

Tribhuvan University

Blurring Racial Dichotomy: A Study of Double Consciousness

In Nella Larsen's *Passing*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Central

Department of English in the Partial fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Arts in English

By

Savita Gautam

Roll No: 76 'B'

T. U. Regd. No.: 6-2-568-36-2011

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

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Abstract

*This thesis examines the idea of racial passing for African-Americans represented in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. It analyses the inner psyche of African-American women in the light of the novel's characters: Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who use the trope of passing to surpass the disabilities of being Negroes siding in white community. In the novel, Larsen's protagonists share their different views regarding passing for white from two different perspectives. These two views reflect two different psyches of African-American people where one passed for white permanently and second prefers situational passing during the time of need only. They present the importance of passing for African-American in order to improve their status as being black in color and black as women. This research explores how the act of passing not only collapses the racial hierarchies but also presents race as a matter of social construction. Likewise, drawing on the concept of Double consciousness, Larsen displays the struggle of Blacks to remain visible beyond the suffocations of internalized oppression. Being inferior in the society, Blacks begins to view themselves through the prejudices lens of white dominant culture which forces them to uphold both racial identity as Black and White. This split in identity reinforces them to adopt both racial identities which blur the racial dichotomy created by so-called American racial ideology.*

Key Words: Racial passing, Colorism, Double consciousness, Double marginalization

This research paper explores the motifs of racial passing in Nella Larsen's *Passing* in the light of William Edward Burghardt Dubois' concept of double consciousness and the discourse of race. At the beginning of twentieth century, the racial attitudes of both European Americans and African-Americans were going through a process of redefinition. The anxiety and discussion over the crossing of racial boundaries, the so-called "color line" between blacks and white, in the United States was to the forefront of national attention. During that time, a large number of dark skinned people were imprisoned and restricted from having an access to the social mobility which is necessary to achieve success. That period was quite tough for the African American race because even the federal government believed in racially segregating its citizens. In this situation, they saw 'passing' as a way of disrupting this rule by disguising themselves as white and becoming the part of the whole community. In this manner 'passing' is associated with the term 'passing for white', which implies the crossing of the color line from black to white in order to transcend racial barriers. Only African Americans were compelled to pass because their black color is the main cause of suffering. In order to come out from the marginalized position, they had to hide their true identity. So at the time of Great Migration, a large number of light-skinned African-American disguises their black racial heritage by upholding white culture. Being a mixed-race woman, Larsen depicts this historical fact in *Passing* as a form of a novel. She destabilizes the traditional conception of racial integrity and discloses the concepts of doubleness and visibility.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is an account of passing figure during the Harlem renaissance. It comes out in the midst of the legal separation of African-Americans from Caucasians. Due to this fact the novel introduces two African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, whose lives have taken entirely different paths because of 'passing' in race. They were able to do this because of the fact that they were mulatto. The term which denotes that they were a child born out from interracial parents and since their

parents were of mixed races they had a lighter skin tone, which sometimes happens, making her look more Caucasian women. The setting of the novel shifts from Chicago to Harlem, but the major action between the two major characters takes place in Harlem, New York. It is the place where large number of middle class African-Americans thrived. Irene Redfield lives as a black women but also passes when feels necessary to blend in with the White culture. She occasionally disguises her blackness and passes for white for her own convenience because at that time, being white was only the ticket to pass some restaurants, events and the license to live in some places or to be a politician. Similarly, Clare Kendry consistently passes as white women. She 'whitens' her lifestyle by getting married with Mr. John Bellew, a typical white racist man. She denies any existence of her black culture. By doing so, she breaks the tragic mulatto stereotype and even does not get chance to align to a particular race because of her untimely death. By letting the characters passing in a race, Larsen destabilizes the existing discourse of race where race is identified with personal traits and appearances. Through the phenomenon of 'passing' she disables this instant racial categorization and presents race as matter of performance. Along with it, she projects an impossibility of assigning a rigid racial identity to African-American who passes for white which demonstrate fluidity in racial identity.

In the novel *Passing*, Larsen tries to explore the complexities and contradictions of the concept of race at the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular by addressing the phenomenon of 'passing'. She challenged racial otherness by completely rejecting race as a deciding factor in identity formation. Even though slavery has been abolished in the 13th Amendment of the American Constitution in 1865, 'the color line' was still a very obvious and physically visible boundary of separation. This form of discrimination leads to a very crucial question that who can be considered as black? And the common view was depending upon the concept of 'one-drop rule'. It implies a single drop of blood transforms a person in

