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Layers of Experience: An Intersectional Approach to Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses Nella Larsen's *Passing* within an intersectional matrix of the entwined dynamics of race, gender, and class in early 20th-century America. The focus is on how the two protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, negotiate their complex identities in a racially stratified society. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's concepts of structural and political intersectionality, the study demonstrates how the experiences of these women intersect in particular configurations of identity formation within oppressive social structures characteristic of the Jim Crow period. The study also discusses psychological conflicts brought about by racial passing, looking at the tension between self-authenticity and social survival. In the following sections, this research delves into the socio-political meanings of passing and its psychological concomitance regarding motherhood, marriage, and social mobility. At the bottom line, passing is approached as a mode of critique of racial and gender homogenization, highlighting the complexity of black women's experiences during the Harlem Renaissance.

Keywords: Structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, identity, racial passing

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1. Introduction

Nella Larsen's *Passing* intricately weaves a narrative that delves into the complexities of female identity within a racially segregated society during the early 20th century. It was written during the Jim Crow era, a period in American history, as Carter writes, characterized by the most significant racial segregation between Black and White individuals than any previous shared historical period, marking a pronounced divide between the two communities (228). According to Michaels, this book serves as a significant subject of examination, making it noteworthy in academic analysis, despite "just the idea of reaching it takes the form of simply looking as you belong to mixed ethnicity or acting as you come from a different civilization a conversation about race as so distinctive again from the way you look and even the way you act." (Michaels 768). The novel raises poignant questions about the intersection of race and gender, prompting readers to confront the multi-dimensional facets of identity and the intricate ways they interact. Through the lens of intersectionality, a powerful theoretical framework that examines the interconnectedness of various social categories such as race, gender, class, and ability; this research aims to study how women of color represented by Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry are treated in the context of the novel and how the production of the images of women of color and the contestations surrounding those images tend to ignore the intersectionality of women of color. It also tries to illustrate how Irene and Clare navigate the intricate balance between their racial and gender identities and whether their economic status influences their understanding of their roles as women of color. This research illuminates the novel's profound insights into the nuanced experiences of its female protagonists.

The narrative explores the concepts of racial boundaries and the various influences that arise from the

interrogation of these boundaries. The text exposes the arbitrariness of racial hierarchy and the complexities of color. The text offers a scathing social critique, a criticism that is largely determined by a pessimistic depiction of events. Larsen's harsh criticism depicts painful situations caused by racial confusion. That tragic literary representation often presents such characters as confused or depressed because of their inability to conform to what they think is the White World and the Black World.

The traffic depicts the fractured and tense social norms of a society obsessed with race, a society that divides its citizens into communities of color. But those who show different shades of brown appear among this opposite duo, becoming a gray space in black and white. They are the group that can cross and have a social mobility space. But as the text depicts, people who manage to cross suffer from identity rupture, psychological damage, instability, or a tragic effort to preserve their stability.

Nella Larsen, an American author, concurrently pursued a career in healthcare as a nurse and archivist, during which she authored two notable novels, namely *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). These literary works received acclaim from critics and achieved high ratings. In 1928, she also published her autobiography, *Quicksand*, which garnered extensive critical acclaim but did not achieve significant commercial success (Wall 97). Despite her limited literary output, she enjoyed the admiration of her contemporaries. Since the latter half of the 20th century, interest has been resurgent in her writings, particularly in the context of race and sexuality. Her works have consistently been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations, and she is now widely recognized as a significant figure in literature. Her writings have consistently been the subject of extensive scholarly research, and she is currently considered not just the main writer of the Harlem Renaissance, but it's a prominent voice in American modernism (Bone 658).

Passing delves into the intricacies of the lives of two African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who possess light enough skin tones to pass as white individuals. Within the black community, the practice of passing into white society serves as a strategy for survival and a means of escaping the racial prejudice and inferiority imposed by white society. This stratagem enables them to navigate a society deeply divided by race by seamlessly blending into the white population. Clare effectively utilizes passing as a means to advance socially. Her ability to pass is facilitated by three key factors: her fair complexion, her demeanor, and her lack of close relatives. Officially categorized as an orphan, having been abandoned by distant white relatives who view her as a source of labor rather than as someone to protect, Clare can pass effortlessly and without scrutiny “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 knew that I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass.’” Clare Kendry (Larsen 17).

