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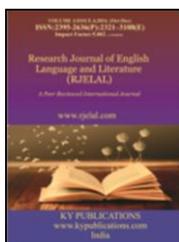
QUEST FOR INTEGRATED IDENTITY IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

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ABSTRACT

Race is assigned to a person based on his looks and skin tone. The society strongly believes in the blood of an individual to fix the identity. All over the world an individual's identity has been fixed pertaining to their blood proportion. Paradoxically the identity of these biracials has been dictated by the legal system during the Harlem Renaissance which became the law of 'One-Drop Rule.'

Nella Larsen's *Passing* has two African-American women Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry respectively, are in search of an integrated identity. Clare a light skinned woman who passes as white, by marrying a white bigot John Bellew. Irene Redfield a mixed-race woman who passes as white occasionally and lives in Harlem with her black husband Dr. Brian Redfield and two children. Despite this racial divide, both Clare and Irene desire to achieve an integrated identity to live as both black and white. Unfortunately, both are unsuccessful in achieving the integration of black and white identities.

Larsen's *Passing* enforces the societal belief that suppresses interracial communion. Therefore, the women become stuck in between these two races forcing them to achieve racial performances of deception due to their confusion on how to achieve an integrated identity that fuses both races equally and with acceptance from society; as a result, when their double consciousness surfaces, they modify their behaviors according to whom they are around. Despite their failure at achieving an integrated identity, their desire for one challenges this racial passing even though the novel reinforces status quo of being only black or white, but not both.

**Key Words:** Harlem Renaissance, Blood Proportion, One-Drop Rule, Interracial, Integrated Identity

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Nella Larsen was born in the year 1891, to a white Danish mother Mary Hanson, and Danish West Indies father Peter Walker, who died when she was very young. Her mother remarried a white Danish immigrant named Peter Larson, who later changed his spelling as Peter Larsen. Before she ascertains herself as 'Nella Larsen,' she changed her

name several times as: 'Nellie Walker,' 'Nellie Larson,' and 'Nellye Larson.' The frequent change of her name signifies her thoughts and experience of consequent dislocations and mixed race identity. She was graduated from Lincoln School in the year 1915 and joined as the head nurse at the Tuskegee Institute Training School for Nurses in Alabama. The

life in Tuskegee was not suited for her sensitivity. She returned to New York and was appointed as a district nurse in the New York Department of Health in 1918.

Larsen married Dr. Elmer Imes on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1919 and lived in New York. Her marriage with him made her also to enter into the privileged African American society. In the year 1921, Larsen resigned her job in the New York City Department of Health, and started her work at the One thirty-fifth of people Street Branch of the New York Public Library, where the Schomburg Collection of Materials on Black Culture was started. Her colleague and supervisors encouraged her to do a certificate course in library science later she became a certified librarian.

Larsen met renowned novelists like Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Carl Van Vechten and Dorothy Peterson etc, when she was working as a librarian. She made use of the books in the library to a great extent. In 1926, under the pseudonym Allen Semi, she had published two short stories, 'The Wrong Man' and 'Freedom,' in the *Young Magazine*. She was acknowledged as a writer only after the publication of her first novel *Quicksand* (1928). She was praised and awarded with Bronze Medal from the Harmon Foundation in 1928. Through her second novel, *Passing* (1929), she gained a better place among the African American writers. She was the first African American woman writer to receive the Guggenheim award for creative writing.

Nella Larsen's second novel *Passing* has two African-American women protagonists -Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry respectively, are in search of an integrated identity. Though these childhood friends are light skinned, they can easily pass as white. Clare marries a white bigot John Bellew and blends into the white society. She blanches her lifestyle by dressing herself as white woman and goes to the degree of resisting and refusing the black culture. Irene Redfield, on the other hand, passes as white occasionally and lives in Harlem with her black husband Dr. Brian Redfield and two children – Brian Junior and Theodore. She actively takes part in the black community, Negro Welfare League (NWL). She occasionally wears the white mask and holds white ideology for her own

convenience. Despite this racial segregation, both Clare and Irene want to achieve an integrated identity to live as both black and white. Clare attempts to achieve the integrated identity by moving back to the black culture and community. Irene, on the other hand, attempts to accomplish this integrated identity by accepting and practicing white standards while living as a black woman. Eventually, they both fail to achieve this integrated identity as the novel reinforces the societal standard that a person can only have one race i.e., either black or white, but not both.

Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry aspire to have different forms of an integrated identity. Clare wants to return to her black culture, while Irene wants to accept the white's lifestyle. Though Clare passed as white, still her sense longs for her black culture. On the other hand, Irene lives loyal to her black race, even as a live member of the Negro Welfare League, but still her inner conscious approves the white's mannerism even when she is not passing as white. Therefore, both Clare and Irene's double consciousness forces them to reach an integrated identity. Through this novel Nella Larsen strongly articulates an integrated identity is plainly impossible. Passing is not just imitating the behaviors, mannerism, and gestures of another race it also includes discarding the former race to which one belongs to. It is easy to emulate but difficult to get rid of one's real race, here neither Irene nor Clare want to do that. They try to avoid being placed on either side of the race but unfortunately, the society constructs race to be divided into two adverse and antagonistic identities of black and white.

Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield transfer both racially and culturally between the two opposite races, but only the failure of an integrated identity is seen. Unfortunately, both fail to combine black and white identities in the novel.

Race depends on an individual's appearance and skin colour. If a person looks white, he is categorized among the whites and if a person's skin colour is black, then he is considered as black. Therefore, people are assigned to a particular race based on their colour and performance. Irene and Clare have performed different aspects of each race

through a performative reiteration, which tells that race not just operate based on looks, but in addition to that behavior, gestures and mannerisms also plays important role. Using skin tone to assess race ultimately clashes as people racially pass for another race. Society is unaware of their true identity, and therefore they are branded as whites based on their skin colour. But when the society learns their true identity that they possess black blood in them, then they would be clearly assigned as black. The society strongly believes in the blood of an individual to fix the identity. The blood proportion has been the markers to fix their identity which reveals the biased inhuman laws that prevailed during the 1840s and until the rebellious Civil Rights Movement. The mixed-race people formed exclusive groups that are termed as –

S. No.	Blood Proportion		Identity Terminology
	White	Black	
1.	50%	50%	Mulatto
2.	3/4	1/4	Quadroon or Quarteron
3.	1 - White	1 - Quadroon	Octoroon or Metif
4.	15/16	1/16	Quintroon Meamelouc, Mamelouque, Sextaroon or Hexadecaroon
5.	31/32	1/32	Demi-meamelouc
6.	63/64	1/64	Sangmelee
7.	1/4	3/4	Griffe
8.	3/8	5/8	Marabou
9.	1/8	7/8	Sacatra

From time immemorial, all over the world, an individual's identity is fixed depending on their ancestral origin (blood proportion). Paradoxically the identity of these biracials has been dictated by the legal system during the Harlem Renaissance which became the law of 'One-Drop Rule.' The one-drop rule is a sociological and legal principle of racial classification that was important in the United States asserting that any person with even one ancestor of sub-Saharan-African ancestry ('one-drop' of black blood) is considered to be black (*Negro* in historical terms). This concept evolved over the course of the nineteenth century and became codified into law in the twentieth century. It was associated with the principle of

'invisible blackness' and is an example of hypo descent, that is children of a mixed union between different socio-economic or ethnic groups to the group with the lower status.

In the novel *Passing* Larsen suggests that race is not just apparent by the skin tone because both Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield racially execute the white mannerism despite they are black. But the eminent part is that their white performance in white background is great attempt to achieve an integrated identity, even though it is a failed attempt due to the society's rigid racial structure.

Clare Kendry wants to be a part of the black community again. Her mother possesses black skin and her father possesses white skin tone but she passed over to the white world to enjoy the white privileges. However, Clare embarks on a strong thirst to return to her birthright, her former race. Clare feels a sense of liberation when she is in the company of blacks which she unable to experience around white people. Unfortunately, she can't abandon her white identity, as she has passed and fixed as white, at the same time she desires to restore herself as black, therefore the only way is to attempt to achieve an integral identity.

As Clare starts following the white life style, she simultaneously loses her African American identity. She desires to live both as white and black; however, integrated identity remained unachievable as the society follows a strict racial structure. In this society a person is not permitted to live both as black and white. An individual is allowed to either be black or white but not both. Clare gets struck in-between the races; therefore, she tries to blend both black and white identities by inviting her childhood friend Irene into her life as it's the only way for her to return back to her black community. Even though Clare longs to be among the black community again, she would still like to uphold her appearance as a white woman to enjoy the white privileges. She looks like a white woman and therefore she is granted certain rights and advantages that are provided to the white people. The rights enjoyed by Clare make her to maintain her white identity too.

