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Critique of Mainstream Modernism in Larsen's *Quicksand*

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By

Prem Bahadur Ayer

Symbol No: 575

TU Regd. No. 6-2-605-306-2010

Central Department of English

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Tribhuvan University
Central Department of English
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Critique of Mainstream Modernism in Larsen's *Quicksand*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Prem Bahadur Ayer has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

Internal Supervisor

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

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Prem Bahadur Ayer

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze how Nella Larsen's Quicksand goes beyond the discourse of mainstream modernism and the rationale behind doing it. She challenges the trend of mainstream modernism which exclusively glorifies the experiences of European white elite males' issues. Interestingly, the author incorporates the experience of formerly discarded groups such as women and African-American inside the discourse of modernism. Moreover, an effort is made to demonstrate how women and marginalized groups are represented in the text. For this purpose the researcher draws theoretical insights especially from Janet Wolff, Georg Simmel, and W. E. B. DuBois. Wolff's concept of flaneuse, Simmel's blasé attitude and DuBois' double-consciousness are applicable in this paper. These theoretical concepts help us to investigate the way Larsen challenges mainstream modernism. Larsen's celebration of gender and racial issues significantly take a departure from mainstream modernism. She goes beyond the trend of mainstream modernism in order to make it inclusive.

Key Words: *Alternative modernism, Mainstream modernism, Modernity and the city, Flaneuse, Blasé attitude, Double-consciousness*

Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* challenges the trend of mainstream modernism so as to expand the horizon of modernism. She celebrates the issues of women and marginalized groups. *Quicksand*, a modernist text written in 1926 during the pivotal time of Harlem Renaissance, offers an alternative to mainstream modernism. The discourse of mainstream modernism pushes minorities, women, and subaltern to the margin. The then period, most of the texts were written from the White European Elite Males' perspective that gives more importance to high class white European males' issues. Subject matter related to women, African-American, and lower class people were trivialized. However, in *Quicksand*, Larsen challenges the trend of mainstream modernism and attempts to make it inclusive by including the experiences of marginalized groups through her doubly marginalized African-American female protagonist, Helga Crane.

Nella Larsen (1891-1964), an African-American novelist and one of the important figures of Harlem Renaissance, was born in Chicago to a Danish mother and West Indian father. She shaped her career as a nurse, a librarian, and a writer. In 1919, she married with Elmer Imes, a prominent physicist. Later, the couple moved to Harlem, where Larsen became friend with prominent member of the Negro Awakening that evolved into Harlem Renaissance. In 1926, she gave up library work for her writing and published two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Notably, in 1930, she became the first African-American woman to receive the Guggenheim Fellowship for her creative writing. Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport argue, "Today Larsen ranks with Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston as one of the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance" (229). As she was the member of the Harlem Renaissance, she raises the issue associated with subaltern groups in her writing. Cheryl A. Wall contends: "Among the best written of the time, her books

comment incisively on issues of marginality and cultural dualism" (207). *Quicksand* also deals with the issues of marginality and cultural dualism. It presents the story of mulatto, African-American female character Helga Crane.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen raises the issue of African-American as well as women who were invisible in the rubric of modernism. Helga Crane, the protagonist of the novel embodies experience of both African-American and women. She is a daughter of Danish white mother and a West Indian black father, who embraces racial and gender consciousness. She is educated and independent African-American New Woman, challenges existing patriarchal notions. She sets her journey from Naxos to Chicago, New York, Harlem, Copenhagen, Harlem again and finally a small Alabama town. Crane is a black flaneuse, public stroller who wanders among the street of Chicago and Harlem. In Copenhagen, she is treated as exotic other. Missing black people she returns to Harlem and ultimately marries with a preacher Mr. Pleasant Green in rural Deep South. She is disillusioned by religion, her husband and her life there. She struggles throughout her life for gender and racial identity.

In most of the modernist texts, issues related to marginalized people are excluded whereas, Larsen's *Quicksand* includes the issues that were discarded by the mainstream modernism. More importantly, she incorporates the experience of African-American as well as women. Why does Larsen challenge the trend of mainstream modernism? How does she go beyond the discourse of mainstream modernism? How are the experience of African-American and women represented in the text? This dissertation deals with Larsen's discontent with the trend of modernism and her attempt to present an alternative to mainstream modernism.

Larsen includes the voice of African-American along with women in her text to redefine modernism. She rejoices the issue related to marginal groups. The novelist

tries to provide justice to African-American and women. She criticizes the blasé attitude of whites and elite bourgeoisie people. In addition, this paper casts light upon the concept of double consciousness, which was essential in contemporary time to survive for biracial people, like Helga Crane.

