness retained its value despite emancipation, when racial borders were maintained through Jim Crow, redlining, and restrictive covenants. Because of the racialization of this training, whiteness was also considered a protected interest, with

protection aggressively offered by the law. For example, color-blind legal frameworks regularly claim that challenges to white privilege threaten a fair legal process and conceptualize whiteness as a neutral norm. Whiteness is the norm in courts that hear affirmative action cases, interpreting racial justice claims as "reverse discrimination." Harris maintains that the way to debunk this reasoning is "...confronting and exposing the property interest in whiteness..." (Harris, p.3). In other words, the law creates and maintains racial hierarchy as a part of its function as opposed to simply replying to social reality.

In this way, literature subverts this construct by showcasing its ludicrousness and cruelty. Morrison's *Sula* attacks racial essentialism with identity as shifting through defiance, pain, and community. The Bottom, a Black community situated on condemned ground as a result of a forced move, is the setting of the novel, and it supports Harris' argument that space is racialized property. " *Outlaw women are fascinating—not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive* " (Morrison , p.18) Morrison suggests that these characters, especially Sula Peace, defied the rigid constraints of Black women and what he speaks of as an "outlaw" existence. Sula creates tribes by systematically refusing to follow the rules; the novel shows the ways gendered and racial identities are surveilled to show them to be social constructs rather than natural realities. As Morrison writes, "*The bulk of the opening I finally wrote is about the community*" (Morrison, p.17), establishing racial identity in terms of the community. The sociality of community emphasizes that race is a socially constructed variable that is subject to negotiation through history and power, and not an individual attribute.

This is also deployed in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, which explores the constructed and deeply contradictory character of racial identity. Coleman Silk, the protagonist, is a light-skinned African American male who passes as white for most of his life. His eventual revelation comes with his own personal and professional devastation,

revealing the fragility and violence that lie at the heart of racial categories. Like Cheryl Harris in *Whiteness as Property*, Roth shows that being white is more about privilege and power than it is about appearance. As Harris states, “*whiteness was the predicate for attaining a host of privileges from society*” (Harris, p. 39). Coleman's downfall reveals that although racial categories are socially constructed, their effects are materially and psychologically profound.

The law and literature are two sides of the same coin; the former codifies racial domination, while the latter sheds light on its peculiar contradictions. Harris's legal work emphasizes how whiteness is enshrined as property, while Morrison and Roth's literature exposes its human consequences. In order to end racial injustice, we must first recognize that race is not a set fate but rather a tool of power that can be challenged, rewritten, and ultimately reversed. Laws must be altered, beliefs must be revised. Then we can start to imagine a world in which identity is a means, not a barrier.

Philip Roth dives into the complexities of how racial identity is a system of socially produced behaviors rather than a biological truth. This point is made clear by the protagonist's extensive passing as white, which shows that race is a flexible . The protagonist's "poetically prize-fighterish looks" are less physical characteristics and more outward manifestations of "*everything colliding within*" (Roth, p.266), emphasizing the internal struggle of assuming a racial identity that is in opposition to his place of origin. Coleman's whiteness is portrayed by Roth as a delicate act that needs ongoing maintenance and attention. Coleman has to carefully maintain his false identity through planned actions, speech patterns, and broken familial relationships. However, this act is always uncertain since his meticulously crafted identity might be destroyed by a single verbal blunder. Thus, whiteness is shown in the novel as a high-stakes social script that necessitates constant

repetition while always teetering on the edge of disclosure rather than as an innate characteristic.

Race is also shown to be performative through the social dynamics of passing. Racial identity is highly dependent on external validation; one's racial "reality" depends on being observed and validated by others, as evidenced by the yearning for acknowledgment in *"She is looking for the Great Recognizer"* (Roth, p.204). As seen in the story of the protagonist's public humiliation, where the charge of racism changes not just an action but also his whole life story, Roth also links race to social stigma *"If you're a racist, then you've always been a racist"* (Roth, p.232). By identifying identity through process labeling and social memory, this punitive re-signification reveals how race functions performatively within social discourse.