The notion of passing intersects with multiple layers of identity, notably race and gender, thereby shaping both the self-perception of the characters and how they are perceived by others. The title directly pertains to the central theme of racial passing within the novel. A crucial narrative episode is Clare Kendry's attempt to pass as white, particularly for her husband, John (Jack) Bellew, which serves as a pivotal event that is meticulously examined in the story. The narrative unfolds from a third-person perspective, with Irene Redfield, a black woman with European or near-European features, serving as the central character, residing in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City (Kaplan xvi). But at first glance, the title passing might present itself with a range of potential meanings to the reader. The shift from the realm of “life” to that of “death” is another context where the term passing finds relevance. While the term passing inherently signifies a transformation, it also carries connotations of concealing one's true self or adopting an alternate identity (Piper 56).

Intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how different dimensions of identity cannot be studied or understood in isolation; instead, they intersect and overlap, contributing to unique and often marginalized experiences. Passing goes around two identities represented by Irene, a central figure in the narrative, who displays unwavering dedication to the Harlem Renaissance and its mission of elevating and empowering the Black community. Conversely, the other primary character, Clare, remains largely indifferent to it, often functioning as a passive observer and consumer of the community's offerings. She chooses to pass as white, thus traversing racial boundaries, introducing a unique dimension that adds

complexity to the characters' interactions and self-perception.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

The 1920s in the United States was a time of great social and political change. The country was emerging from World War I and entering a period of economic prosperity. However, this prosperity was not shared equally, and African Americans continued to face discrimination and segregation in all aspects of life.

This era was characterized by rich modes of literary and musical cultural expression, and the Blacks of the era struggled to control the image and business affairs of that expression. The paper also mentions that the NAACP's The Crisis and Marcus Garvey's Negro World magazines focused on all aspects of the political and cultural climate of the 1920s, and both sought to guide the direction of the flourishing cultural production. Overall, the Harlem Renaissance was a time of great cultural transformation and artistic expression for African Americans (Perry and Peters 156- 157).

Maurice mentions that "Identity is shaped at the unstable point where the „unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture." (3). The Harlem Renaissance had a significant impact on African American identity and representation in mainstream American culture. The movement sought to challenge and redefine the prevailing stereotypes and prejudices that had long been associated with African Americans. Through their artistic and literary works, Harlem Renaissance figures sought to showcase the richness and complexity of African American culture and history and to assert their place in American society. This effort helped to pave the way for greater recognition and acceptance of African American contributions to American culture and society (Ritchie 49).

Perry and Peters notice that the Renaissance had strong connections with political engagement and encompassed a diverse range of political elements. Among those deeply involved in political activities were individuals affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, under the leadership of W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as the extensive membership of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, which extended its influence to African communities worldwide. Garvey's expansive activism, which was rooted in black history, significantly influenced the prevailing ethos of the era (156).

The interplay between jazz and political activism during the Harlem Renaissance was primarily influenced by the ideologies of the New Negro and Black Nationalist movements. Within these movements, the emerging African American popular music, commonly known as jazz, held a dual status. On one hand, it was looked down upon by the leaders of these movements as the music of the unsophisticated. On the other hand, it was proudly recognized as a distinctly African American art form. Much later, during the Cold War and into the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, jazz as a means of political expression evolved to become more direct and focused on addressing specific political issues, particularly those related to racial equality (Casey 2).

The intellectual activity of political activists and artists during the Harlem Renaissance had a significant impact on American and international culture during this time. The Renaissance was an intellectual and artistic movement that was firmly rooted in political activism and contained a wide variety of political overtones. The members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the United Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey, were politically active during this time. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of great cultural transformation and artistic expression for African Americans. The intellectual activity of political activists and artists during the Harlem Renaissance helped to shape American and international culture during this time (Perry and Peters 156- 157).

Women played a vital role in the Harlem Renaissance. They were writers, poets, artists, musicians, and performers. They also played a leading role in the social and political activism of the era. One of these women is Nella Larsen. She wrote about the experiences of middle-class African Americans in New York City and helped to shape the culture and arts of the Harlem Renaissance. She also helped to challenge stereotypes about African American women and to promote a more positive image of African American womanhood.

Nella Larsen's literary work diverged from the specific expectations of literary exoticism held by some editors for writers of her racial background. Simultaneously, she deviated from conforming her characters to the anticipated ideals of certain black activists. Her writing took a critical stance on various pressing issues, including racism in its various manifestations, whether it be in violent or paternalistic forms. She also delved into the pervasive, isolating influence of religion within black communities, particularly in the Southern regions, as well as addressing issues of classism and snobbery prevalent among the black elite. Additionally, Larsen explored the sexual objectification of women of color by white individuals (Shakir 228). Despite the inherent ambivalence and contradictions in her work, Larsen masterfully depicted the life and culture of Harlem and the religious communities within the African American belt in the United States.