Larsen's *Quicksand* is semi-autobiographical; there are numerous resemblances between author's life and the central character, Helga Crane. Like Nella Larsen, the protagonist Helga Crane has a mixed racial heritage, daughter of a white Danish mother and a black West Indian father. The narrative takes place in different locations: Naxos, Chicago, New York, Harlem, Copenhagen, and rural Alabama shares many plot details with author's life. Like her protagonist Larsen travels to these different places. Similarly, she is educated, independent, and bold like her protagonist. Helga's continuous dissatisfaction and longing reflects the details of author's own life.

In the present day, Larsen is admired for her noteworthy contribution to the literature of Harlem Renaissance and modernism. Unfortunately, before 1990s Larsen was misunderstood and misinterpreted. Her works were remained outside the canon and taken as ordinary. Hazel V. Carby contends: "Traditional Afro-American literary and cultural criticism has failed to adequately consider the significance of the work of Larsen and Jessie Fauset. Both writers have at times been dismissed as minor figures, mere background to a major event, Harlem Renaissance" (166). Similarly, George Hutchinson in *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* mentions:

By the late 1990s, her enigmatic novels, dismissed at the time of her death in mid-1960s as trivial, misguided, and poorly written, had become canonical and were being taught in classrooms around the world. Editions multiplied at turn of the twenty-first century; advanced scholars in several fields came to

see her as one of the truly important modernists. . . The work of reconstructing her long-hidden life had also begun. (2)

With the turn of the twenty-first century, Larsen's works are broadly studied and considered as canonical works of Harlem renaissance as well as modernist literature. She is praised for her contribution to modernism not only including women's experiences but also for incorporating African-American issue. Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport assert: "Most Larsen scholarship of the past three decades has defined her as, first and foremost, an African-American writer who played an essential role in the aesthetic and literary rethinking of race and class that characterized the Harlem Renaissance" (228). Recently, in few decades Larsen's works were widely reviewed and reinterpreted. Now, she is taken as one of the major figure of Harlem Renaissance and modernist literature.

Quicksand is one of the experimental fictions of Harlem renaissance, which W. E. B. DuBois praised as the "best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut" (qtd. in McDowell ix). Critics believe that this text is modernist in terms of its presentation of subject matter. Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport argue, "Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* in 1928 and *Passing* in 1929, are not only complex expressions of African-American racial and gender identity in the twenties but also important modernist experiments" (228). The novel offers the complex expression of African-American racial and gender identity. Likewise, Peter Childs contends, "Larsen's work is modernist in its presentation of both a new identity and identity in crisis; it concerns searches for an inner self amid feeling of duality in intoxicating while alienating intensity of urban experience" (190-91). The protagonist, Helga Crane is daughter of mixed ethnicity, Danish white

mother and West Indian black father. As a biracial character, she suffers from the identity crisis. She feels alienated in both ethnic groups.

Larsen tries to give space to the discarded marginalized groups in the rubric of modernism. She focusses on the experience of women and African-American. Jeanne Scheper asserts: "Larsen brings to light the presence and meaning of black female flaner in the modern cityscape and foregrounds black women's experiences of U. S. and trans- Atlantic modernity" (680). Larsen presents female subject of modernity that strolls and observes the modern effects going on metropolitan city. She depicts the image of female flaneur which is unimaginable. Her purpose of representing black female flaneur in modern city scape is to foreground the experience of African-American women.

George Hutchinson in "*Quicksand* and the Racial Labyrinth" talks about the complex structure of racism. He argues, "Larsen's most important revelations about the nature of the modern, transnational racial labyrinth, not least her consciousness of her own entrapment within it, have been sublimated, even unwittingly repressed" (543). Hutchinson emphasizes on the way modern people fall in the trap of racial labyrinth due to cultural hybridity and admixture. They do not get the way to come out and suffocate in modern racial maze.

Another critic Anthony Dawahare in "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*" discusses about the way human beings are commodified in modern industrial urban world. He claims that Larsen represents academic institution as capitalist industrial enterprise that commodify their employees:

Larsen first explores racial identity as a function of the capitalist political economy in *Quicksand*. Significantly, the novel begins in a work site, Naxos,

the Southern black college where Helga works as a teacher. Larsen represents this academic institution not as a locus of liberal humanism or social reform but as a capitalist industrial enterprise . . . As is typical of employees in a capitalist workplace, Helga feels alienated from her role as a teacher that is, from her commodified self. (25-26)

He shows the way academic institution function to exploit employees in modern capitalist world. Employees are commodified even in the academic institution like colleges. They are exploited and alienated from their contribution.

Moreover, some critics proclaim that this text compacts with the concept of double-consciousness. Peter Childs contends: "Ethnic stereotype and hybridity makes it a compelling account of inner-war double-consciousness" (191). Accepting similar view point, Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Sterport state: "The novel creates a crucial slippage between what is stated and what is repressed. This slippage initially evokes W. E. B. DuBois' term double-consciousness from *The Souls of Black Folk*. . . *Quicksand* compounds this duality in its depiction of Helga" (241). As stated above, this text deals with the concept of double-consciousness. Helga, the protagonist adopts double-consciousness. She is conscious of her own culture and how majority of white look her.