Additionally, the protagonist's perseverance in the face of such stigma, as demonstrated via dancing, symbolically enacts the constant performance and adaptation required to fit within assigned racial categories *"I can soothe him. All I need to do is keep on going. When he asks "Dance for me and I think "Why not?"* (Roth, p.232) captures the draining cycle of self-presentation necessary to sustain his fake whiteness. Every gesture must be meticulously regulated to prevent slip-ups that may expose his actual self, much like an eternal dance. Roth exposes the paradox of passing, which makes identification a prison one creates for oneself by granting a fleeting sense of belonging while requiring constant attention. According to the novel, these constant, nervous performances rather than biology maintain racial distinctions.

Morrison and Roth urge viewers to question the legitimacy of racial hierarchies in general by illustrating the frailty of racial categories and designations. Characters like Sula and Nel live in a social world underlapped as Black, which simultaneously brings them

marginality but also unreal possibility. However, Coleman's tragic outcome in *The Human Stain* shows that racial passing is not heterotopia but precarious negotiation with structures of authority. These texts show that race as a mode of power must be dismantled for justice to be found.

### **3. Belonging limits under Passing and Segregation**

Two of the most essential mechanisms that have historically shaped American racial hierarchies are passing and segregation. Both mean inclusion and exclusion, but each does so in a different way. Segregation is a systemic practice of enforced separation between Black communities and the white world across every institution of social life, including housing, schools, employment, public spaces, and even cemeteries. Segregation seeks to exclude whole communities and establishes hierarchies of inferiority by systematically denying them equal access to resources, opportunities, and dignity. By contrast, passing is an individual strategy or a concealed act of survival by which light-skinned African Americans attempted to escape the burdens of racial discrimination by passing as white. Whereas segregation seeks to confine Blackness to the peripheries of society, passing seeks the conditional entrance into whiteness, revealing racial identity as fragile, mutable, and dependent on recognition from the social position of whiteness. Together they affirm the conclusion, that racial boundaries of belonging are not natural or fixed; they are socially constructed, constantly policed, and protected by the structures of white supremacy.

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores the epistemic violence of segregation through the geography of Medallion, Ohio. The Black community is relegated to a place called Bottom a cruel irony explicated by Morrison originally "given" to their enslaved ancestors as an act of negligence. When Morrison states "*It is called the suburbs now, but when Black people lived there, it was called the Bottom*" (Morrison, 22), she highlights how whiteness rewrites history and

geography when it is economically expedient to do so; once this land had value to whites, Blackness was erased from the landscape. Bottom serves as a marker of exclusion, as barren soil that was offered to Black Lives as reparations, but only refashioned into desirable minutes when appropriated by white interests. This process illustrates, as Cheryl Harris articulates, "*Whiteness as property*" where access to space, resources, and opportunities is conferred by white property rights, and systematically denied to Black people.

Morrison highlights the structural aspects of segregation in the tunnel building scene. The Black men of the Bottom are enthusiastic about work, seeing the project as an opportunity to be involved in the "progress of the nation" as a way to express their worth as workers. Their exclusion from these jobs reveals that segregation is not just about space, but rather a structural system that operates across whiteness, reinforcing the economic marginalization of Black people. In *Sula*, segregation is presented not as a condition, but as a process that is active and ongoing to continue the inequalities against Black workers, Black labor, culture, and lives are constantly devalued and denied advancement.

In *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth examines the complication of belonging through the act of passing. Coleman Silk, who is a light-skinned Black man, casts away his genealogy and instead embodies himself as a white, Jewish professor. Coleman actively denies both his family and his Black ancestry. Although, this denial allows Coleman to inhabit social and professional spaces that had otherwise been inaccessible; the demand of "performing" continuously denies the possibility of sustaining a sense of self. Roth depicts this performance through the image of Coleman's tattoo "*Embedded in that blue tattoo was a true and total image of himself. The ineradicable biography was there*" (Roth, p.188). The tattoo symbolizes the permanence of his previous identity, even in disguise, it is still engrained in both the body and the mind. Coleman's passing ultimately fails when he is labeled a racist after he used the word "spooks" to refer to missing students. He exclaimed in that he had no knowledge of their

racial identity whatsoever, nor had he label them by race, yet the label of racist enduringly redrafts his biography: *"If you're a racist, then you've always been a racist. All of a sudden, it's your whole life you've been a racist"* (Roth, p.232). This moment captures the tragedy of passing: Coleman has spent his whole life rejecting his Blackness, only to wind up wrecked by a racist charge that uncovers the fragility of his constructed identity.