3. Cultural Representations of Blackness and Womanhood in the Early 20th Century

In *Passing* by Nella Larsen, identity is portrayed as an in-depth portrayal of what it meant to be Black and a woman during the 20th century. Larsen uses the themes of passing and gender roles as an implicit critique of the homogenization of Black identities, especially Black women's experiences, during the Harlem Renaissance.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance manifested an explosion of African American artistic expression, literature, and intellectual thought. The period also brewed vibrant but ultimately conflicting cultural narratives about Black identity. Larsen responds to or critiques prevailing cultural constructions of Blackness by illustrating diverse complexities and contradictions within the African American experience in Passing.

As Emmanuel M. Gates points out, the Harlem Renaissance sought to celebrate the essence of being Black through its art, literature, and culture but continually landed in the pitfalls of imposing a singular experience of what it means to be Black. What dominated this movement was primarily a singular discourse on the upliftment of Blacks progressive in nature yet dismissive of a variety of dissenting and discursive voices coming from within the Black community. In Larsen, on the other hand, one can find characters such as Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield managing not to fall into simple categorization. Indeed, Clare, who passes for White, covers the ground on the fluidity and plurality of Black identity, against Irene, who stands with Blacks and is the signification of the difficulty of the relation of personal identity to racial loyalty.

Where Larsen does describe Clare and Irene, she does much to defy the notion that Blackness should ever be confined within a singular experience. The extent to which Clare crosscuts both white and Black spheres of society raises questions over the rigid, unitary definition of race. Hence, internal conflicts like Irene's served to underscore the immense pressures upon Black women to perform, or "pass" into predetermined social roles (McDowell 82). In this way, Passing is critical of the homogenization of Black identity, which often, through the discourses and reception of the texts of the Harlem Renaissance, was promoted in cultural politics.

In addition to critiquing cultural narratives around Blackness, Passing offers a deep dive into the experiences of Black womanhood, whereby the intersection of race and gender is laid bare. Larsen teases out through her characters how Black women were feeling pressure from two sides during that period: from within the Black community and from wider societal expectations.

Passing is a feminist text in that it centers on the unique struggles Black women, as opposed to white women, must navigate race and gender oppression (Walker 232). Larsen will present Black womanhood as the conflicted site in which race and gender ideology come to bear to make and remake subjectivities in their various complex organizations. Traditional Black respectability is seen in the character of Irene next to Clare who passes for white and therefore breaks those rules while simultaneously refusing the implicit responsibilities of Black womanhood by turning her back on her race and being a good mother to white children.

The novel is a critique of the limited roles available to Black women in either the Black or white community.

Tate states that The Harlem Renaissance too often celebrates male intellectual and artistic achievement, laying the contribution and experience of black women to the movement in the background (Tate 90). Larsen puts Black women at the center of her narrative in *Passing*, thereby showing both racial and gender-specific expectations that come to force into the limelight. She uses Irene and Clare to say that the Black woman has been required to fit squarely into one of the following loyal wife, not selfless mother, then racial activist, to be considered valuable within her community.

Larsen's view is a highly potent assault on cultural and literary homogenization, particularly against the background of the Harlem Renaissance. Even while the movement set up an unprecedented forum for African American voices, it aggravated pressures of conformity within the Black community. The sector expected labor from its artists and writers in line with its political and social goals of racial uplift and respectability, even at the cost of personal and artistic expression (Wall 50).

Where Larsen's *Passing* differs from much writing of the period produced by her contemporaries, particularly in its shift of focus from broad social or political issues to the internal psychological conflict of the characters. It is a comment on the kinds of pressures that African American artists were subject to, that they produce a certain kind of work. As Hutchinson argued, Larsen's depiction of Clare and Irene's inner conflicts may be read as a rejection of the collective identity politics at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance in preference for an exploration of individual identity (Hutchinson 300).

4. Discussion: Unraveling Intersectionality in *Passing*

Intersectionality involves considerations of race, gender, and class differences as well. Smith states:

The discourse of intersectionality because although it is generally motivated by class considerations and constructed in racial terms…its consequences are distributed differentially on the basis of gender (women in the narrative are more likely to be punished for passing than men) (43).