The text has been studied from various points of view: racism, feminism, transnationalism, and identity. Apart from all these critics, the present researcher deals with the issue of critique of mainstream modernism in *Quicksand*. Larsen through this text challenges the trend of mainstream modernism which trivialized and discarded the issues of African-American and women. She problematizes the trend of mainstream modernism by incorporating the experience of women and African American.

Modernity describes the way of living and experiencing social life which took place with the expansion of industrialization and urbanization. It was emerged in Europe from the Eighteenth century, so-called the age of Enlightenment and spreads throughout the world. Many critics claim that the period of modernity emerged in Europe and the United States between 1890 and 1950. It is a term first used by Charles Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century. He in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" defines modernity as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of the art whose other half is the eternal and immutable" (796). Modernity signifies modern life as a break away from past that exists as a result of fleeting, ephemeral and rapid changing environment.

Modernism refers to an artistic and literary movement emerged due to modernity. Julie Armstrong in *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* states: "Modernism can be seen as a response to the condition of modernity, a transformation the swift through the arts in response to the huge development in technology, science and psychology and social ideological changes in beliefs, systems, ways of life and attitudes to class structure and values. . ." (17-18). It questioned various form of prior artistic exercise. Similarly, Peter Childs mentions: "Modernist art is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the art of what Harold Rosenberg calls 'the tradition of new.' It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notion of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form. . ." (2). Modernism stands for the tradition of new, which throws earlier artistic practice in question. Therefore, it refers to an artistic movement that is concerned with experimentation and innovation.

The mainstream modernism is exclusive that only focuses on elite, European, white, males' issues. Peter Childs asserts: "Modernism can be discussed in terms of its exclusions and its critical reformations. I have mentioned its Eurocentric bias, but in its reactionary aspects, it has been characterized as a response to mass culture and to feminisation, and thus as resting a masculinist elitism" (23). Mainstream modernism is Eurocentric, elitist and masculinist. Similarly, Rita Felski in her book *The Gender of Modernity* mentions: "The claim that most contemporary theories of modern are male-centered . . ." (16). She says that issues related to male are only celebrated. The experience of women is situated apart from history.

In literature of modernity, the experience of women and marginalized group is missing. Mainstream modernity exclusively admires males' experiences in public arena which was regarded as males' arena. This biasness of modernity is problematized by Larsen. She attempts to incorporate women and marginalized issues in both spheres- public and private. She presents an alternative to mainstream modernism by incorporating the issues of gender and race together. In mainstream modernity, there is no question of inventing of flaneuse, a female version of flaneur. Larsen tries to invent flaneuse in her text. She redefines modernism by filling the gaps that were found in mainstream modernism. The researcher draws theoretical insights from Janet Wolff's "The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and Literature of Modernity," W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Metropolitan life."

Janet Wolff in "The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and Literature of Modernity" problematizes the mainstream modernity that excludes the experiences of female. Her major concern is to redefine modernity because the concept of modernity is gender biased. She says, "experience of 'the modern' occurred mainly in public sphere; it was

primarily men's experience" (200). In this sense, modernity only celebrates the issue of male in public arena. It forgets to include the experience of women. Similarly, Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* claims: "the recurring identification of the modern with the public was largely responsible for belief that women were situated outside process of history and social change" (16). She insists on the fact that modernity should incorporate issues related to the experiences of women. The theorists of modernity are exclusively attentive to males' experience. So, Wolff highlights the notion of "flaneuse." She goes on argue, "There is no question of inventing the flaneuse . . ." (209). She contends that independent life of the flaneur was not open to women. Therefore, Wolff demands for the redefinition of modernity.

With regard to the issue of modernity and consciousness W. E. B. DuBois emphasizes the concept of double-consciousness. He in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* defines double-consciousness as "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3). It denotes two perspectives: the first how majority of mainstream society is looking at us and the second our own cultural perspective. It also refers to the twoness of biracial people like Helga Crane. In today's transnational modern world, it is essential for individual to survive.

Moreover, Georg Simmel in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" talks about different characteristics of metropolitan people, like: blasé attitude, reserved attitude, money economy, intellectuality, and anonymity. He says that internal and external environment play important role to shape the internal psychology of metropolitan individuals. The fleeting environment of urban area arouses blasé attitude in metropolitan people. Simmel states: "There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved, also seems originally to the metropolis as has

blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapid changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves" (186). Money centered tendency of metropolitan people evoke the blasé attitude. Urban people unnecessarily give importance to intellectuality. Simmel says, "[metropolitan people] react with head instead of heart" (184). They do not show compassion and kindness to other people rather they remain indifferent.