For Roth's character, passing does not liberate, it is another form of alienation, for he will never claim full membership in either the Black space he has renounced or the white space that ultimately rejects him. Passing is, in this sense, revealed to be an unsound and precarious strategy; while one member is always on guard against the general threat of being exposed, passing depends on a grounded sense of racial identity that is, at any moment, perfected by an increasingly suspicious racial space. Coleman's fall embodies the paradox of racial performance by performing an identity of whiteness, he illustrates that whiteness is an unstable performative social category, one that must be policed and assured through exclusion and performance to maintain its very boundaries.

Roth's critique is, therefore, not only about the personal costs of passing, but across a broader social system of racial categorization in which belonging is never certain, and identity itself is at once a performance and a sacred prison.

Together, Morrison and Roth show that both segregation and passing, no matter how they seem to exist at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, indicate the structural limits of belonging in America. Segregation denies the Black community access to land, labor, and equality, relegating them to exclusion. Passing, on the other hand, tries to evade those limits by entering into whiteness, but within this form of passage, one must abide by erasure and, of course, it all ends with getting caught. In either case, whiteness allows the terms. It assigns belonging, allows some to flourish, and mandates exclusion for those who will not obey the

terms. Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality is critical in this regard; Crenshaw elucidates how race, alongside class and gender, produces cumulative forms of oppression. For Morrison's characters, poverty accumulates on top of their racial segregation, while Black women like Sula endure domineering gender expectations that control their conduct. For Coleman, though passing allows him a sort of class mobility, it never secures immunity from the institutional reclassification in stolid racial hierarchies.

Both segregation and passing highlight the impossibility of not being racially categorized in America. In *Sula*, resistance to segregation leads to marginalization, while compliance offers no safe haven. In *\*The Human Stain\**, passing entails short-lived privilege, but this privilege is peak and is ultimately fatal. In both novels, belonging mediated by whiteness is always conditional, tenuous, reversible, and harmful. Morrison and Roth together illustrate the violent absurdity of racial categorization: segregation outright excludes, passing pretends inclusion, but no belonging emerges in either case.

## Endnotes

1. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 22.
2. Ibid, p. 5.
3. Ibid, p. 83.
4. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 266.
5. Ibid, p. 204.
6. Ibid, p. 264.
7. Ibid, p. 194.
8. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993), p.3
9. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 18.
10. Ibid, p. 17.
11. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993), p.39
12. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 266.
13. Ibid, p. 204.
14. Ibid, p. 232.
15. Ibid, p. 232.
16. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 22.
17. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 188.
18. Ibid, p. 232.

## Chapter Two: Navigating Race and Intersectional Identity in *Sula* and *The Human Stain*

Intersectionality is a paradigm shift in understanding systemic inequity that was first introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is an analytical framework that considers how different forms of social stratification - such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual identity, are not only additive but also interrelated, and act together to produce complicated hierarchies of privilege and disadvantage.

Rather than segregated considerations of kinds of oppression, intersectionality assesses the interplay of existing and new forces, to shape a nuanced understanding of substantive experience. For instance, while disabled white people may experience substantial barriers in society, disabled Latina lesbians face a series of barriers that qualitatively differ from those faced by disabled white people and heterosexual Latinas, they face their barriers from the intersection of at least three other kinds of marginalized identities. What began as a methodological critique of the shortcomings of antidiscrimination law has matured into a critical interdisciplinary tool with a more nuanced re-conceptualization of power relations, and a direction towards more viable and inclusive movements for social change and equity-based policy development.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality is an important construct for determining how race, gender, and class intersect to create systemic inequality. Crenshaw (1989) contends that oppression arises not simply through individual prejudice, but exists as a structural phenomenon embedded in the legal, institutional, and social fabric that creates overlapping disadvantages to groups already marginalized in society. This construct is useful for understanding the characters' struggles in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Philip Roth's

*The Human Stain* (2000), who both occupy multiple, intersecting identities and are subject to the same exclusion and distortion. The tragedies depicted in these two texts both arise from a set of circumstances involving Blackness, but unfold differently along diverging lines of identity. As a Black woman, Sula Peace counters both her community's expectations for womanhood and respectability, as well the larger expectations of white-minority society at large. Coleman Silk is a Black man with a light enough complexion to hide his racial identity, but this hiding confines him to a performance of whiteness that is barely verifiable socially, and collapses under scrutiny. “*I don't want to make somebody else , I want to make my self*” (Sula , p92)

When these two novels are examined together, they reveal how intersectionality demonstrates the ways in which social and legal constructs cannot grasp the lived realities of Black and marginalized lives. Morrison and Roth use their protagonists to show that systemic injustice does not only silence overt suffering but also fails to acknowledge the subtler, hidden costs of survival , whether through defiance of oppressive norms or through the concealment of identity.