The socioeconomic status of individuals plays an important role in shaping their experiences and identities. Class influences the opportunities and barriers that people face, which affects their decisions and actions, including passing to a race. While class is considered a driving factor, discourse is framed within the context of race. This means that ethnic identity and social structures surrounding race are central to understanding the experiences of those who pass to another race. The intersection of class with race creates a complex matrix of advantages and disadvantages. Clare has a greater understanding of class dynamics than Irene. Although she enjoys substantial wealth as Bellew's wife, her early life was difficult. Growing up in a lower-working-class home, she knew of financial instability and the terrible treatment of her white family members. She was a janitor's daughter, running errands to sew her own clothes, and then spending her teenage years doing household chores for her aunts as punishment for being born black. This shed light on her social journey. Her history produced in poverty and adversity guides her decision to pass for white. The surroundings, together with this ability to pass her off as a white person, forced her to thereafter take up any chance for social and economic betterment eventually marrying a rich white man, John Bellew, effectively enabling her to leave behind her poor past gain the benefits of whiteness, but she must hide her racial identity. These experiences elucidate her amicable rapport with Irene's maids, a source of exasperation for Irene, who has never encountered poverty or laborious work. Irene, in turn, feels a sense of exclusion due to Clare's decision to invite Gertrude to Chicago. Irene finds it perplexing that a socialite like Clare would befriend a butcher's wife, yet she acknowledges the parallel trajectories of their lives. While Irene has exclusively mingled within the upper echelons of society throughout her life, Clare's past experiences in poverty and working-class roles equip her with a heightened ability to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds. The Passing theme can also be applied to survival issues for Clare. According to Piper, passing would reflect the strategy that oppressed people develop to negotiate with oppressive systems: "Passing is a strategy for social survival, a means to escape the constraints imposed by one's race, class, or gender" (56). Passing enabled Clare to get out of the economic instability characteristic of her childhood, but it meant alienation from her person and the Black community. Irene Redfield, in contrast, accommodates comfortably within a middle-class way of living. Since her spouse is a doctor who prospers, Irene need not feel the economic pressure to pass that Clare does. Financially secure, she stands

entrenched within her racial identity, taking pride in her role firmly embedded in the Black community. It is her comfort with her social place that allows her to channel so much enthusiasm into being the center of Harlem, as she was during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, and promoting racial uplift.

Nevertheless, to Irene, class status even conditions one's views of loyalty in race and passing. Clare passes to secure an economic future. She holds passing in contempt because it represents a betrayal of the Black community. As McDowell has observed, “Irene’s class status shields her from the harsher realities of race, enabling her to reject passing without facing the economic consequences that might compel others to do so” (134). For Irene, middle-class standing granted, her homogeneous status spared.

Irene bemoans that she has a Negro identity and female gender at the same time:

…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. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, 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 (78).

She feels that race is the main bond that binds her together with Clare. Without this link, Irene would feel free from Clare's problem. Clare becomes a reflection of Irene's perceived shortcomings. Beauty, charm and Clare's willingness to pass race openly and completely evoke Irene's sense of inferiority in herself and her agency. This feeling is filtered by her anxiety about her marriage. When she begins to lose her sense of self in front of Clare, she also begins to lose her marriage. Passing is presented as complex in women's passing narratives, as well as the question of feminine friendship. Despite the comfort that Irene and Clare may have found in each other at first, feelings of rivalry, paranoia, and incompetence soon overwhelmed them and made them doubt their sense of identity and agency. In the end, Irene’s pushing Clare out the window is a means of preservation because Clare's “having way” and her sexual hyperactivity force Irene to question her nature and agency, this interrogation leads to anxiety about her stable identity and marriage. Clare's agency is a reminder of what Irene lacked, and Irene's pushing Clare is a last-ditch attempt to demonstrate her sense of agency.

If marriage and feminine coincidence provide points of contention or punishment, transit also indicates that a degree of privilege is granted by the act of passing itself. For example, Brian says

…you my dear had all the advantage. You knew what his opinion of you was, while he—well, ‘twas ever thus. We know, always have. They don’t. Not quite. It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and sometimes, its conveniences (185).

In an attempt to illustrate the marriage and race status of the novel's characters, Larsen presents the encounter between Irene, Clare, and Gertrude as a model:

… she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of life (Larsen 24).

While Clare passes by being white and has successfully integrated herself into the white community by abandoning all black bonds, Irene is instead immersed in the black community, indulging only in passing when it suits her needs. But, in Gertrude - who does not pass by but marries a white man who is knowledgeable of her blackness and accepts it- Irene finds annoyance. It is a reminder that "passing" is not always required. Irene admits to her loneliness in her marriage, something she seeks to maintain to maintain her class status. This recognition suggests that passage is not just a way to obtain the privilege given to whites, but a way to escape from the boundaries of her marriage, even for a moment.

The complexities of marriage in Passing are sometimes a form of punishment or a complex factor in the lives of women who express their ethnicity. Irene feels torn between her self-loyalty and her race when faced with the opportunity to reveal Clare's ethnicity to her husband, which could threaten her marriage. The novel flips the idea of marriage as punishment as Irene fears that Clare's divorce will give her freedom.

What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? There was the Rhinelander case. But in France, in Paris, such things were very easy. If he divorced her—if Clare were free—But of all things that could happen, that was the one she did not want (81).