These aforementioned theoretical ideas provide us sufficient tools to analyze how Larsen challenges the trend of mainstream modernism and makes it inclusive. Larsen is one of the writers who are fascinated towards the issues of women and marginalized groups. She incorporates the experiences of African-American women in this text. Departing from nineteenth century novel this text focuses on the psychological reality of characters in relation to race, gender and modernity. She problematizes the literary trend that exclusively celebrates the elite white European males' issues. The author through her fictional strategy sets up doubly marginalized character to revolt against mainstream values and approaches.

The novel's epigraph from Langston Hughes' poem "Cross" deals with the issues of subaltern people. It strengthens the argument that the text goes beyond the trend of mainstream modernism. The poem echoes the voice of marginalized people:

My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black? (9-12)

These aforementioned lines from Langston Hughes' poem "Cross" raise the voice of African-American people. Mainstream modernism excludes the issues of African-American people. Unlike mainstream modernism, the epigraph highlights African-

American's problem of racial dualism that marks the text a point of departure from mainstream modernism. As the speaker in the poem, Helga Crane suffer from the problem of racial dualism who finds herself discontent with the assumption of racist and patriarchal society. Helga is a mixed-race woman caught between two cultures. She is daughter of Danish white mother and a West Indian black father. Due to her mixed race identity she feels suffocation in her surroundings. Unable to feel comfortable with her European and American relatives, Helga lives in the United States and visits Denmark searching for people among whom she feels home.

Larsen challenges the trend of mainstream modernism by addressing the issues of formerly discarded groups. Mainstream modernism trivializes the issues related to women and marginalized groups. Janet Wolff argues that the problem of "the literature of modernity which has been improvised by ignoring the lives of women" (205). The mainstream modernist literature only discusses experiences of men in public arena. Contrastingly, Larsen embeds the experience of women and marginalized groups in the text in order to challenge the trend of mainstream modernism. The writer includes experience of female characters like: Helga Crane, Anne Grey, Aunt Katrina, and Mrs. Nilssen. The important fact is that she presents doubly marginalized woman Helga as a protagonist. The whole narrative hovers round to show women's experience in home and suburb along with the experience of public world of work and city life.

More importantly, the author presents African-American women moving to public sphere. In the past, women were invisible in the public sphere. Janet Wolff says, "all accounts have in common is their concern with the public world of work, politics and city life. And these are areas from which women were excluded, or in which they were invisible" (200). In nineteenth century, there was separation of

spheres: private sphere and public sphere. Private sphere was associated with women and public sphere was associated with men. As a result, women were limited to private sphere. However, in *Quicksand*, Larsen subverts the boundary between private sphere and public sphere. She presents women not just limited in private sphere but also moving to public domain. Helga Crane, the protagonist, "a graduate of Devon" (33) has "taught in Naxos for almost for two years" (5). She has also serve as a speech coordinator of Mrs. Hays Rore. Moreover, she is engaged in Negro insurance company. The narrator describes: "Her secretarial work with the negro insurance company filled her day. Books, the theatre, parties, used up the nights" (45). Helga works in the public world of work such as academic institution and company, the sectors from where female were excluded.

Going beyond the discourse of modernism, the author describes the female subject of modernity. Cosmopolitan modernism fails to address the female subject of modernity. Rita Felski asserts: "Accepting at face value an equation of the modern with certain abstract philosophical ideals and a male-dominated public life, it fails to consider the specific and distinctive features of women's modernity" (18). Due to the male-centered approach mainstream modernism fails to introduce the female subject of modernity. Nonetheless, Larsen describes the female subject of modernity. Helga Crane, the major character who travels different places: Naxos, Chicago, New York, Harlem, Copenhagen and Alabama. She spends "hours driving or walking about the city" (76), and observes the activities and events that occurred in cityscape. The author narrates: "Like thousands of other Harlem dwellers, she patronized its shops, its theaters, its art galleries, and its restaurant" (45). Helga's "existence [is] bounded by Central Park, Fifth Avenue, St. Nicholas Park, and One Hundred and Forty-fifth street" (46). Her life is "not at all a narrow life, as Negroes live it" (46). Helga strolls

in the streets and observes the events that take place in cityscape. She also visits shops, theaters, restaurant, and art galleries. It illustrates that Helga is female subject of modernity. Hence, Larsen goes beyond the discourse of modernism by describing the female subject of modernity.