## **1. Systemic Legal Failure and the Marginalization of Black Women**

According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, Black women exist on a site of “double discrimination” where the intersection of race and gender creates oppressions that have little traction in antiracist or feminist discourses of theorizing and demonstrating lived oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 139). Toni Morrison's *Sula* makes this proposition dramatic when conceptualizing, through its section “A Different Place,” Black women whose structural lives are lived without legal protections and where their day-to-day lives operate as an exercise in the resilience and creativity and sometimes acts of resistance against what they may perceive as a structure of limit. The women who are characters in the Bottom live under the structures

of white society and their own community, which did not change the status quo but serve as another layer of identity formation and behavioral norms connected to respectability and sameness.

The removal of institutional protection is vividly articulated in moments when the narrator understands that *"the only possible triumph was that of the imagination"* (Morrison, 1973, p. 15). Rather than romanticizing imagination as an ideal, Morrison mourns the absence of legal and state support, illustrating Black women's necessity to construct themselves in conditions of abandonment. Importantly, Nel's post-loss understanding that she possesses *"her own abiding strength and limitless power"* (Morrison, 1973, p. 123) is significant; however, it is only established because there are no systems outside her body to protect and recognize her. In this way, Morrison situates the cost of intersectional neglect: Black women having to imagine power in loss and the imagination precisely because the systems that exist to protect them refused to recognize they ever existed.

Morrison is clear that this silence is not an accident. It is structural silence, underpinned by histories and community complicity. The town of Medallion, which itself is a product of segregation and economic exclusion, replicates the logic of oppression within its own social order. Respectability politics come in undergird the social order: Women are expected to occupy the spaces of wife, mother, and silent sufferer, and any deviation leads to derision. This regulation is emergent not only from outside but within, as women also learn to discipline one another to comply with standards. In rejecting the limitations of womanhood as defined, by refusing marriage, domesticity, and silence, *Sula* is cast as dangerous and immoral, and expelled from the very community that should serve as a place of support.

Morrison's question is pointedly asked *"What choices are there for black women apart from the sanction of their own people?"* (Morrison, 1973, p.14) This question highlights the very

constrained parameters set on Black womanhood. The community acts as a type of alternative legal system that does not enact punishment through established law but employs social structures through gossip, ostracization, and symbolic exile. Morrison anticipates Patricia Hill Collins's work of "controlling images" that construct Black woman, whether virtuous "good mother" or deviant "*fallen woman*" eliminating any space for complexity or resistance to stereotypes and impropriety (Collins, 1990, p.69). By dramatizing the interplay of respectability politics and structured, public Racism, Morrison illustrates that Black women's reality exists at the intersection of Racism and gendered policing in black spaces.

Sula resists both images, and her punishment illustrates how social norms operate with the same force as law, Her rebellion is written onto her body. Morrison's description of her "*birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose...gave her otherwise plain face a broken excitement*" (Morrison, 1973, p. 52) it signifies her resistance to being identified. She is neither truly beautiful nor ugly, neither victimized nor difamed, but something in between. This refusal of clarity reflects the legal system's inability to account for Intersectionality . *Sula*, similar to Crenshaw's Black women, is illegible to institutions with only neat, stable categories. Even in death, she is left unacknowledged; her death inspires little mourning in public, only gossip and story-telling, and the law leaves her humanized form irrelevant.