to a black person. But, the great migration from south to north gives a way for fair-skinned African-American to pass for white. It is because white always remain in the position of superiority and blacks in inferiority. Being inferiorized in the society, they had to hide their true identity in order to come out from marginalized position. Marginalized in a two sense, one being black in color and another being black women in white male dominated society. It means Black women were double marginalized in American society. Same is the case that Larsen tries to project through the novel. Clare Kendry's decision of consistently passing for white discloses the attempt of all those African- Americans women to come out from double marginalized position in white male dominated society. After her father's death, she migrated towards North with her white racist Aunts. Her Aunts forbade her to mention Negro to the neighbors and even to mention the south side. They present Clare as white women through a plausible tale because no one knows about Clare's black racial history in north side. Due to which she became able to get married with white racist man, John Bellew. In one hand, Clare uplifts her social standard by passing in race. But, on the other hand, she got fragmented between white and black racial identity. In order to have access to white privileges, Clare or many other African-Americans unwillingly suppress their black identities which re-enforces them to live a life in a racial dichotomy that blurs the conventional color line. In this manner, by using the trope of passing, Larsen makes an effort to attack racial essentialism as reflected by American Racial Ideology.

Numerous critics have examined the issue of race through different types of research articles and reviews dealing with Larsen's novel *Passing*. Catherine Rottenberg in "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire" states that:

On the one hand, the novella suggests that race in the United States operates through an economy of optics, and the assumption of whiteness is one of the consequences of this economy. On the other hand, the novella reveals that skin color (i.e. optics) does

not really constitute the 'truth of race'...It uncovers the way in which regulatory ideals of race produce a specific modality of performativity. Passing is especially conducive to interrogating the modality of race performativity because, unlike other passing narratives of the period, Larsen's presents us with two protagonists who can pass for white, yet only Clare 'passes over into the white world'. The depiction and juxtaposition of these two characters reveal the complexities and intricacies of the category of race. (435-36)

In the novel, Larsen unravels the constructed nature of racial identity in United States which is based on skin color. Ones whose skin color is white, they were considered as white and the one whose skin color is black, were considered as Black. At the same time, this assumption of racial category is dismantled by her. Her characters, from a black ancestry, passes for white just because of their skin color. Through this, she presents the false nature of racial category where skin color does not stand as a determinant factor. She uncovers the fact that racial identity is a matter of social construction or performative task.

Similarly, Elaine Ginsberg in her book *Passing and The Fictions of Identity* depicts the condition of many outnumbered African-Americans whose outer appearance does not give clue to their race. She defines passing as "a transgression not only of legal boundaries (that is, from slave to freeman) but of cultural boundaries as well" (1). It means passing not only transcends the racial boundaries, it also threatens the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimated by law. In the novel, Irene and Clare's attempt of passing not only challenged the racial dichotomy but also challenged the social institution or law, where racial identity is formed on the basis of skin color. Ginsberg further asserts that:

Although for the legally or culturally black individual race passing is an attempt to move from cultural margin to the center, from the perspective of a dominant race,

passing is deception, an attempt to claim status and privilege falsely...Clare Kendry...refuses the constraints of a singular identity and uses passing as a subversive strategy to transcend the limitation of a racist, classist and sexist society. (11)

For African-American, Racial passing stands as way to come out from marginalized position. It gives them to access the power granted with white privileges. Clare's decision of consistently passing emphasizes her desire for an integrated identity, which can embrace the aspects from both races. Being Black and female, she rejects the idea of having a single identity (i.e. only Black or only white); she needs to be a member of white society because it gives her prestige and power. It gives her courage to stand along with her racist white husband. At the same time, she desires to be a member of black community as it provides her solace. So, she adopts the idea of passing in order to come out from all the difficulties and problem that she used to faced being a Negro girl. In this regard, Larsen's depiction of racial passing is simply an attempt to make a way for African-American in American's white dominated society.

Another critic Corinne E. Blackmer in her journal article "The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" brought the issue of how racial passing ultimately leads passers towards the fragmented psychology. For her, Larsen's *Passing* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of Ex-Colored Man* carry the similar issue of passing over the color line. She asserts that:

Passing is not fictionalized autobiography so much as its acute social observation of her artistic peer community...her imbrications of the issues of racial and sexual 'passing' can be seen as both an appeal to her potential audience and literary colleagues and an informed critique of socially conservative African Americans like Irene Redfield, whose understandable desire to gain marginal acceptance and security in American Society. (59)

For Blackmer, the story of the novel reflects the account of all those African-Americans settled in American society because Larsen herself was the mixed race woman and her novel projects an acute reflection of her society, the society where the people from mixed heritages were viewed as a problem. Through the character like Irene Redfield, she indicates socially conserved minded African-Americans whose first priority belongs to their security. In the name of security, they were ready to accept the marginalized position. For them, passing is a dangerous act. Though passing helps black people to access the power and prestige, it does not make them safe in white community because in the eyes of law, they were and will always belong to black ancestry.