Marriage, in this context, is a punishment for Irene. For women, marriage is complicating their lives and forcing them to deal with the wills and diseases of their husbands. Without her husband, Clare can fully exploit the fluidity of her ethnic identity, realizing that the reward lies in the ability to move between identities when needed, suggesting that marriage complicates the sustainability of transit.

Motherhood is another layer of identity explored. The class backgrounds also orient both women to interact with the public sphere in ways that are constitutive of their gendered experiences. Irene's middle-class status allows her to be very clinging to a traditional image as a mother and homemaker, roles that then work for her sense of stability and purpose. What Irene does at this time resonates strongly with the ideal of middle-class women expected to use their homes for the good of the family. Hence, she is seen scorning by Clare's reckless behavior, which is the most likely to upset her apple cart.

While Irene is black ennobled and restricted by high society, Clare is of a working-class origin and reached fortune by marrying, she has much greater liberty to relax conventional gender roles than Irene does. The longing that Clare harbors for returning to the black community, as well as the risks she is prepared to undergo to do so, like attending a black social event and passing for white, speaks volumes of her rejection of the kind of limitations imposed on women, particularly black women. According to Wall, for such mobility across the boundaries of race and class, gender relations in Clare's life were also mobile, he states, “Clare’s ability to move between racial worlds is mirrored by her resistance to the domestic confines expected of women, a resistance fueled by her complex relationship with both race and class” (97).

Irene, being a mother herself, introduces a unique dimension to her self-concept, as her concerns for her children's prospects in a society marked by racial divisions intersect with her racial identity and her roles as both a woman and a mother. For her, motherhood assumes a role akin to security and holds significant importance within her identity framework. It provides her with a sense of purpose and a means to structure her life. Irene emphasizes her commitment to motherhood, stating that she takes "being a mother rather seriously" and that she is “wrapped up in [her] boys and the running of her house.” (Larsen 80). In this regard, Irene exemplifies a more conventional model of motherhood, wherein children occupy the central focus of a mother's attention, and motherhood stands as a crucial facet of female identity.

In Irene's recollection of her experience in Chicago, she recalls a sweltering day as she shopped for keepsakes for her two sons, Brian Junior and Theodore. While Irene successfully purchases a mechanical plane for Junior, she encounters difficulties in locating the drawing book Ted had requested. In her quest, Irene witnesses a man suffering from either fainting or succumbing to heatstroke outside the sixth store she visits. This episode portrayed by Larsen

illustrates Irene's unwavering dedication as a mother, willing to endure physical discomfort to ensure her boys receive the appropriate gifts. Her commitment to her children is profound, yet in this instance, it appears imprudent, as she places herself in jeopardy solely for the sake of procuring souvenirs. Irene subsequently takes a seat near a window, pondering her options concerning her inability to secure a coloring book for Ted. Once again, this highlights Irene's deep attachment to motherhood, though her preoccupation with the coloring book may seem somewhat misplaced. This fixation on material possessions appears misguided, reflecting an obsession with portraying herself as the ideal mother.

Clare, on the other hand, presents a markedly distinct model of motherhood compared to Irene's. Motherhood does not hold a significant place in Clare's sense of self, and instead of allowing it to shape her existence, she endeavors to construct her life independently of it. In the same dialogue where Irene expresses her deep commitment to motherhood, Clare firmly states that "children aren't everything," (Larson 80) implying that motherhood is not her primary purpose. Larsen underscores this perspective by deliberately avoiding any direct introduction of Clare's daughter, Margery, thereby relegating her to a peripheral role in Clare's presence within the novel. Clare's minimal emphasis on motherhood serves as a

departure from the conventional role of women in domestic and maternal contexts.

Furthermore, Clare harbors a sense of resentment towards her role as a mother, primarily because it prevents her from leaving her husband, John, and returning to her life within the black community. Instead of utilizing motherhood as a means to establish a familial sanctuary insulated from racial prejudice, Clare's maternal responsibilities effectively bind her to a marriage where she endures racial discrimination daily. After Irene underscores the significance of Clare's daughter in preventing her from leaving her husband, Clare candidly expresses her belief that motherhood is “that being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world.” (Larson 66). While Irene perceives motherhood as a source of security and responsibility, Clare regards it as a form of confinement and a restriction on her freedom. Despite Irene's disapproval of Clare's interpretation of motherhood, which she views as self-centered, Irene begins to adopt certain aspects of Clare's approach to motherhood. For instance, Margery attends a boarding school in Switzerland, prompting Irene to contemplate proposing to Brian that one of their own children should also attend school in Europe.

