



Passing as a Means of Survivals in Nella Larsen's Passing

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Abstract

Passing is the strategies the biracial people use to pass, cover, and conceal the origins of their racial ancestries. It is thus used as a mean to avoid the stigma associated with anti-black racial discrimination and social marginalization. Most notably, it is perceived as an undefined way of being, and it's neither a conscious decision nor an inborn truth of biology, but rather a culturally provided. The purpose of this study is to give some insights into how black community adapts passing into white society as a means of survival and to get rid of the inferiority and racial prejudice of the whites. The subject of passing will be explored in Nella Larsen's *Passing* in the light of monoculturalism theory. Larsen's novel has much to teach individuals today who are torn between a desire for essentialism and a desire for constructionism. It teaches them how adherence and commitment to one's culture and heritage can save and enable them to cope with racism and prejudice.

Keywords: Passing, Larsen, blackness, identity, race, monoculturalism.

العبور كوسيلة للنجاة في رواية نيلا لارسن العبور

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المخلص:

المروور هو الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الأشخاص ذوو العرقين لتمرير وتغطية وإخفاء أصول أسلافهم العرقية. وبالتالي يتم استخدامه كوسيلة لتجنب وصمة العار المرتبطة بالتمييز العنصري ضد السود والتهميش الاجتماعي. وعلى وجه الخصوص، يُنظر إليه على أنه طريقة غير محددة للوجود، وهو ليس قرارًا واعيًا ولا حقيقة فطرية في علم الأحياء، ولكنه بالأحرى مقدم ثقافيًا. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو إعطاء بعض الأفكار حول كيفية تكيف المجتمع الأسود مع انتقاله إلى المجتمع الأبيض في ضوء نظرية أحادية الثقافة. رواية لارسن لديها الكثير لتعليمه الأفراد اليوم ممزقين بين الرغبة في الجوهرية والرغبة في البناء. يعلمهم كيف يمكن للالتزام والالتزام بثقافة الفرد وتراثه أن ينقذ ويمكّنهم من التعامل مع العنصرية والتحيز في المجتمع الأبيض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اجتياز، لارسن، سواد، هوية، عرق، أحادية الثقافة.



Introduction

1.1 Introduction

1.1.2 Monoculturalism and its Origin: an Overview

Monoculturalism is a technique or practice that supports, advocates for, or permits the expressions of the cultures of a certain social or ethnic group. It stems from dominant group ideas that their cultures are superiors to those of minority groups, and is similar to the concept of racialism, which also entails judging another renewed focus from one's own criteria. It may also include an assimilation process in which other ethnic groups are pressured to embrace the dominant ethnic group's culture and habits (Oxford dictionary online).

In the case of cultural variety, monoculturalism is the complete antithesis of multiculturalism. Monoculturalism is the policy or method of promoting, pushing for, or enabling the manifestation of a single ethnic or racial group's culture. It may alternatively be characterized as the purposeful preserving of a country's native culture by the rejection of other influences, rather than the repression of diverse ethnic groups within a specific society. Monoculturalism of this sort may be seen in Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. Conversely, less purposeful variables such as physical isolation, based on racial uniqueness, or political isolation may also play a role. For example, several European countries, such as Italy, Portugal, Poland, and Northern European countries, remain virtually monocultural due to common ethnicity and culture, as well as low immigration rates (Jackson.203).

Several of the genocides committed throughout history were motivated by ethnic superiority. After some defining actions by an independent commission or one of the ethnic groups, one group within a culture acquires ethnic domination. With European intervention in

places like Rwanda, societies sought to deliberately construct racial inferiority, dividing Hutus from Tutsis and culminating with some of the most horrifying instances of atrocity in modern history (White.2009.471).

The continuing civil conflict in Burma is a similar example to the Rwandan genocide. The civil war started with the adoption of a government that awarded Burma independence from the British Empire, in which a small group of elites created conditions that disenfranchised most of Burma's ethnic minorities, motivating them to revolt. The new regime has relocated many of Burma's racial communities, particularly the Karen, and placed them in refugee camps in surrounding countries. The last ethnic group has been living in horrific conditions (Marsella.2005. 15).