Likewise, Richard Bernstein in *The New York Times* reviewed the novel *Passing*. His view regarding the novel seems to be quite different from other reviewers. He asserts that:

It is a tragic story rooted in inescapable facts of American Life: that whiteness conferred an almost universal unearned advantage, and that loyalty to a black racial identity was not only an act of pride but also one of courage...Larsen's treatment of race in this sense was both candid and tough-minded. She understood the power of its impact. But she never let her characters escape from the weight of their choices. (para. 2-3)

Though Larsen avoids the racial separatism and presents 'passing' as a way for racial uplift, her treatment of race is quite different. She let her characters passing in race but does not allow them to escape from their decision. When Clare Kendry started to re-join the black community, Larsen directed her story towards the end where she presents Clare's death in order to demonstrate the penalties of passing. In the same way, she presents Irene's fixity in her race in order to depict the loyalty of all those African-Americans, who take pride in their true racial identity.

All the critics mentioned above reflect their different kinds of views regarding Larsen's novel *Passing*. The novel details societal pressure or necessity of all those African-American to 'pass' for the member of majority. Most of the scholars agree with the fact that the novel encapsulates the history of African-American settled in America. They were brought from their homeland Africa to New land where the whites enslaved them, denied to accept black as member of their community. White masters forced them to live under American culture leaving their own culture. Consequently, African-American lost their cultural history. While enslaving them, Black women were tortured a lot. They were raped by the white masters and forced to involve in prostitution. The identity of the babies born out from rape goes in flux. If the Black woman gives birth to white children, then there occurs duality in identity. Outwardly, they were considered as whites, but originally they belong to black heritage. No one can trace their real identity because of the white countenance. Such mixed blood child can pass for white in order to have a better lifestyle. Same is the case in the novel. Irene and Clare, are the product of mixed blood. Larsen clearly mention the past history of Clare, her Grandfather married with Negro so as her Father too. Their white countenance helps them pass in order to uplift their position in the white dominated society. In this manner, Larsen shows the reason of passing which is based upon society's biased nature towards blacks.

This research is based on primary and secondary resources as well as material available in library, journals and internet websites. Along with this, this paper has taken theoretical insights from William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's *The Souls Of Black Folks* and *The Strivings of the Negro*, James Baldwin's *Stranger in the Village*, Allyson Hobbs's *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* and Elaine Ginsberg's *Passing and The Fictions of Identity*.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, a renowned scholar of twentieth century, explored the changing social condition in 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this text, Du Bois defines the concept of double consciousness, which he theorized was a perception of identity that African Americans consumed because of their conflicting societal roles as Americans and as Black people. According to him:

The Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with the second in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this doubleconsciousness, this sense of always looking at one 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. (xiii)

Here, Du Bois argument depends upon how black think of white people's perception about blacks. The perception of identity that African-American possessed being in American society, is defined as double consciousness in Du Bois term. Because of the racial discrimination, whites imposed their superiority over Blacks. Black's voice was suppressed. They had no right to put their views in front of the people. In this vein, they started to look at themselves through the eyes of others. By bringing racial interpretation in the process of identity formation, Du Bois demonstrates how race in a racist culture, changes and determines almost everything in life. Blacks viewed the world as being divided by the color line. So, in the quest for a stable identity, light-skinned African-American travel along the color line and pass in to different roles for a life outside the veil without restrictions. In this regard, the researcher analyses passing as an attempt to escape the confines of race and double consciousness in the novel *Passing*.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* was published in 1929 during the Harlem Renaissance. As a result, the novel mainly reflects the psychological struggles of African-Americans who

migrated to North following the emancipation of slaves. African-Americans were still restricted from opportunity by a race-conscious society in the North. Light-skinned African-Americans often 'passed' as white in order to obtain opportunities and enjoy privileges granted with whites. Due to which, black identity split between two: the American identity and the African Identity. As James Baldwin in his essay "*Stranger in the Village*," evaluates how and why black racial identity is split in two. Baldwin argues that "slavery stripped away black identity because when slaves were taken from Africa, the whites who enslaved them denied blacks and their cultural history" (160). In other words, Blacks taken to the United States lost some of their cultural values, tradition, history and beliefs. They were forced to live under American culture. This forced assimilation into American identity led to the double identity that Du Bois describes in double consciousness. In this regard, Larsen explores the confining and psychological narrowness of the lives of all those light skinned African-American women with the help of her novel's protagonists i.e. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry.

Race is deeply rooted even now-a-days in western countries. Race, in Donald Hall's terms, "refers specially to the ways that physiological characteristics (such as skin tone) are combined with distinctions in social history (such as region of original habitation) to distinguish and identify groups of people" (265-66). Even the official definition of race in the USA does not refer to social history, but completely to biology. In this regard, Elaine Ginsberg asserts that "cultural logic presupposes a biological foundation of race visibly evident in physical features such as facial structures, hair color, and texture, and skin color- what Franz Fanon has called the 'epidermal schema of racial difference'" (4). But, Larsen attacks these essentialist notions of race by depicting black women passing for white, whose physical appearances do not give a clue of their race. In Ginsberg's words, their "epidermal schema" does not "distinguish or identify" them. At the roof of the Drayton Hotel, when the

woman sitting next to Irene's table continuously gazed her, Irene suspects the possibility of being exposed as black women because she passed for white in order to enter inside the hotel. Her white skin let the people consider her as white. She confidently asserts that:

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. (18-19)

Larsen projects the American racial ideology, where outer appearance plays vital role in shaping the identity of the people. She dismantles the epidermal schema of racial difference with Irene's confidence in her appearance, which does not reveal her race. Irene challenged the stupidity of considering outer appearance as determinant factor in shaping racial identity. She uses the word 'Absurd! Impossible!' which indicates an impossibility of recognizing one's race through their outer appearance because Irene herself belong to Black racial heritage but her skin color deceives the people around her. Irene does not care even if "the woman did know or suspect her race" since she knows that "She couldn't prove it" (20). In one hand, she feels worried about being exposed but on the other hand, she consoles herself by saying that no one can even prove her black racial identity. Eventually, even Irene herself, fails to identify that the woman sitting near her in the cafe is, Clare, who also a Negro passes for white. She fails to recognize her childhood friend with whom she used to spend a lot of time.

In another situation, Jack Bellew, the racist white husband of Clare, in the tea party openly expresses his racial prejudice, while he fails to acknowledge that his own wife and the two other women he is addressing are also black. He ironically greets his wife as "Hello! Nig'" (66) for fun and again confidently says that "I know you're no nigger" (68), shows that

he is sure about her wife that she is not a Negro. The outer appearance of Clare deceived him. He becomes unable to recognize his wife as Negro because American ideology regards that to be a Negro one should be black in color. In this regard, Larsen explicitly illustrates that biological characteristics do not speak for race and deconstructs the notion of racial categorization on the basis of skin color. Rather she shows that discourse of racial identity is socially constructed and imposed on the self in order to create a hierarchical system in which white can justify their superiority and their exploitation of blacks. She sees identity is produced through performance and this rigid racial structure has created white supremacist society. As Catherine Rottenburg opines that:

In white supremacist society where norms work by constructing a binary opposition between white and black in which white, is always privileged over black...series of traits linked to whiteness (civilized/ intelligent/moral hardworking/ clean) and blackness (savage/instinctual/ simple/ licentious/ lazy/ dirty) have been concatenated in the service of specific social hierarchies...race performativity compels subjects to perform according to the those fictitious unities, thus shaping their identity and their performances.(435-37)

Since the historic period Black were dehumanized and dominated by White. They were not allowed to put their views and denied to take part in economic, social and political progress of the country. White has been always in the position of power and superiority and Blacks in the position of inferiority. In order to maintain power and position over Blacks, whites presents negative attributes for blacks like savage, lazy, dirty, so on and positive for them like civilized, intelligent, clean and so on. Along with it, Rottenburg claims that racial identity is the product of racial performance. One who performs like white characteristics, they were regarded as white and vice-versa. In this sense, it is safe to say that being white secures the

position of power. Therefore, Clare feels compelled to maintain her white identity along with black identity.

Larsen presents the novel in a masked format structure like the three-acts of play i.e. Encounter, Re-encounter and Finale, in order to mask the conflict of two-ness in the characters being the Negro or the American. Through the phenomenon of ‘passing’ where a light-skinned woman from black heritage can transform herself in white, Larsen tries to create threat among European Americans. She presents passing as an option for African American to rebel against the racial hierarchies. Allyson Hobbs states in her book *A Chosen Exile* that “passing was an act of rebellion against the racial regime” (8). It means passing not only provides blacks to carry false identity to gain social membership in a white dominated society, it also indicates a revolutionary act towards the racial segregation. Clare Kendry’s childhood is guided with the racial discrimination which creates a strong thirst inside her to uplift her status in the society. Her racist white Aunts always dehumanized her as she says: “I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep by doing all the housework and most of the washing...to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood and they belong to the generation” (39). Clare presents her pathetic childhood days. Her white Aunts treat her like a servant. They compelled her to earn by doing house hold works and washing just because she had Negro blood. The phrase ‘to their notion’ indicates all American racial ideology where Negroes were labeled with hard labour. Because of this, Clare passes for white and her act of passing is revolutionary act towards racial division where she wants to be a person rather than a problem as constructed through racist notions.

Despite this, Larsen reflects the struggle of Irene and Clare with Du Bois ideas of Double consciousness. Du Bois theory of double consciousness sought to answer the question of how it feels to “to be a problem”(7), as blacks are viewed as problem in a society dominated by whites. He further states that, as a black person, “one ever feels his two-ness, -

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” (8). As blacks live under white domination, their identities become split between the American identity and the African identity. In the novel, both the characters, Irene and Clare, have identities split between these two identities. Clare longs for Black community along with white. She wants to be a member of both communities at once. Because of her pathetic childhood days, she cannot lose her white identity which she gets through Mr. Bellew. She wants to uphold white identity as it stands her in position and power. Along with it, she prefers to be a member of black community because being among blacks provides her pleasure. Likewise, Irene rejects white community superficially only as she lives her life through white ideologies and judgments. She reflects the idea of situational passing whenever it is needed to pass; she passed for white and when it comes to be black, she remains black. She also takes advantages from both communities like Clare. In this regard, their preference towards both communities reflects their double consciousness which forces them to adhere to white standard of identity and function within the role of a white mother. At the same time, reminding their black ancestry makes them black in the eyes of white law and lets them to uphold both roles of American and African in order to surpass the disabilities of being Negroes in white society.