Clare progressively engages in more daring activities, initially enjoying favorable outcomes from her dual existence. Initially, she exercises caution, exemplified by her provision of a post office address for Irene to respond to her letter, avoiding the disclosure of her actual location. Nevertheless, she dismisses Irene's counsel to stay away from Harlem, contending that in a situation where complete safety is unattainable, taking another risk pales in comparison to the happiness she derives from reconnecting with the Black community. Her only moments of hesitation stem from motherhood, particularly when Irene highlights the potential peril her visits to the Black community pose to Margery.

The idea of structural intersectionality can be applied to analyze how larger societal structures and institutions interact to shape the characters' lives, choices, and identities. The novel is set in the early 20th century when racial segregation was deeply entrenched. Structural racism creates a dichotomy between Black and white communities. Clare's choice to pass as white highlights how systemic racism pressures individuals to navigate societal hierarchies based on race. Clare’s intersecting identities represented by race and gender influence her decision to pass and the consequences she faces. She describes the action of passing as "such a frightfully simple thing to do" (Larsen 18), her decision to pretend to belong to the white race to make her life easier was an easier choice to escape the reality of the black race. It was an easy choice as she lived with a white family and had a relatively light complexion, facilitating the process. However, she still lived in fear of being discovered, especially during her pregnancy, as she was terrified that her child would have a darker complexion, "almost died of fright's entire nine months prior Margery was born for fears that she may be dark" (26). The fear of legal consequences for passing emphasizes how systemic oppression is upheld through laws that perpetuate racial inequalities.

The concept of passing intersects significantly with the notion of social mobility. Due to structural inequalities that restrict opportunities for Black individuals, some are compelled to engage in passing as a means to access privileges, attain economic stability, and pursue a better life. Passing is an effort to evade the adverse repercussions of one's racial identity. In this practice, African Americans endeavor to present themselves as members of the dominant and typically superior racial group, often white, to secure social, economic, or legal advantages. This phenomenon underscores how systemic racism acts as a hindrance to upward mobility within the Black community. In a pivotal rooftop conversation between Clare and Irene at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, Clare remarks, "You know 'Rene, I've long wondered why more colored females, girls like you...oh, and many others never 'passed' over. It's a frighteningly simple thing to accomplish. If you're the sort, all it takes is a little gut" (16). Clare's recollection of the moment she realized she had no alternative but to "pass" serves as a stark reminder of one of the prevailing biases that African Americans encountered during the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. During this period, African Americans were often regarded as the "White Man's Burden."

Additionally, Irene and Bellew's "unorthodox partnership", as noted by Brody, serves as a compelling factor in challenging Irene's steadfast belief in the essence of black identity (405). However, it is essential to acknowledge substantial differences between Irene and Bellew's perspectives. During a heated

conversation at a tea party, Bellew characterizes African Americans as sinister, remarking, "They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (Larsen 30).

Marriage is a structural institution that intersects with identity and class. Passing dedicates significant attention to the matrimonial dynamics within the households of both the Redfield and Bellew families. For characters like Irene, Clare, and their peers, including Gertrude, Hugh, and even minor figures like Felise, marriage initially appears to offer a sense of security and companionship. Clare's marriage to a white man affords her a certain social standing she wouldn't achieve if her racial background were known. However, Clare and John Bellew's marriage reaches a critical juncture due to a wholly distinct factor: Clare's concealed racial identity. This highlights how structural factors like marriage can impact an individual's perceived racial identity. Irene articulates her concerns regarding the potential consequences should Jack become aware of Clare's racial identity: "What if Bellew should divorce Clare?" Could he do it? An example of this would be the Rhinelander case. Larsen might suggest that her readers were already acquainted with this case due to its recent extensive media coverage in the news (qtd. in Madigan 388). However, as the narrative by Larsen unfolds, the apparent stability promised by marriage becomes increasingly problematic. Irene's marriage is strained by the potential of an affair between Clare and Brian, as well as Brian's persistent dissatisfaction.

The novel delves into how public and private spaces intersect with identity. Clare Kendry's entire adult life revolves around the practice of deceit. She has skillfully deceived both her white associates and her prejudiced white husband, John Bellew, concealing her true racial background. Her act of passing signifies her desire to gain access to white spaces and lay claim to the privileges inherently associated with them. This underscores how structural divisions shape the boundaries of where individuals can comfortably and authoritatively navigate their existence. It explores as Bernard mentions the intricate connection between social responsibility and individual freedom, delving into the evolving interpretations of constructs such as race and gender, while also examining the enduring interplay between whiteness and black identity (407).