Monoculturalism, the Civil Rights Movement, and revolutionary nationalism have been the three types of African American struggle. Although drawing limits between these three kinds is challenging in practice, they may be analytically separated and explained. The African American movement aimed to reclaim a cultural identity for Black people that had been warped by racial tyranny, to free Black people from the racial system, and bring about a profound social reform in the Black community. To preserve racial border mechanisms, White civilization pushed monoculturalism integration on African Americans while denying them primary and secondary structural assimilation. In response to racist speech and White cultural hegemony, Black cultural nationalism arose. Initially, black people attempted to maintain monoculturalism in order to save their lives and survive. According to Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick (1970), in the era "From around 1880 to 1930, a distinct cultural nationalism blossomed. It was most visible in a growing self-awareness of the race's history and efforts to promote distinctly black literature" (1970. 299). The concepts of ethnonational self-help, collaboration, ethnic heritage



and pride, militancy, and desire to fight for constitutional rights were championed by the "New Negro" movement (Meier & Rudwick, 1985, p. xix).

1.1.3. Nella Larsen

Nellallitea "Nella" Larsen was a writer from the United States. She worked in a nursing home and archivist while producing two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and a few stories. Notwithstanding her small literary output, she was well-liked by her peers. There has been a renaissance of popularity in her writing since the late 20th century when topics of racial and sexual status have even been explored. Her works have always been the focus of many scientific papers, and she is now widely considered "not just the main writer of the Harlem Renaissance, but it's a prominent voice in American modernism." (Bone.2011.658)

Nella Larsen was a celebrated author who published novels during the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen is best known for her two stories, *Passing* and *Quicksand*, both of which gained critical praise and high ratings. She was widely regarded as a rising African American author until she abruptly abandoned Harlem, her reputation, and her work. Larsen is frequently compared to other writers who have written on ethnic conflicts, such as Claude McKay and Jean Toomer. She became embroiled in Harlem's multicultural literary-critical culture after meeting Carl Van Vechten, a white filmmaker, and writer. Larsen's autobiography, *Quicksand*, was released in 1928. It gained widespread critical praise but failed to reach commercial success (Wall.1986.97).

Nella Larsen's drawings are considered striking pieces that properly reflect mixed-race people and the difficulties in identifying that they would face. Critics say that Larsen's works did not correctly depict the "New Negro" phenomenon that her central protagonist was

confused and battled with their race. They believe her work was only a real and important picture of where and how life was for many residents, particularly women, as during Harlem Renaissance.

Larsen's multiracial roots and the abundance of ethnic passing in the twentieth century had inspired her exploration of race. The novel was lauded at its first release, but it has since been acknowledged in current scholarship for its complex depiction of race, gender, and sexuality, and will be the subject of much scholarly criticism. As one of Larsen's only two novels, it was instrumental in propelling its author to such forefront of several literary canons. Larsen mentions the issue after the story as Irene worries about what would happen if Jack discovers Clare's ethnic status: "What if Bellew should divorce Clare?" Could he do it? There would be the Rhinelander case, for example. Larsen may infer that the readers were aware of the case because it received heavy publicity in the news a few days ago (qtd. in Madigan .1990.388).

1.2 Monoculturalism and Passing Strategy in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Passing was written in the United States in 1929. The story is largely established in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in the 1920s, and it centers on the meeting of two friends, Claire Kendry and Irene Redfield, and their developing interest in each other's lives. The title relates to the novel's core topic of "race passing." Clare Kendry's try to enforce themselves as white for her husband, John (Jack) Bellew, is a significant episode in the novel that analyzes the disaster. The narrative is told in the third person by Irene Redfield, a black lady with a European or near-European appearance who resides in New York City's Harlem section (Kaplan, 2007, xvi).