Similarly, Du Bois in his article “The Strivings of the Negro People” argues that “Black identity has been characterized as a form of double consciousness; the desire to be an American and not lose one’s racial identity” (195). It means to say that African-American identity is formed through their double consciousness which compels them to be an American along with African. In the novel, Larsen projects this struggle of characters to reconcile their identity as a black person and as an American citizen. Irene passes for white occasionally as she says, “I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially” (184). It means socially she

wants to be a member of Negro society but to have an access towards white privileges, she prefer situational passing. She does not want to stick in one identity either American or African. She wants to take benefit from both identities. She doesnot even hesitate to pass whenever it is needed. The first time, she passes is at the Drayton Hotel. She herself asserts her feeling as: “It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (13). The word ‘another world’ refers to the white American world where there is access to everything in Drayton Hotel and ‘below’ refers to the street of the Chicago where she has been a black woman. As, Martha J. Cuttler states, she enjoys “the sensation of leaving her habitual racial niche” (87). When Irene passed for the first time, she feels the relief that passing provide her to stay in Drayton Hotel, the hotel where only whites are allowed to enter. Despite her insistence on stability on race, as we see when Clare asked about her thought of passing, Irene promptly answered “No. Why should I?” (43) and again added “I’ve everything I want” (44), her fascination towards passing according to her convenience refuses her to stay stable and fixed. Thoughshe is involved in the black community and attends many of the social events of Upper-class African-Americans in her peer group but, at the time of need she passes for white to have rights of European Americans. In this manner, Irene’s duality in identity blurs the racial dichotomy.

On the other hand, Irene’s internal conflict affects her perception of her racial identity. Irene knows that European Americans consider her to be black based on her racial heritage, and so Irene makes no attempt to go against this label as like Clare Kendry. Though she sometime passes for white, she stays within the black community because she thinks that passing is dangerous. As she says:

She wished to find out about this hazardous business of ‘passing’, this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment,

not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came in to contact with other Negroes. (37)

Irene worries about how to avoid getting caught after passing and what would happen if the one caught. She thinks how a person can pass into an unfavorable environment where everything seems to be strange. Along with it, she also acknowledges that it would be the humiliation of being escorted out of the place that would embarrass her rather than the truth of her racial heritage as she says “It wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (19). It means that she does not feel hesitant to declare herself as a Negro but, she is afraid of being taken out from the public place like Drayton Hotel. It indicates Irene’s duality which shows the journey of passing figure along the color line where they have to face all kinds of issues that are connected with it, in particular the dilemma of a black and white identity within a single body.

The whole novel is projected through Irene’s perspective; the projection of Clare’s racial identity is switches throughout the course of the novel. Assigning a race to Clare is difficult for Irene. Though Clare and Irene grew up together in a black community but after the death of Clare’s father, she goes to live with her White racist Aunts. This experience automatically let Irene’s perception to Clare as Black. But, in the first meeting at Drayton Hotel, Irene fails to recognize the woman sitting to her next table, is her childhood friend Clare rather assumes that she is a white woman. This scene reveals the presence of double consciousness in Irene, who struggles between acting according to her established consciousness (i.e. Clare belongs to black community) and conflicting sub consciousness (i.e. her White countenance which compel Irene to regard her as White women) that complicates

her fears. Because she knows the possible consequences of getting caught in passing and also aware of judgments white would make when Irene revealed to be a black woman. Alyson Hobbs states that “passing was a potent weapon against racial discrimination, but it was also a potential threat to personal and community integrity” (13). It means that even though passing dismantles the existed racial discrimination but it also creates a kind of fear among passers while having personal or communal gathering. Outwardly the passers pretend to be a member of white community but their inherent racial identity unconsciously creates a kind of threat of being exposed among others.

Similarly, Clare Kendry reflects the hazardous nature of passing which Irene longed for. Larsen portrays Clare as the embodiment of racial ambiguity, a mysterious woman who physically and figuratively bridges the gap between white and black. Though Clare’s ancestry revealed her as a member of black community but she permanently passes for white community. For her, passing is about individuation which offers her a chance to define herself independently, denying the innate and imposed factors. Kathleen Pfeiffer, a literary critic asserts that “one can clearly feel the urgings of self-reliant individualism in this wish to move out of a historically defined identity and into a freer and fuller expression of selfhood” (6). It means racial passing helps the marginalized people to express or define themselves freely. It definitely provides Clare an opportunity to be an individual self rather than a predetermined concept, as she says: “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham...I know I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass’” (40-41). Clare reflects her strong feeling that she wants to free herself from all those accusations that she used to listen from her white Aunts. The way through which she can free herself is passing for white.