The Human Stain by Philip Roth complicates this criticism, showing that marginalized women are not erased by community gossip, as with Morrison's Medallion, but by institutional indifference. Faunia Farley, the working-class lover of Coleman Silk, is portrayed as a woman who is trapped in cycles of abuse and functional illiteracy. Despite conditions, Faunia is offered no measure of institutional protection in the very parts of society that are supposed to uphold her humanity, such as schools, courts, and welfare systems. Faunia's subsequent accidental death in a car crash, while ultimately narratively significant, is

not significant for Faunia as a tragedy in her own right, but only as a detail folded into Coleman's scandal that erases her subjectivity altogether. Just as Sula is punished for reframing femininity, Faunia is punished for her class and gender as she is incorporated into the story of a man. Roth emphasizes this erasure when he describes Coleman's disgrace, "*He's lost his wife. He's lost his job publicly humiliated as a racist professor*" (Roth, 2000, p. 232) without comparable attention to Faunia's suffering or loss. Faunia does not even merit acknowledgment as a victim; her role in the narrative is to be entirely silent.

Both novels emphasize that women, positioned at the intersection of race, gender, and class, are abandoned by the same structures that are meant to provide them assistance. Morrison's *Medallion* demonstrates how communities reproduce legal exclusion via social ostracism, while Roth's *New England* demonstrates how institutions, through bureaucratic neglect, make oppressed women invisible. What unfolds is an intersection of abandonment: Sula's ostracism, Nel's isolation, and Faunia's erasure all highlight what Hortense Spillers calls the reduction of Black women to "*flesh*," as opposed to being recognized subjects (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality allows us to see these events not simply as isolated tragedies, but systemic forms of violence; law and society establish and normalize categories that flatten complexity and relegate marginalized lives to silence. The tragedy is not only the lack of recognition and danger in not protecting them, but the inability to acknowledge these women as fully human in terms defined legally and socially.

## **2. The Violence of Racial Classification and the Struggle of Passing**

The logic of racial classification in American society operates as structural violence, which simplifies complex lives into fixed categories that obliterate nuance and individuality. As Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us, this reduction is enabled because the law "normalizes identities into stable categories" that fail to reflect lived realities (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151).

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* dramatizes this violence through the life of Coleman Silk, a man of Black ancestry who passes as White to avoid racism but is ultimately undone by the same categorical systems he tried to escape. Roth's novel exposes the brutal nature of the act of classification once classified, there is no way out; an individual is relegated to an identity that denies the intricacies of history, choices, and circumstance. Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers a similar commentary, as Morrison shows her female characters being confined to rigid communal classifications, denying their humanity.

Together these works demonstrate how the violence of classification, whether through race, gender, or sexuality, acts as structural violence. Roth chronicles Coleman Silk's downfall as a result of the permanence of racial labels. When he is accused of being a racist by his students and colleagues, the label becomes a totalizing verdict “*If you’re a racist, then you’ve always been a racist. Suddenly it’s your entire life you’ve been a racist*” (Roth, 2000, p. 232). This reduction vaporizes his entire decades long history as an academic and his private life, turning him into a cartoon character. The permanence of the label racist demonstrates the violence of classification one act or mistakenly interpreted word sends all that was life for a man into one category. To demonstrate how deeply pernicious this reduction is, Roth notes that Coleman “*lost his wife, lost his job, publicly humiliated*” (Roth, 2000, p. 232). The accusation did not stop at his job; it seeped into his most intimate relationships, and left him ruined.

However, Coleman’s tragedy goes much deeper into his childhood, where his decision to pass as white illustrates the coercive power of racial classifications. He is born into a Black family, but he chooses to have nothing to do with it so he can be a white man. A choice that affords him professional opportunities denied him as a black man. If passing is not an act of liberation anywhere but the borders of one’s own identity, it is survival, one forced by structures and systems that necessitate a form of compliance to whiteness. The tattoo

Coleman has serves as the novel's most powerful metaphor for the impossibility of escaping classification "*Embedded in that blue tattoo was a true and total image of himself. The ineradicable biography was there*" (Roth, 2000, p. 188). Even as he tries to wash away his past, his body is still marked, revealing that classification functions as a permanent scar. The tattoo represents what Frantz Fanon calls in *Black Skin, White Masks* the impossibility of escaping racial embodiment: no matter how one performs whiteness, the body is still a site of inscription.

The brutality of classification is not limited to Roth's novel. Morrison's *Sula* likewise illustrates the ways in which women are placed into rigid categories that erase nuance and serve as mechanisms of compliance. Sula Peace in particular becomes the victim of this social diminishment: her voluntary non-marriage, her freedom to explore her sexuality, and her rejection of the politics of respectability are read not as acts of independence but as evidence of immorality, danger, and unfemininity.