Drawing upon Janet Wolff's notion of "flaneuse" the researcher argues that Larsen dismantles the gendered notion of modernity. In nineteenth century, experience of female was not considered to be significant for the theorization of modernity. For feminist thinkers like Janet Wolff and Rita Felski, experience of female is equally significant for the theorization of modernity. In the context of nineteenth century, female were not regarded as flaneur and "the solitary and independent life of the flaneur was not open to women" (Wolff 209). Modernist theorists discard to discuss about the female version of the flaneur. Wolff argues, "There is no question of inventing the flaneuse: the essential point is that such a character was rendered by the sexual division of the nineteenth century" (210). The mainstream modernity remains silent to talk about the female flaneur. Nevertheless, Larsen presents African-American flaneuse in *Quicksand*. The protagonist Helga Crane embodies flaneuse - a female traveler. She wanders around the streets and lanes like a flaneur. In "The New Negro Flaneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," Jeanne Scheper argues:

In the case of *Quicksand*, Larsen effectively sets up a resistance space of modernism in Harlem that rewrites those quintessential tropes of modern experience, *la flaneuse* and the crowd, through an African American experience of the city . . . Larsen invents a flaneuse that also disrupts and call into question those very boundaries by repeatedly drifting across them. (688)

Larsen creates African-American flaneuse, the female subject of modernity that challenges the trend of modernity. She presents woman on move "something at times imagined to be impossible, a modern flaneuse or female flaneur" (Scheper 679). The author appropriates Janet Wolff's notion of "flaneuse" in African-American context. Helga is a flaneuse who strolls among the streets of Chicago, Harlem, and Copenhagen. At the point when Helga is in Chicago, she "traverse[s] acres of streets" (34). She has irrepressible wish to merge herself in crowd: "She stood intently looking down into the glimmering street, far below, swarming with people, merging into little eddies and disengaging themselves to pursue their own individual ways. A few minutes later she stood in the doorway, drawn by an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd" (30). Later, she purposelessly wanders in the streets, "Helga, instead of returning, spent hours in aimless strolling about the hustling streets of the Loop district" (32). All these textual evidences demonstrate that she is a flaneuse. By creating flaneuse, a heroine of modernity Larsen presents an alternative to mainstream modernism.

Further, textual evidences show that this text offers alternative to conventional modernism. Larsen exposes African-American modern woman's sense of coming home in urban crowd. Helga is flaneuse, mobile observer feels home at crowd:

As she stepped out into the moving multicolored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food - sweetbreads, smothered with truffles and mushrooms - perhaps. And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home. (30)

Helga feels sense of home in the urban crowd. She feels release from suffocation and disturbance. Further, at the point when Helga moves to Harlem, she has a magic sense

of coming home. The narrator describes: "Again she had had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleetingly, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment" (43). She enjoys full freedom in the fleeting environment of urban crowd that arouses sense of home.

Moreover, ambivalent aspects of experience of modernity are highlighted in the text. Marxist philosopher Marshall Berman defines experience of modernity as personal and social life as a "maelstrom" : "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have , everything we know, everything we are" (15). The same as Berman says, happens in Helga's life. She travels different places observing self and other. She has ambivalent feelings moving in the crowd. Helga in the urban crowd simultaneously feels joy, adventurous and transformation as well as threat. She has sense of freedom and danger at the same time, "It has been pleasant, the leisure, the walks, the lake, the shops and streets with gay colors, their movement, after the great quiet of Naxos. Now she was panicky" (32). She gets release from narrow regimented society of Naxos and her suffocation. At the same time, she feels threatened of how to survive in anonymous crowded cityscape.

The author criticizes the blasé attitude of ruling class people who do not appreciate the voice of marginalized people. Due to the rapid changing environment and money-centered tendency of metropolitan people, there developed blasé attitude. With regard to blasé attitude, German sociologist Georg Simmel contends that blasé attitude results from rapidly changing urban environment and money economy:

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves . . . This physiological source of the metropolitan blasé attitude is joined by another source which follows from the money economy. (186)

The fleeting environment and the seat of money economy in metropolitan people arouse blasé attitude. Larsen shows blasé attitude of people of Chicago. When Helga is jobless and homeless, she expects that some institutions will provide her employment. But institutions and organizations show their indifferent attitude towards Helga. Institutions seek for references to offer any kind of employment. Nobody remains aside from asking her history and reference. The same question is repeated everywhere, "Have you references?" (33). Helga feels disgusted with the treatment of employment agent at Y. W. C. A. employment. She explains that she is educated from Devon and taught at Naxos. But the girl is not interested. She says: "Our kind of work wouldn't do for you" (33). Helga says that she is willing to accept work of any kind. But, the officer repeats her question about reference. When the officer knows the fact that she does not have reference and finally says: "I'm sorry but we never send out help without references" (33). Nobody is interested in her necessity, ability, and strength but in reference. Helga visits many institutions and employment agencies but none of them offer her employment. Nobody is interested to help her. These institutions and organizations work in the protection of ruling class people. By showing the blasé attitude of these institutions and organizations the author criticizes the blasé attitude of ruling class people who do not understand the significance of African-American people.