However, Clare’s decision to pass over to the white world to obtain white privileges that are granted with the white race does not provide her a sense of liberation. Allyson Hobbs

argues that “Some African Americans used passing as a crucial channel leading to physical and personal freedom. They declared their rights as American citizens and insisted on their humanity. What they could not fully know until they had successfully passed was that the light of freedom was often overshadowed by the darkness of loss” (27). Hobbs presents the loss of passing that every passer has to face in their life soon after passing. African-Americans uses passing as thread which binds them with white privileges. They disguise themselves as American Citizens to enjoy the life of freedom. But, the freedom in cost of their inherent racial identity gets darken when they become conscious about what they actually loss. When Clare used to live with her white Aunts, she wants to get rid of from her Aunts because her Aunts does not like her as she says: “for their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn’t want anyone to know that their darling brother has seduced ruined, they called it a Negro girl...they forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors” (41). It shows that her Aunts refuses to mention her as a Negro in front of others because being Negro means becoming inferior. She was frustrated with her situation as a child, so once she becomes adult she feels the only way to progress within society is to become completely white. Because of this fact, she chooses the path of passing as a way to come out from all those problems and difficulties that she has to face during her childhood days. For Clare, passing stands as an act to defy the racial division and through this trope of passing, Clare blurs the color line draws by Whites. Unfortunately, the world she chooses by marrying with Mr. Jack Bellew ironically jailed herself in a similar environment to that of her Aunts because her husband imitates her Aunts thinking regarding Black. Belle strongly reject the idea of having Negro in his family as he says: “I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never had been and Never will be” (68). Mr. Bellew strictly asserts that he does not want to see nigger in his family. The word ‘never’ indicates his hatredness towards black.

However, Clare begins to gain a strong thirst to return back to her birthright, her former race. She feels comfort and an overall sense of community with blacks something that she has never been able to experience among whites. Consequently, Clare can't just abandon her identity as a white woman and return to her former race. She has passed as white and this puts her in danger due to society's fixed racial structure. But, when she realizes the loss that passing provides her, she attempt to achieve an integrated identity regardless of the consequences because the loneliness she experiences from passing as a white woman begins to overwhelm her. She openly admits that she lives in isolation and desires nothing more than to be among blacks again. As she states in letter:

For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life.... You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of....It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases...and it's your fault, Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago.

(8)

In this letter, Clare openly expresses her repressed desire to return back to her former race. Being in white society, she feels like an ache or pain which never gets healed until or unless she got a chance to be free in society. She wants to live a life that she used to live earlier in black community. By repeating the word 'lonely' she is continuously indicating desperation to be among blacks again. Consequently, she confesses that her longing for returning back to Black is arouse because of Irene. This wild desire of being a member of Black community is the result of their meeting in Chicago a long time ago.

Although Clare longs to be among the black community again, she would still like to uphold her appearance as a white woman because of the white privileges that she instantly

obtains. As she says, “You’d be surprised, Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. May be because there are so many more of them or may be because they are secure and so don’t have to bother” (37-38). Clare shows her affection with white world. She wants Irene to know about the life with white people is easier than with Blacks. Therefore, due to white privileges, Clare wants to maintain her white standard but also wants to go back to her former race. This is what Dubois argues in his theory of Double consciousness that ‘From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American’ (136). Du Bois clearly distinguishes two social ‘worlds’ and the ‘double lives’ that black identity has been identify as a form of double consciousness; the desire to be both an American and African. In the novel, Irene and Clare both do not want to lose their racial identity but at the same time, they prefer passing to have an access to white privileges.

Throughout the novel, racial passing stands as a tool for transcending the class system. It provides one way of attaining the material comfort that the passer previously has no access to. Clare’s motivation for passing is not merely to avoid the social white oppression, but also the economic oppression she has been through her childhood days. She passes for white by marrying Jack for material comfort, as she says to Irene: “I wanted things... You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others”(41). It shows her strong passion for all those things which she did not have in her life before. Clare uses the trope of passing in order to perceived wealth and power. George Hutchinson says that Clare decides to pass not because “blackness as such represented victimization and powerlessness, but because of the class dynamics of social mobility in a racially segregated world” (300). Clare not only pass in order to surpass the causality of being black in society but also to uplift the class in society. By disproving the natural existence of races through passing, Irene and Clare blurs the racial dichotomy created by so called American racial ideology.

Despite finding wealth and security as white woman, Clare cannot escape her roots. She personifies Du Bois idea of double consciousness. In the beginning of the novel, she expresses her loneliness and isolation through letter to Irene. Yet only a few pages later, she question's Irene's decision to embrace her African-American identity as she states that:

You know, Rene, I've often wondered why more coloured girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and – oh, lots of others- never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve.... You'd be surprised, Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. (37)

Clare presents passing as an easy but frightful thing. One must have a little gut to pass. Later on she changes her mind again, and says that "I've been so lonely since! You can't know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to"(119).Just after describing the advantage of passing, Clare presents her isolated feeling with Irene. In one hand, she describes passing as way to escape from marginalized world to free world. On the other hand, she reflects the difficulties of passers. In this manner, we can see Clare's dual attitude towards race. At one time, she expresses her desire to return back to her African heritage as she mentioned in her letter to Irene. At the same time, she does not want to lose her white identity.