The dynamics of friendship and rivalry between Irene and Clare are subject to the influence of societal norms and expectations, particularly those governing how women should interact. Structural norms dictate how women should interact, and these norms are complicated by racial dynamics. The novel presents a multifaceted and, at times, problematic concept of friendship. On occasion, the friendship between Clare and Irene appears notably unbalanced, as Clare consistently and enthusiastically reaches out, while Irene, conversely, decides to maintain a certain emotional distance. Nevertheless, there are indications of a sincere connection between these two women. Irene, for instance, genuinely worries about the consequences of Clare's decision to pass as white and gradually develops an appreciation for Clare's grace and social charm. With time, this appreciation could have evolved into a deeper sense of fellowship.

It is conceivable that Irene, who is deeply committed to justice for Black Americans and racial loyalty, also views this preference through a political lens. However, it's worth noting that Irene herself can pass as white, an experience that grants her a somewhat less nuanced understanding of the complexities of skin color compared to Brian and Junior.

When Irene expresses her anger to Brian over Bellew's use of a racial slur as a nickname for Clare, Brian points out that Bellew did not actually use that name to refer to her. While Irene asserts that hearing the word was as distressing as being called it, Brian clearly disagrees. Brian and Junior have both been the targets of racial slurs, which has afforded them a deeper comprehension of racism than Irene possesses.

Larson effectively illustrates Irene's strong preoccupation with beauty, evident early in the narrative during Irene's visit to Chicago. After witnessing a man who either faints or succumbs to heatstroke and nearly experiencing the same herself due to the scorching weather, Irene immediately endeavors to fix her appearance as soon as she escapes the heat. Paradoxically, this underscores the remarkably high priority Irene places on her physical appearance. She seems more concerned with her own looks than the well-being of the man she witnessed fainting and even describes feeling broken when her appearance isn't at its best.

Despite Irene's stated preference for traits traditionally considered "Black," she idealizes Clare's more "white" beauty (Larsen 24). Irene consistently returns to Clare's physical attractiveness, openly admiring her light skin and blonde hair. Larsen skillfully conveys Irene's fixation on Clare's beauty not only through her explicit comments about Clare's allure but also by embedding these observations into the narrative itself. Given that the narration closely aligns with Irene's perspective, the descriptions of Clare's "ivory" skin and blonde hair become integral to Irene's inner thoughts (29). Furthermore, Irene places particular emphasis on Clare's dark eyes, which she characterizes as "negro eyes." Irene frequently remarks on the captivating effect of Clare's dark eyes in combination with her fair complexion, asserting that this juxtaposition forms the essence of Clare's beauty. For instance, as Irene and Clare converse in the Drayton, Irene notes that Clare's eyes, paired with the rest of her light features, and that: “there was about them something exotic.” (29).

Clare's act of passing can be interpreted as a political commentary on the extreme measures some individuals were willing to undertake to escape the systemic oppression of racial discrimination. Her decision to pass raises complex questions about authenticity, identity, and the multifaceted nature of political resistance.

Conversely, Irene serves as an example of a character who engages in passing as white selectively, primarily when it serves her convenience. At the outset of the novel, she passes to gain entry to the white-only Drayton's hotel so she can enjoy a refreshing iced tea. While at Drayton's, Irene acknowledges that she only resorts to passing when she is by herself, and she associates the act of passing with a sense of isolation from the black community.

Irene and Clare's identities as black women are intricately shaped by the dualities they experience as a result of their racial ambiguity. This dual nature of identity significantly impacts not only how they interact with others but also their internal perception of self. Clare's ability to pass allows her to seamlessly navigate between different social spheres, yet it also fosters a sense of detachment from her racial heritage. In contrast, Irene grapples with the internal tensions arising from her identity as a Black woman and her longing for social acceptance within both Black and white communities. Larsen's narrative delves into a psychological examination of her protagonist, which in some ways resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. This heightened self-awareness prompts questions about one's 'identity' and a genuine return to one's true self. Consequently, it leads to a duplication of this self-consciousness within itself, giving rise to what could be described as the 'Unhappy consciousness.' (Hegel 126). The Unhappy consciousness evolves into a form of self-awareness characterized by the recognition of oneself as a dual-natured and inherently contradictory entity. This self-awareness results in a division of the self into two distinct aspects: the 'changeable' and the 'unchangeable,' which are fundamentally at odds with each other and appear foreign or estranged from each other (Hegel 126–27). A comparable notion of division within the same self-awareness is evident in Du Bois's theory. Du Bois specifically focuses on a racially defined form of 'identity' that experiences internal conflict. However, this internal conflict doesn't arise from the presence of other competing self-consciousness but rather from the act of acknowledging or accepting the Black self-consciousness as letting him see himself through the revelation of the other world.