Additionally, the writer demonstrates white people's blasé attitude that remain indifferent towards African-American people. Mrs. Nilssen, a white woman who has recently married to Peter Nilssen is guided by blasé attitude. As soon as Helga goes to visit her uncle Peter Nilssen at Chicago, Helga is mistreated by Mrs. Nilssen. She has the halo of white supremacy. She misbehaves Helga due to her (Helga's) colored root. Instead of helping Helga, she shows indifferent attitude to her:

Oh, yes! I remember about you now. I'd forgotten for a moment. Well, he isn't exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn't married, was she? I mean to your father? . . . Of course she wasn't. . . Mr. Nilssen has been very kind to you, supported you, sent you to school. But you mustn't expect anything else. And you mustn't come here anymore. It – well, frankly, it isn't convenient. I'm sure an intelligent girl like yourself can understand that. (28)

Mrs. Nilssen shows rudeness to Helga, asks insulting question. Helga visits her uncle's house with great expectation that he can help her. Conversely, she gets insulted; her aunt does not care about her feeling and emotion. Nilssen agitating says: "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, would make me your aunt! He's not"(29). Mrs. Nilssen statements are offensive. Her expressions display that Mrs. Nilssen is guided by blasé attitude. It shows that white people loss their ethical responsibility and humanitarian values.

More importantly, Larsen is concerned with inclusiveness and expansion of modernism. She expands the horizon of modernism by incorporating the issues of gender and race together. Mainstream modernism excludes the issues related female and African-American. It fails to capture the issues of race and gender. Jeanne Scheper asserts: "What Larsen adds to this modernist vision is a critique of geography of race and gender in modernity" (688). The literature of modernity missed to involve

the account of race and gender such as African-American and women. So, Larsen in this text tries to provide justice to those discarded groups. She presents the experience of dually marginalized groups.

According to Rita Felski, "the recurring identification of the modern with the public was largely responsible for history for belief that women were situated outside process of history and social change" (16). As a result of male-oriented tendency of historian, women were placed outside the process of social transformation. Their issues were trivialized. But, Larsen through this narrative attempts to voice the voiceless. She presents the experience of doubly marginalized women. Helga Crane is representative of doubly marginalized groups. She is marginalized in a sense that she is a woman and she is an African-American. In American context, black females are marginalized dually. Consequently, they are also called muted group. The following excerpt spoken by Alex Olsen makes clear how African-American female are dehumanized:

You know, Helga, you are a contradiction. You have been, I suspect, corrupted by the good Fru Dahl, which is perhaps as well. Who knows? You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer.

(87)

Alex Olsen's remarks are offensive. Helga has been treated as sexual object. He attempts to undermine the existence of Helga; simply she belongs to African-American root. However, Helga firmly challenges Olsen's insulting remarks. She says, "But you Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you" (87). She strongly resists Olsen's remarks. Helga discards his marriage proposal and leave for Harlem in pursuit of her ethnic

identity. Helga does not mingle in white racist society, rather she confronts with racist and patriarchal values. Larsen through the mouth piece of Helga Crane speaks on the behalf of voiceless.

The writer makes critique of racist and mainstreaming values from the very beginning of the narrative. The protagonist Helga Crane confronts with racist values at Naxos. The educational system at Naxos implores no new ideas and innovations. Naxos is narrowing regimented and authoritarian. As a result, Crane is fed up with the educational system at Naxos:

This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it . . . Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. (4)

The academic system at Naxos functions as machine. There is no space for innovation and new ideas. It is full of hypocrisy and injustice. Although, the white preacher claims Naxos as "the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south; in fact, it was better even than a great many schools for white children" (2-3), it is full of prejudice. There is "suppression of individuality and beauty" (20). A sermon presented by white preacher advocates the segregation of blacks into separate schools. Crane is frustrated by the complacent attitudes of blacks towards racism. Larsen writes: "No, Helga wasn't sick. Not physically. She was merely disgusted. Fed up with Naxos. . . She could no longer abide being connected with a place of shame, lies, hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness" (14). Subsequently, disappointed by racist attitude and educational system at Naxos, she makes her journey towards

Chicago. By showing disappointment of Helga, Larsen critiques racist and mainstream values.

Moreover, the author displays the way white people undermine significance of African-American people. In white's perspective colored people are regarded as beggars: "Go back to America, where they hated Negro! To America, where Negroes were not people. To America, where Negroes were allowed to be beggars only, to life, of happiness, of security. To America, where everything had been taken from those dark ones, liberty, respect, even the labor of their hands" (82). In America colored people are not taken as humans. They have position of beggars. They have deprived of liberty, respect, and education. In America who has Negro blood, one must not expect money, education, and even work. Americans were "ashamed to be Negroes, but not to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine. Too bad" (74-75). White Americans behave colored people as inferior and subordinate people. They ashamed of Black people but not to be beggars. They trivialize and underestimate their existence.