In the storytelling of the community, Sula's rebellion becomes a palpable threat to their tenuous unity, which resulted in her entire identity being reduced to the singular term "outcast." This act of naming is not neutral, as it legitimizes the exclusion of her and simultaneously casts her as a symbolic vessel of deviance, the metric for determining their own community virtue. In this, Morrison illuminates how classification itself is a form of violence , violence that strips away individualism and compliance, and reproduces the very structures of patriarchy and respectability politics that uphold systemic violence.

Like Coleman, Sula becomes impossible to categorize within a system that privileges clear distinctions, and so she is punished with social exile. The mark on her face "a stemmed rose" that gave her "a broken excitement" (Morrison, 1973, p. 52) is a metaphor for this refusal of

clarity. She cannot be fully classified as plain or gorgeous, good or bad. This inability to abide by her community's defined categories leads them to reduce her to a single word: evil.

Both Coleman and Sula display the intersectional violence of categorization. Coleman finds himself trapped within the fixed restrictions of Black and white, never considered able to reside in the ambiguous area in between, while Sula is categorized as morally upstanding woman or deviant outcast and in the process, her own individuality is flattened. Passing in particular performs the violence of categorization as a survival mechanism. To escape race's impositions, Coleman denounces his family ties and his ancestry, and performs whiteness for the duration of his life, claiming he merely "become white."

However, what this performance masks is that survival comes at the price of the annihilation of self. Passing makes survival possible, but also exposes the self to disintegration because concealing oneself always bears the threat of exposure. Sula's resistance to gender roles operates in the same manner. Her refusal to acquiesce is not merely a choice; it is an ontological necessity: she cannot exist in a legitimate way under the roles offered to her. Like Coleman, her refusal makes her both free and doomed. Both novels by Morrison and Roth suggest that when one does not accept being categorized, one uncovers the tenuous quality of race and gender along with how violently society will respond to those who refuse its system of categorization.

Ultimately In the end, both authors argue that the act of classification is violent in itself. Coleman ends up fractured as he cannot both be exterior to the categories in which Black and white are supposed to inhabit, nor can he understand himself as a distinguished professor with an entirely erased lineage and familial story or treatise. Similarly, Sula's existence is condemned because she cannot be both woman and independently a person, sexual and virtuous, without being perverse in the opposition of tested binaries. In laying out

these exclusions, Morrison and Roth make evident that classificatory systems are not neutral descriptors, but systems made to regulate and punish. Their storytelling evokes precisely what Crenshaw verbalizes as a warning when the law and society similarly normalize categories without taking intersectionality into consideration, the law and society places an erased subject into invisibility. This is not simply marginalization; erased categories eradicates a possibility of understanding one's whole being, and becomes a simple number from which Coleman and Sula's resistance provides an alternative to, at the expense of living outside the terms of classification.

### **3. Systemic Racism and Intersectionality as Structural Oppression**

Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that racism should not be conceived as an accumulation of individual biases, but as an embedded systemic/structured reality manifested in the legal, economic, and cultural codes that dictate daily life. This structural force intensifies even further in the context of intersectional social identity categories like gender, class, and sexuality to marginalize and silence voices at the margins.

Through *Sula*, Toni Morrison dramatizes this awareness by locating her narrative in a town called Medallion--a place marked by segregation and intentional economic exclusion. The most salient symbol of systemic betrayal in the details surrounding this promise is the building of the tunnel. It is built to serve as employment offer for Black people only to have white people moved in to take on the work. And this denial of work is more than another iteration of injustice; it shows the very functioning of systemic racism, where an illusion of inclusion is proffered only to be retracted, leaving Black citizens excluded materially and symbolically. "We leave a stain , we leave a train , we leave our imprint . impurity, cruelty , abuse , error , excrement , semen" (The Human Stain , p16) . Not only does the denial of work mean the denial of recognition, it also means belonging in collective and intentionality

in the project of progress. Consequently, we see not just poverty, but what Morrison describes as a state of “spiritual devastation” that hurts bonds of community and deepens fragmentation. By noting that “*the bulk of the opening I finally wrote is about the community*” (Morrison, 1973, p. 17), Morrison places the personal calamities of Sula and Nel in this larger form of abandonment, and makes clear that their condition is not arbitrary, but a result of structural inequality that persists.