Like Clare even Irene desires for an integrated identity. Irene wants to be with the sense of freedom from the suffocating restrictions of this racial structure. She likes to live as a black woman at the same time aspires to adopt the white lifestyle. She occasionally passes as white for her own convenience in order to receive the white privileges. For instance, as the day was so hot Irene decided to racially perform as white and entered the Drayton hotel where blacks are strictly abandon. Her racial paradox is exposed by Clare's daunting gaze. Her gaze unveils Irene's insecurities about her invisible blackness when she decides to temporarily pass. She tries to calm herself by telling herself that she couldn't possibly be detected but when she looks up again, Clare still bluntly gazing at her, dissecting her physical traits, and trying to interpret her race. Irene fears that this woman in front of her is detecting her true race, it never occurs to Irene if this woman is passing herself. This suggests that not only race socially constructed at be divided between black and white but is also determined on skin colour. Irene's attempt to temporarily pass and fear of detection symbolizes her failure of an integrated identity and the setting at the Drayton hotel displays society's rejection of an assimilated identity as well of a black woman living with a white lifestyle.

Though Irene is black woman, she tries to identify herself with the white standards of life. She embraces the white behavior even among her black community, which clearly shows that Irene is trying to achieve an integral identity. For example, she sees the Negro Welfare League as a social event rather than a charity event. Clare talks and mingles with the cook to savour the black spirit; however, this to Irene is "an exasperating childlike lack of perception" because Irene believes one is not supposed to be friendly with the hired help (Larsen 144-145). Additionally, Irene even shelters her sons from race and avoids discussing racial terms and names. She states to her husband, "Just the same you're not to talk to them about the race problem. I won't have it" (Larsen 42). She thinks that discussing about the racial issues would ruin her sons' life and this shows her middle class attitude. Irene is more racial paradox in hopes of obtaining an integrated identity. Her stable African American household

with white upbringing represents the racial paradox that many face since they cannot achieve an integrated identity – attempting to fuse both races together with different practices from each race; however, this becomes a life of irony as one stays loyal to a race that constantly clashes with the other.

The racial structure followed by the society eliminates interracial union and considers it as shameful. Both Irene and Clare have both sides of their mixed identity come out through their own character by their personal performances integrating black and white mannerism. However, Larsen can't write against the societal ideology that forces Clare and Irene to choose a race to align to. Therefore, both these women desire to share portion from two clashing races that results in problems and hesitations of which race they will choose to align to because society forces them to choose only one to assimilate and claim. The pessimistic end of the novel is not Larsen's wish but the social pressures and the hegemonic view of the social beliefs are so strong that she couldn't end her novel on an optimistic note.

As the novel closes, Irene becomes increasingly annoyed that Clare was able to come close to achieving an integrated identity unlike her. It is because Irene's life was set in an orderly fashion and Clare was capable of heights and depths of feeling that Irene had never known. Irene was never able to experience the lifestyle Clare was exposed to nor was she close to experiencing almost accepted integrated identity that Clare was close to achieving.

Though Clare was closer to the integrated identity, she finally dies. Her death symbolizes the failure of an integrated identity; however, Irene's nervousness, fear, double consciousness etc., with the racial structure exhibit her own failure of an integrated identity. Double Consciousness, is this "twoness" that African Americans face as they approach the problem of the colour line. This cultural hegemony forces the blacks to muse whether to stay loyal to their black community or to imitate the whites. Clare and Irene lead double lives, double social classes, and double thoughts. Their desire for an integrated identity grows as Clare receives spiritual renewal from the presence of

blacks while Irene feels restricted due to her race's limited accessibility to society's advantages. Therefore, when they attempt to create an integrated identity, their double consciousness is constantly active, on that account they deal with both the races. The fact that they experience double consciousness and have to go through such measures signifies their own failure at being able to live with an integrated identity.

Irene's secret desire to pass and Clare's desire to return to her black race are different attempts from both women to achieve an integrated identity. Clare made the decision to pass for the attractiveness of the lifestyle while Irene superficially remains loyal to her black race but upholds white standards. The difference in their performances proves that these women fail to achieve an integrated identity. Larsen's novel enforces the societal belief that suppresses interracial communion. Therefore, the women become stuck in between these two races forcing them to achieve racial performances of deception due to their confusion on how to achieve an integrated identity that fuses both races equally and with acceptance from society; as a result, when their double consciousness surfaces, they modify their behaviors according to whom they are around. Despite their failure at achieving an integrated identity, their desire for one challenges this racial passing even though the novel reinforces status quo of being only black or white, but not both.

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