The protagonist Helga Crane challenges the white bourgeois attitude. The dehumanizing remarks by Alex Olsen and the exotic treatment of Danish in Copenhagen contrive her for her racial identity. She rejects Olsen's marriage proposal longing for her race:

You see, I couldn't marry a white man. I simply couldn't. It isn't just you, not just personal, you understand. It's deeper, broader than that. It's racial. Some day may you'll be glad. We can't tell, you know; if we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate dark people. My mother did that. (88)

The above mentioned quote shows that Helga begins to long for her racial identity. She understands that how white people hate dark ones. After the refusal of Alex Olsen's marriage proposal, she identifies herself with her father's ethnic identity. She longs for her racial identity, "I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That's the trouble" (92). In Copenhagen Helga becomes homesick. She wants to live with her black people. Helga's longing for her Black people illustrates that the author tries to establish African-American centric values in her writing.

Moreover, Helga is treated as exotic other in Copenhagen. There, she gets to wear fine clothes and attends sophisticated parties among white bourgeoisie. Her aunt decorates her up in exotic and eccentric clothing:

There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera cape. There were turbine like hats of metallic shells, feathers, and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semiprecious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. Gradually Helga's perturbation subsided in the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time. (74)

Helga is decorated with unusual clothes and strange jewelry. There is black Manila shawl, a leopard-skin coat, turbine like hats, strange jewelry, a nauseous Eastern perfume, and shoes with dangerously high heels. To Helga, her exact status in her new environment is "a decoration. A curio. A peacock. . ." (73). She is objectified and viewed as exotic, almost as if she is of another species: "to them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). Helga's racial identity is big problem for her in Copenhagen. Due to her difference, she is taken as mysterious and

exotic. Besides these, Helga's portrait painted by the great Danish painter Alex Olsen shows whites' perspective towards African-American people. The portrait displays stereotypical exotic figure of Helga, "some disguising sensual creature with her features" (89). This shows that white people's mind is pre-occupied with stereotypical image for colored people. Whites treat colored as exotic and savage. Whites' exotic treatment towards Helga put her identity under crisis.

Furthermore, black people are objectified and laughed on the stage in Copenhagen. When Helga, Olsen and some other young folk go to the great Circus, a vaudeville house in search of amusement, Helga feels some connection between herself and the stereotyped portrayals in the circus. She observes the way black people are objectified and laughed on the stage:

They were reaching for their wraps when out upon the stage pranced two black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they dance and cavorted they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing as a child, "Everybody Gives Me Good Advice." . . . And how the singer danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease! And how the enchanted spectators clapped and shouted for more. (82-83)

These lines depict primitive image of black people. The song "Everybody Gives Me good Advice" refers to old ragtime song. And the singer dances with beating their hands together, twisting their legs, and having their abnormally long arms. This gives the primitive image of black people. Whites take pleasure by cavorting black people on the stage. Black figures in Copenhagen are taken as the things of amusement and laughter.

Larsen presents exotic traits of African-American in her text to subvert them. Debra B. Silverman in "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*: Untangling the webs of Exoticism" states, "What is left out of the formulation of just race or gender is a way to decide how far one can use already available stereotypes to subvert them" (611-12). Larsen unearths stereotypes associated to black people to challenge them. She problematized stereotypes attached to African-American female through the presentation of female sexuality. Helga Crane is a New Woman who is educated, independent and daring. As a woman on move, she challenges the stereotypes attached to black female. Hazel V. Carby asserts, "the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definitions as primitive and exotic within a racial society" (174). Larsen through the representation of black female sexuality risks African-American stereotypical image as primitive and exotic.

Moreover, Larsen appropriates the concept of New Woman in African-American context. New Woman is an "inspiratory symbol of modernity at the forefront of social change" (Felski 158). The author gives birth to African-American New Woman. Helga is African-American New Woman who challenges existing gender and patriarchal notions. She is educated and independent. Larsen presents bold woman who can compete in racist and patriarchal society. In the nineteenth century, female were situated outside the modernity. They were considered as the members of private sphere. Rita Felski states:

As many feminist writers have noted, the nineteenth century saw the establishment of increasingly rigid boundaries between private and public selves, so that gender differences solidified into apparently natural and immutable traits. The distinction between a striving competitive masculinity and a nurturant, domestic femininity, while a feasible ideal only for a minority

of middle-class households, nevertheless become a guiding rubric within which various aspects of culture were subsumed. (18)

When we turn out the pages of history, they were placed outside the modernity.