Structural racism impacts most heavily on women who experience the combined weight of racial oppression and gender oppression. In *Sula*, Morrison dramatizes this double bind in her female characters. Sula’s active rejection of wife and mother roles is seen as deviant; her sexual freedom can be interpreted as a challenge to the tenuous cohesion of the Black community and the response is to expel her. Nel, on the other hand, conforms; she marries, becomes a mother, and lives by the rules of respectability only to find herself emotionally as barren as Sula. Nel learns too late that obedience does not engender happiness. In either case, whether resisting or conforming, both women are subject to the combined weight of race and gender. As Black subjects they are excluded from state protection, as women they are silenced and shamed by their community.

Morrison's portrayal exemplifies what Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to as the boundaries of "single-axis" frameworks, which consider gender and racism as distinct oppressive systems. In practice, these categories interact in ways that make it impossible to separate them, creating overlapping responsibilities that frequently make Black women's experiences invisible. Morrison dramatizes how single-axis analyses obscure complex identities and fall short of capturing the compounded nature of discrimination by demonstrating how Sula is evaluated simultaneously through the lenses of gender and race. This supports Crenshaw's claim that an intersectional perspective is the only way to understand how power systems exclude people who don't cleanly fit into discrete analytical categories.

Morrison's criticism is echoed in Roth's *The Human Stain*, which also emphasizes how systematic racism still exists in both academia and the legal profession. Coleman Silk's life serves as an example of how social success frequently depends on whiteness. Coleman uses the tactic of passing as a light-skinned Black guy to obtain access to social and professional advancement, demonstrating how institutional expectations enforce racial identification rather than it being a choice. The fact that his employment as a professor of classics hinges on hiding his Black ancestry demonstrates how the academic system is set up to reward those who resemble whiteness while excluding or penalizing those who don't. Thus, Roth reveals how institutional power is not neutral but rather essentially dependent on maintaining white privilege, which makes Coleman's self-erasure the prerequisite for his ascent as well as the cause of his final demise.

However, this adjustment ultimately fails. When seen as racist, Coleman's carefully crafted identity collapses under the judgment of institutional authority "*He's lost his wife, lost his job, publicly humiliated as a racist professor*" (Roth, 2000, p. 232). His downfall underscores how systemic racism can adapt and persist, whether through economic exclusion, as shown in Morrison's work, or through institutional labeling, as seen in Roth's. Even passing, which might provide access to privilege, cannot erase the deeper systems that create exclusion.

The lasting nature of systemic racism is symbolically captured in Coleman's tattoo, which Roth calls "*the ineradicable biography*" (Roth, 2000, p. 188). Even after decades of passing, the mark on his body shows that race cannot be avoided. This tattoo parallels Sula's rose-shaped birthmark, which also defies categorization and signifies her difference (Morrison, 1973, p. 52). Both symbols demonstrate how structural oppression marks the body, preventing identity from being fluid or changeable. Through economic denial or the policing of racial identity, structural systems enforce conformity and punish those who resist.

In spite of these acts of rebellion and passing, neither are enough to change or disrupt these systems. Sula's spirited defiance allows for moments of personal agency, but ultimately results in her isolation; in turn, Coleman's passing successfully allows him access for a moment but ultimately brings about his destruction. Their defeats illustrate Crenshaw's observation that individual acts will not dismantle systems of oppression; the answer lies in systems change rather than individual acts or practices.

The novels show that oppression is not just a temporary injustice but a lasting condition. In Morrison's work, this condition appears as the economic betrayal of the Bottom and the community's acceptance of racial hierarchies. In Roth's narrative, it shows up in institutions that obsess over racial categories and refuse to acknowledge complexity. Throughout both works, characters on the fringes like Sula, Nel, Coleman, and Faunia are denied recognition as fully realized human beings.

By illustrating how inequality is woven into law, labor, and community, the novels support Crenshaw's key point: systemic oppression is only visible through an intersectional perspective. Sula's exclusion, Nel's isolation, Coleman's downfall, and Faunia's erasure are not just personal tragedies; they are public accusations against institutions that make inequality normal. In the end, both Morrison and Roth argue that achieving justice requires more than moral judgment or individual strength; it requires structural change that can tear down the racial and gender hierarchies that define who belongs.