The story takes a new turn when Clare decides that she wants the advantages of both worlds, remaining in the white community and yet enjoying the pleasures of the black society. And she sees Irene as door allowing her to re-enter in her past as 'Negro', when she got to know about Negro Welfare League and Irene as a member of ticket committee. Irene clearly states that: "the trouble with Clare was not only that she wanted to have her cake and eat it too, but that she wanted to nibble at the cakes of other folks as well" (88). Irene present the problem existed in Clare's mind. Clare not only wants to take advantages from white

community but also wants to take with other folks too i.e. Negro community. This clearly indicates that she wants to move on her life by having double identity, this is what Du Bois describes, the experience of double identity as having a 'double consciousness':

The double life of every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American leads as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century, from this must arise a painful self consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality, and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence...such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism. (136)

It means African-Americans double life leads them towards double thought, duties and ideals which cause psychologically fragmentation. Due to which, they uphold dual identity. But, living as both black and white is simply not allowed in racist society. Clearly then, we can see that Clare becomes stuck in the middle of racial dichotomy. Her death in the novel projects the consequences of the hazardous business of passing, where she completely failed to fit in 'the white world' or 'the black world'.

But, Irene's identity split between loyalty to her race and the pain of racial differences. Irene's self hatred and duality are first apparent in interaction with Mr. Bellew, Clare's white husband. When Irene asked him, "So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew"(69). He answered with short denying laugh that:

You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don't dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn in to one. She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I'd want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils.... I know people who've known them, better than

they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And, he added darkly, 'worse'. (69-70)

Mr. Bellew's racial remarks represent the ideology of white supremacist society. It shows whites negativity towards Blacks. This negative attitude towards blacks spread amongst white from generation to generation through their ancestors, Medias, newspapers and so on. Mr. Bellew does not have a personal problem with blacks but his mentality towards blacks is based upon his ancestors and Medias. He clearly mentioned that he read about blacks in newspaper where blacks were portrayed as robbers and killers which enhance him to regard black as worse creature.

In addition, this racial remark makes Irene uncomfortable in her racial difference. As a result she begins to look at herself through Bellew's racist gaze who compelled her not to shout at him rather behave in calm manner. Here, Irene is overwhelmingly and psychologically consumed with self hating double consciousness which can see through the lines when she angrily questions her racial allegiance as Larsen says:

She was caught between two allegiances different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race.... Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely, sardonic. Sitting alone in the quiet living room in the pleasant fire-flight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race...enough to suffer as a woman, an individual...without having to suffer for the race as well. It was brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children. (180-181)

Here, Irene presents her dual perception towards her identity. She questions herself about her race and determine race as a factor that binds and suffocates her. For the first time she felt bad

for being born as Negro in white dominated society. She becomes faded up from upholding both identities. If she left her black identity, it will detach her from her birthright race. Similarly, if she left her white identity, it will keep her away from all those white privileges which she cannot get being Negro. This is what Du Bois states “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world” (xiii). He argues that the experience of double consciousness is the experience of perpetual self-consciousness; Black Americans are required to consider themselves through the lens of the larger society. So, as Irene did while having conversation with Mr. Bellew. Instead of shouting at him, she thinks it’s better to stay calm and think about it through the lens of the so-called white society. This shows her struggle to reconcile and merge ideals from both ends of binary duality in order to re-establish a cohesive and functional self perspective.

Likewise, passing not only stands as a transgression of legal racial boundaries in the novel, but of patriarchal boundaries as well. Clare and Irene are not only bound by race, but also by being women. They both make their racial choice according to their welfare as Black women. As Kashinath Ranveer says “the blacks women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy: racism, sexism and classism” (1). It means blacks were not only suppressed through race but also through class and sex. In the novel, though Clare has put herself in a dangerous situation by taking a risk of passing, she represents the need of power for African-American in the white male dominated society. And through passing she succeeds to uplift her female racial status. In black racial heritage, women were not allowed to speak against their husband. They were supposed to be inferior and indulge in household works only. Their responsibility is to take care of their children and husbands like Irene. She is bound by her societal roles where women have no rights to speak against her husband. When Irene got to know about her husband’s extra-marital affair, she did not say anything to him in a fear that if

he would leave her then how could she as well as her two sons managed to live their life. As she says that:

And knew that he had gone. Down to Clare...Impossible for her to put it immediately into words or give it outline, for prompted by some impulse of self protection...she closed her unseeing eyes and clenched her fists. She tried not to cry. But her lips tightened and no effort could check the hot tears of rage and shame that sprang in to her eyes and flowed down her cheeks. (163-64)

Irene's expression reflects her painful feelings after knowing the fact of her husband's affair with her friend. Even though, she knows that her husband goes to Clare's room, she did not take a step to stop him because of her inner impulse of self protection. She is determining to keep her marriage for the sake of security. Her status as a woman and mother let her to do what it is best for her children. She cannot leave Brain.