Women were domesticated, regarded as the members of private sphere, which makes them fragile and submissive. However, Larsen portrays female figure bold and independent, who can challenge the patriarchal and racist notions. In the text, Helga is New Woman who is educated, independent, and strong. She uses freedom in optimum level. She is female flaneur, public stroller, wanders among the street of Chicago, Copenhagen, and Harlem. Dissatisfying with their treatment of James Vayle at Naxos and Alex Olsen at Copenhagen, Helga breaks her relation with them. She embodies radical feminist. She slaps Robert Anderson when she realizes that he has derogated and humiliated her, "she felt that he had belittled and ridiculed her. And thinking his, she had suddenly savagely slapped Robert Anderson with all her might in his face" (107-8). The ways Helga confronts with racist and patriarchal society displays that she is an African-American New Women.

Interestingly, the author celebrates the notion of double-consciousness. She tries to depict the double-consciousness of African-American woman. African-American sociologist and writer W. E. B. DuBois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* defines double-consciousness as:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3)

Double-consciousness refers to twoness, two souls, and two thoughts of an individual: black and white at the same time. It arouses two perspectives in an individual: how majority of mainstream society is looking at him/her and his/her own cultural perspective to look at him/her. The protagonist Helga Crane internalizes double-consciousness technique. Due to her biracial root and her new urban experiences, Helga develops double-consciousness. As a result, she suffers from inner-war, shuttling between two worlds. Nathan Irvin Huggins states, "Helga crane is overwhelmed by the ethnic war within her mulatto psyche" (157). Indeed, Larsen attempts to portray African-American socio-cultural practice that has shaped inner-war, double-consciousness. In the text, Helga has feeling of twoness, two thoughts that develops her own ways to look at existing society. Right before leaving Harlem, Helga feels suffocated, "It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of race, closed up with something in the racial character which had been, to her, inexplicable alien. Why she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk?" (54-5). She actually travels to Harlem in quest of relaxation. Nevertheless, she feels boxed up and suffocated there. Living among black people, she begins to miss people of white race. Helga's unhappiness appears due to her divided self and desire.

As a result of her double-consciousness, Helga develops evaluative sense. She keeps critical attention to others and self in observing and judging. She always thinks and evaluates herself from both white and her cultural perspective. In the course of Helga's visit to her maternal aunt in Copenhagen, she finds that her Danish relatives treat her as exotic jungle creature. Because of her double-consciousness, Helga desires to go to Harlem identifying herself with her father's ethnic identity.

While leaving Denmark Helga finds herself completely in dilemma: "The last day came. The last good-byes were said. Helga began to regret that she was leaving. Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place? Now that she was actually off, she felt heavy at heart" (93). Helga is in the acute moment of perplexity whether to stay in Copenhagen or return back to Harlem. There, she develops twoness in her, blackness and whiteness at the same time, "this knowledge , this certainty of division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive" (96). Helga feels physical freedom in Europe (Denmark) and mental freedom in America (Harlem). Helga's double-consciousness shapes her unstable and fluid self. Looking through the perspective of both black and white, Helga finds herself attached to black. Consequently, she marries with rural southern preacher Reverend Green and moves to South. In this way, Larsen presents doubly conscious African-American female character to rejects old assumptions and offers alternative to them.

Mainstream modernism is exclusive; it has trivialized and excluded the subaltern issues. Rita Felski asserts, "the history of the modern needs to be rethought in terms of various subaltern identities that have contributed to its formation" (212). Mainstream modernism excluded and trivialized the subaltern issues. Thus, to challenge and make it inclusive Larsen advocates for the issues of women and marginalized groups. She includes the experience of African-American and women in order to voice the voiceless and at the same time to expand the horizon of modernism.

To sum up, Larsen's representation of experience of women and marginalized groups show that *Quicksand* significantly challenges the trend of mainstream modernism. Her fascination with gender and racial issues expand the sphere of

modernism. Mainstream modernism simply glorified the issues of European elite males. Nonetheless, Larsen has celebrated the issues related to women and subaltern groups. She has tried to be the voice of voiceless. Speaking on the behalf of female and marginalized groups, she has given justice to formerly discarded groups.

Larsen has taken departure from mainstream modernism in order to redefine modernism. Her redefining perspective to modernism is well expressed by the central character, Helga Crane. She embodies doubly marginalized character, marginalized as a woman and as an African-American. Through her representative character Helga Crane, the author has problematized gender and racist assumption. Helga is African-American New Woman who has adopted double-consciousness technique which is considered as survival technique in contemporary society. She has used freedom in optimum level. She is female flaneuse, a public stroller who has travelled among the streets of Chicago, Harlem, and Copenhagen. Larsen has presented African-American women as doubly conscious New Woman.

Finally, by going beyond the discourse of mainstream modernism, Larsen has made modernism inclusive that also celebrates the experiences of subaltern groups. Through this text, she has foregrounded the issues of women and marginalized groups. She has attempted to provide voice to voiceless. Therefore, *Quicksand* remains as a historical text which includes experiences of women and marginalized groups.

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