Generally speaking, Passing strategy is a key event in the history of race in America, and it's been studied by numerous racial theorists. It is a conundrum for hard determinism since it looks to involve a person really belonging to one race despite incorrectly being considered to belong to another. Even though conflict theorists of race strive to identify what race is, they should perhaps aid in our understanding of passing. Passing occurs whenever a representative of one locally constrained group sees (and permits herself to be perceived as) a member of this other similarly narrow group, or by a white person passing as black or a black person passing as white. Thus, according to Walter Benn Michaels (1994), ethnicity estimates cannot account for passage through the institution. But at first glance, the term of the novella, "Passing," may appear to the visitor to have a variety of interpretations. The transition from "life" to "death" is also referred to as passing. Although the phrase "passing" refers to a transformation, it also suggests disguising oneself or assuming a different identity (Piper.1992.56).

Identification must submit to some type of essentialism, which begins by denying any task other than describing the ideas people hold and the activities they engage in." Passing is an important case study, according to Michaels, so even though "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.1994, 768)

To pass denotes a deliberate decision to cross a border. While there are no overt references to race or sexuality in the term, it does allude to camouflage, decrepitude, and change. This passing, or changing, is a comparable process to the one described by Donald Hall when readers engage in a careful procedure of Queer Theory. This era of transition is quite likely what Nella Larsen is alluding to in the title of her novella *Passing*. Webster defines

transfer as "the movement or passing from one state, action, or location to another, and...The passage from an earlier to a later stage of growth or creation." (Ibid)

Cherrie Sherrard-Johnson, a female and African American professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, claims that Irene, as a mulatta, may both pass and rightfully represent the race as a genuine race woman. The mulatta served as a visual epistemic theme for race's complexities. The *muletas*, a Female to Johnson and afterward Larsen, depict the difficult situation posed in American identity as an outcome of America's attempt to quantify race and impose limits and benefits racism. The conundrum originates from the mistaken belief that race is a biologically determined characteristic: race was illustrated by skin color.

Clare uses passing as a means of social advancement. Clare "passes" easily for three reasons: her pale skin, demeanor, and absence of relatives. The fact that she is officially an orphan, having been abandoned by some faraway white relatives who see her as a labor source but rather a person to protect, allows her to pass simply and without description:

"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 1929.17)

Clare tells Irene on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago: "You know 'Rene, I've long wondered why more colored females, girls like you...oh, and many of 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 recalls the moment she realized she has no option but to "pass." Her selection highlights one of the prejudices that African Americans faced throughout the post-civil war reconstruction period. African Americans were frequently seen as the "White Man's Burden."



Furthermore, Irene and Bellew's "unorthodox partnership" (Brody.2007.405) is a significant motivator for believing that *Passing* is refusing Irene's conviction in a blackness air, a blackness air. Nonetheless, there are significant disparities between Irene and Bellew's points of view. During his tea party rant, Bellew refers to blacks as malevolent. "They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (Larsen, 1929, 30).

Passing seeks to demonstrate how Irene is incorrect on the topics she believes she is so knowledgeable about. As a result, the reader is cautioned from accepting Irene's viewpoint on race as the novella's reasoned viewpoint. At least, that's how the debate goes (McIntire.2012.784). Irene gets inquisitive about just the passing lifestyle during a talk with Clare, but she is unsure how to bring it up. Clare, "conscious of her longing," broaches the issue. Clare describes passing as "such a frightfully simple thing to do" (Larsen.1929.18), which may appear at odds with my interpretation of Clare's fear of black maids. So, what explains Clare's aversion of black maids? Clare does not want a "recap of the cruelty of the discriminatory labor divide," according to Dawahare (Ibid. 34). Clare's rejection of black servants due to fear of being discovered is compatible with passing being simple. A white person, as she is considered to be in her white environment, has the luxury of ensuring that the "scrimy demons" are not there when she does not want each other to be. Although Clare claims that passing is so simple, it soon becomes evident that she is exaggerating: Clare "almost died of fright's entire nine months prior Margery was born for fears that she may be dark" (Ibid.26).

1.2.1 Monoculturalism in *Passing*

Although *Passing* is a work of fiction, it is founded on Nella Larsen's real-life experiences. To deny the movie's many levels of themes by simply defining it as a novel about something like a black lady passing for white is to disregard the story's many kinds of themes.