Similarly, Clare succeeds to escape from domestic sphere through becoming white. Like many African-American women, she spends her early life working in the private domestic sphere of white women. Because she belongs to African-American ancestry, her white Aunts assume their niece possesses an inherent skill for labor like blacks. In this vein, she does not choose to pass simply for economic reasons but also to escape from society's gender reasons. By becoming white, Clare escapes the domestic life of African-American. She enjoys the freedom by transgressing the racial boundaries where as Irene, being a black woman does not get a chance to enjoy the freedom like Clare. Clare seems to be irresponsible towards her child, Margery. Being white women, she does not care about her marital life and children. When Irene suggests Clare not to take part in Negro Welfare League dance because she passed for white and if anyone in the party would recognize her as Negro and Brain got to know about this fact then her and her child life would be on danger. Being Black women, Irene forces Clare to think about her child's security. But, Clare asserts that, "Children aren't everything" (148), it indicates that like Irene, Clare does not want to sacrifice her life by thinking about children and family's security. Rather,

she wants to enjoy her life freely as she says “There are other things in the world” (148). She keeps on having affair with Irene’s Husband. She is presented as selfish women who passed for white for her benefits. As Miriam Thaggart in her journal ‘Racial Etiquette: Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and the Rhinelander Case’ states that “Larsen offers three competing visions of the black women The women become reflectors of their husband’s wealth and positions, their husband’s success written on their female frames” (11). It means both the women Clare and Irene depend upon their husbands for their comfortable lives. Irene’s marriage to a wealthy Black physician, Brain, is her guarantee to achieve mobility in black community which she still wants to maintain after knowing the fact of having affair between her friend and her husband. Similarly, Clare’s marriage to wealthy white man, Jack is her passport to the White world which she wants to maintain even after knowing her husband’s hatredness towards black. In this regard, through Irene Larsen projects the lives of many other Black women are who are double marginalized in a white dominated society. By presenting Clare with contrast to Irene, Larsen tries to show how African-American women uses passing as a tool to fight against racial segregation and gender discrimination in the white dominated society.

Larsen, through her novel *Passing*, demonstrates the reality of the phenomenon of passing that swept across the African- American community. During early twentieth century, race defined almost every aspect of one’s life. If one belongs to white community, one has an access towards economic and social mobility. But, being a member of black community denies one from all those freedom and mobility that are granted with whites. Because of this, African-American people think that their black colour is curse for them. They had perception that black race has inferior status in the society. This racial prejudice compelled them to disguise themselves as whites. Through Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, Larsen portrays the psyche of African-American women who practice passing for different reasons. No matter Irene passes for many times, but she abhors the act of passing for permanently as Clare does. She takes the advantages of her white countenance through situational passing. She prefers to be a member of Black

community but for social mobility, she needs passing. Similarly, Clare felt ashamed of her black racial heritage because her white racist Aunts always used to taunt her of being a child of black discreet Ham. So, being adult, she denies her racial heritage and passes for white through which she became able to obtain all the things that she wants. Her attempt of passing permanently projects the psyche of those entire African-American children who used to be humiliated in their home just because of their mixed ancestry and consequently their humiliation leads them to disguise their racial identity permanently like Clare. In this manner, Irene's and Clare's white countenance helps them to become a member of white society. This ability to cross over the color line disturbs the very ideas of racial divisions.

Unlike this, Larsen kills off her passing character which allows readers to interpret that passing figure is punished because of being disloyal to her race. In this sense, she demonstrates Clare's death as penalty of passing. Though Larsen uses the trope of passing to dismantle the existing notion of race, she personally denies accepting the idea of passing permanently like Clare does in the novel. Through Clare, Larsen indirectly reflects her story of difficulty and hatred faced by her because of being visibly black person in her family. Her visible blackness had created difficulty to Peter Larsen, step-father of Larsen as he felt ashamed of his African-American daughter like Clare's Aunts. But, Larsen never thought to become disloyal to her race like Clare. Through Clare's death, Larsen illustrates the destructive effect of split in consciousness in passers. It means passing not only let African-American become the member of white community but also it created a sense of loss of their black heritage which would enable them to uphold both racial identity together. This nature of upholding both racial identities indicates the failure of essentialist notion of race where racial boundaries were not as rigid as they were originally appeared to be in white society. Larsen, by letting her black characters passing for white and black time and again, reflects the flexibility of race which destabilizes the imposed white racial discourse. In this regard, Larsen presents passing as a tool to blur the conventional racial segregation which gives chance for blacks to be a person along with economic freedom.

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