## Endnotes:

1. Crenshaw Kimberlé, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics , (University of Chicago Legal ,1989) , p.139
2. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 123.
3. Ibid, p. 14.
4. Collins, Patricia Hill, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, (2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000) , p.69
5. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 52.
6. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 232
7. Spillers, Hortense J , Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe (An American Grammar Book , 1987) , p.67
8. Crenshaw Kimberlé, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics , (University of Chicago Legal ,1989) , p.151
9. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 232
10. Ibid, p. 232.
11. Ibid, p. 181.
12. Ibid, p. 52.
13. Ibid, p. 232.
14. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 52.
15. Hooks Bell , Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism, ( Boston, South End Press, 1981) , p.207

## IV. General Conclusion

This research explored the central theme of racial identity and oppression in two famous works of American literature, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). Through a comparative analysis, this study has highlighted how both novels expose the destructive effects of racial prejudice, social exclusion, and communal judgment on individuals who attempt to define themselves outside rigid social boundaries.

One of the primary connections between the two pieces is that they both present racism as an isolating force which not only creates outsiders among individuals, but also divides outsiders among communities. Morrison depicts the lives of Black women in Medallion as subject to expectations of respectability, unable to defy those expectations without being denounced, while Roth tells the tragic story of Coleman Silk, a man who escapes his beginnings by passing as white but ultimately is obliterated by the very system to which he attempted to flee.

These novels, while in difference historical and cultural contexts post-slavery America in *Sula* and post-Civil Rights America in *The Human Stain*, both reveal that racial hierarchies and exclusion were still prevalent in new forms. In *Sula*, racism appears in the way in which promises were broken through economic exclusion, in denying the Black community access to land and work opportunity. By the same token, in *The Human Stain*, racism appears in more subtle forms of labeling, policing one's identity, which ultimately causes Coleman Silk's demise.

Both novels demonstrate that while racism may appear in changes in form, whether in the form of more or less overt exclusion, ranging from direct segregation to invisible surveillance, they produce the same outcome for their subjects: alienation, silence, loss of dignity. The similarity between the respective narratives suggest that racial oppression is not just constrained to one historical moment, but rather a changing system of oppression that adapts to different contexts, aiming to continue limiting freedom and self-definition.

Our analysis has shown how the implications of institutional racism can take form as psychological trauma, alienation, and internalized shame suffered in characters who are erased or rejected by white society and the integrity of their own community. Coleman's demise in *The Human Stain* comes after he is accused of being a racist and Bottom's poverty and forced relocations ensure that the residents develop a cycle of mistrust, dissent, and fear of rejection. In each story, characters feel pulled between acts of rebellion and acts of concealment in the pursuit of a weakened sense of agency.

Ultimately, Morrison and Roth converge in their condemnation of white supremacy and the static hierarchies of racial classification that deny the complexities of human identity. Together, they demonstrate that race is not simply a biological marker but a social construct fueled by institutionalized power systems such as structural, educational, legal, and community practices that reinforce exclusion. Both novels demonstrate that the price of living in societies such as these is immeasurable, as survival can lead to psychological obliteration, damaged relations, and social invisibility.

In conclusion, it's apparent that Morrison and Roth depict similar concerns: self-definition, the damaging weight of racial passing, the pursuit of justice, and the persistent pain of exclusion. Their works demonstrate how racism and social hypocrisy become a part of life, limit choices, and silence voices. This paper, therefore, contributes to the growing

conversation in critical studies surrounding representation of race and identity in American literature and opens avenues for future research to highlight how other writers and contexts continue to challenge what systemic oppression is and how it impacts individual experience.

Future research could expand this comparative approach by looking at how other writers such as James Baldwin, Alice Walker, or Ralph Ellison similarly explore the intersections of race, gender, and social exclusion. Comparison could also be used to consider postcolonial or exilic literatures, where issues of passing, displacement, and betrayal of the community take different but related forms. This would extend critical race studies and emphasize the global relevance of Morrison's and Roth's works and analysis, underscoring the continuity of structures of racism, which, while bound to a historical moment, are always changing into new forms across time and space.

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