Passing is a novel more about monocultural revolutions that happened in American culture after World War I. It is about rethinking concepts such as race and gender, as well as the intertwined relationship between whiteness and blackness. It ponders the confusing link between societal obligation and personal liberty. It is about changing perceptions of concepts like race and gender, as well as the unbreakable relationship between whites and blackness (Bernard.2005.407).

As a monoculturalism notion, it is a study of the unsettling relationship between social responsibilities and individuals liberty. It depicts the difficulty of identity in a culture where nuance and confusion are regarded as lethal risks to the social order. The narrative is a satire of materialism and monoculture, and even the dangers they pose to enhanced protection. It highlights the power of desire to mold and unhinges us, and also the lengths we will go to obtain what we seek. *Passing* implies hypocrisy, fear, concealment, and betrayal. It's a universal story about the complexities of being human, as shown by the explosive relationship between different black women, Clare Kendry but also Irene Redfield (Ibid.408).

Irene and Clare hadn't seen this other in twelve years till they ran into each other on the top of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, which both ladies were enjoying a respite from the sweltering heat of August. The Drayton is an expensive hotel that doesn't even welcome African Americans, or Negroes, in the parlance of the day, and so it is connected with monoculturalism. On the key day of their encounter, both females are identified for white. Clare's unwavering look is a result of her fear of being exposed for who she is and of the disgrace that would ensue from being evicted from the hotel.

Passing reveals race to really be, at least, a consequence of performing (the novel is divided into three sections Encounter, Re-Encounter, and Finale similarly to acts of a theatrical



work), and blackness to have been a subjective topic. Clare appears to be the more truly white of the two females, and Irene not just to refuse to acknowledge Clare as a Negro, but also completely ignores her family friend. Even when Clare introduces herself to Irene, she and her dark are not known. Irene probes her memory once Clare relates to herself by her nickname: "What white ladies had she encountered anyway to be referred to as 'Rene by them?'" (Larsen .1929.21).

Clare's assertions about blackness are questionable, according to genealogical criteria. Her granddad was Caucasian. Her father was the result of her grandfather's disgraceful affair with a black lady. There was also money or something along that road, but her grandfather had spent it. Clare's mother is not mentioned in the story. She is always insistent on this notion, and when she says she is the outcome of a poor secret connection with a black woman, she is a member of monoculturalism. Clare was also forbidden from still discussing black people with her neighbors, let alone talking about the South Side of Chicago, where Irene and her friends lived. Clare enjoyed being able to do that with her unhappy past, which was deprived her between both love and money (Carter.2005.227).

Every passing tale is about status any more than it is about race. One never moves down the social staircase; black characters become, or present as, white to improve their possible factors or gain life chances for private, social, and respect and admire in general, and reject the concept of multiculturalism due to monoculturalism prejudice. Individual satisfaction is always deemed to be preferable to the growth of the species as a whole; in most *passing* stories, monetary ambition and spiritual destruction are intimately associated. (Ibid)

Particular comfort above racial development is invariably represented as immoral; in most passing episodes, material ambition and moral destruction are intimately associated. It is

too late for some passing people to understand the profoundly inferior consequences of their decisions to engage in racial masquerade, which is a truly monocultural trait. The main heroine in the film *Imitation of Life* only comes to her senses after discovering that her decision to pass has physically murdered her mother. Denial of the black mother is frequently the clearest indicator of the poor character of people who choose to pass. In Langston Hughes's short tale "Passing," the narrator finds a great job as a white guy, but his profitability demands him to disregard his mother as they walk down the street. "That's the type of stuff that makes passing difficult," the narrator writes to his mother, "having to reject your relatives when you meet them." (Foley, 2003)

1.3 Conclusion

In Nella Larsen's novella *Passing*, two female Mulatto protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry-Bellew, have adapted passing or a transition into the white society as a strategy of survival and escaping the racial inferiority that is imposed on them due to their black color. This study has relied on the notion of monoculturalism, which is defined as the policy or method of promoting, arguing for, or enabling the display of a single based on ethnic group's culture in a given location. Larsen argues that it is necessary to widen their understanding of the term "passing." She tries to manipulate these people to live in local bounds that contradict their notions of the Northern liberal and the Southern racist by adhering to their African culture and roots.



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