The motherhood roles of these women are intertwined with their racial identities. Irene's concerns about her children's safety and prospects in a racially divided society emphasize the added layers of responsibility and anxiety experienced by Black mothers. She believes it is her parental duty to ensure her children's security and shield them from the racism present in the external world. In contrast, Brian holds a different perspective, disagreeing with Irene's inclination to protect their children from racism. He believes in preparing their children for a life in a country where they will inevitably encounter discrimination from both individuals and systemic structures.

4.1 Intersecting Identities and Psychological Conflict

In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, the psychological terrain is incredibly intricate in the development of dual identities, principally existing in a racially divided society. Clare’s passing, on the contrary, stirred profound inner conflicts that were a strong contribution to unfreezing her mental well-being and stability. This

psychological tension is reflected in her relationships and life choices as a disharmony between her outward identity and self within.

Marecek, a leading feminist psychologist, asserts that intersectionality is necessary to consider multiple and compounded effects of multiple identities, especially when traditional theories fail to notice how different pressures are acting on people with devalued identities. Her work underscores how intersecting social dimensions at the level of personal experience also combine to create specific psychological burdens that, in the mainstream discipline, tend to be overlooked due to epistemic exclusion (Settles et al. 302).

Collins also defines Intersectionality as a framework through which we can analyze how social identities such as race, gender, and class converge or overlap to create unique experiences that may significantly affect mental health, particularly among marginalized communities (Collins 18). This intersected complexity lies at the central point of Clare Kendry's life, wherein she steers between two contradictory identities: the real one where she is a black woman, and the identity she has assumed as a white woman.

Clare faces psychological pressure according to Collins, as she tries to keep her racial identity a secret conflicting with herself, a conflict that sets her real person against her assumed character. This stress relates to what Moravec points out that the act of passing involves not only physically crossing racial boundaries but also the psychological burden of maintaining that performance often leading to guilt, fear, and alienation (145). Such pressures, according to Collins, are multiplied by the conflict between societal norms and personal identity, pushing the conflict within Clare's soul to ever greater extremes as she tries to keep up a self-presentation that ensures social coherence and stability.

The marriage of Clare Kendry to John Bellew, a man who harbors racist ideas, shows a deep inner conflict and contradiction because it means she must hold onto her white identity to remain married to a man who makes her feel tremendously fragmented inside. According to Rogers, her marriage is an example of the inner battle Clare fights, where the pressure of her need for social guarantees contradicts the call for authenticity made upon her person. As he says she is, therefore, "psychologically divided and emotionally unstable" (87).

Collins provides an applicable interpretation juxtaposed through an intersectional framework; as much as Clare desires membership in the Black community, the societal pressures borne by having acquired a white identity are also thrust upon her. Opposing identities serve as a paradox to each other and highlight the contradiction in Clare's public and private selves, reflected in her very risky choices to attend Black gatherings in Harlem as an expression of a profoundly pressing psychological need to reconnect with her roots. In this respect, it substantiates Collins's point that failure to recognize these intersecting identities can bear truly profound psychological strain, demonstrated through Clare's ultimate breakdown in the novel as her intersecting identities bear in on her psychological collapse to an unbearable point.

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that Nella Larsen's *Passing* delves into the intricate treatment of women of color in which she lays bare how their very identities become marginalized across both a racial and gendered set of circumstances. For Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, the navigation of social structures of oppression tends to pretty much place them in a silent position within both antiracist and antirape discourses; these fail to engage with the intersections of race and gender specific to their ordeal. Such discourses do not come to terms with the distinct experiences of vulnerability that Black women confront, tending instead to overlook or simplify the particular challenges they in fact might be facing, thus sidelining their specific voices and experiences.

The intersectionality articulated in this novel discloses the precariousness of women of color by how their race, gender, and class interact and produce specific mixes of oppression and contradiction. Indeed, the experiences of Irene and Clare appear to manifest the presence of multi-faceted identities made real through continuous structures of overlapping discrimination concerning social status, relationships, and self-perception. It is this complex layering of vulnerability, most palpable in the psychological pressures of

passing for an individual wherein each woman must make very hard choices to survive within a racially stratified society, which will set up inner conflicts about authenticity and acceptance.

At the same time, the imagery and representation of Black women in *Passing* often overlook the fine shades of intersectionality. Social expectations and dominant portrayals place Black women in the rhetoric discourse as merely simplified, often contradictory characters, robbing them of the complexities presented by intersectionality. The novel by Larsen mentions analyzing the life of a woman of color through these two principles, race, and feminism, and brings out the insufficiency of such a vision. This is what is implied by *Passing*, that women of color are not just marginalized in such a worldview but are also made responsible for bearing its weight in ways that most mainstream narratives overlook or oversimplify

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