

## The Disappearance of Black Identity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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### Abstract

The practice of racism has always left negative impacts on the colored and black people in white societies leading them either to self-loathe or detesting the white culture. This study is an attempt to explore the melting of Irene's and Clare's black identities in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and how they deconstruct them. They experience the awful impacts of rejection in the white society as black women; therefore, they fail to achieve what they aspire in the dominant culture. Both are terribly in need of white recognition in the white society, which does not recognize them unless they obtain the standards set up by the white dominant culture. Irene cannot find security and pleasure in the black community; therefore she feels comfortable and insists on living in New York, furthermore Clare concludes that she cannot escape her arduous life as a black servant who is expected to work hard. As a result she disguises herself as a white woman. Striving to embrace the white culture, they consider "passing for white" and refusing their black heritage. The dominant culture causes the black characters of both novels to suffer and struggle to identify themselves. The black community in the novel is in a terrible situation, and the black characters are expected to act and work in favor of the interests of the white society, which looks at the black characters as secondary people. I argue that Irene and Clare lose their identities as black women in the novel and take on white identity, although Clare does not feel comfortable in the white society.

**Keywords:** *Nella Larsen, "Passing", Racial Disappearance.*

### 1. The Study Background

Colour line played a pivotal role in determining racial identity in the beginning of the twentieth century, when society was concerned with biology rather than social history and culture. This idea was put forward during the Harlem Renaissance movement, which was a blossoming Frican-American cultural movement in 1920s. Accordingly, a person's appearance, for example skin colour, would determine their racial identity. The Supreme Court stated in its

verdict in *1896 Plessy v. Ferguson* that someone holding one-eighth Negro heritage would be officially categorized as Negro. The verdict was hinged on “a commitment to the biology of race” (Benn Michaels, 130). The essentialist judgment which shrank race to only a drop of blood meaninglessly enlarged this drop to specify the chief “essential” border between races, particularly between Whites and Blacks. To express it simply, depending on the Supreme Court verdict, the all-white judges made the colour line essential as the races were measured innately dissimilar from one another. According to N. Chabani Manganyi, the body occupies an essential position in being since he presumes that people make approaches to life via their superficial being. In this respect, he claims, “[t]he body is a movement inwards and outwards” (6). To put it in different words, the body plays an essential role in human beings’ lives, selecting their life styles.

In the white society, prosperity belongs to the white people, and the blacks are left with no room for development neither for enjoyment; for that reason, the blacks attempt to embrace the white world. Leading life with objects, one depicts black identity as wishing to become white (Manganyi, 31). Existing in a world split between black and white individuals preserves the desire. Consequently, black individuals internalizing white principles possibly imitate whites through having aspirations for material belongings, while what is different for them lies in the fact that they are principally deprived of the financial means of making such ambitions come true. Black individuals judge themselves in accordance with the things they own. This act demonstrates Manganyi’s fascination in the examination of “false consciousness”, a state whereby black individuals take on a white identity and therefore become estranged from the self as well as their own group. The absorption of white society renders a fake identity to the black person, who is compelled to replace their African society with a white culture (Manganyi, 35). Additionally, the replacement is asymmetrical because it fails to produce what it pledges. While embracing the white society, the black individual is duped by the culture which imposes a lower status upon them.

Barbara Burlison Mooney investigates the thought that the African-Americans’ post-Civil War, which broke out from 1861 to 1865, and pre-Civil Rights movement obliged them to abide by a white prevailing society’s outlook. Mooney argues that the African-Americans were under pressure to do their best to be neat and tidy so that the white culture could offer them preference.

The nasty reality is that a lot of white individuals have thought and maintain to think that black people to some extent hold deficiency in living in a clean way, metaphorically or literally (48). The African-Americans took on a strategy of accurate cleanness so as to oppose this terrible misperception. Mooney claims that “orderly, enlightened, domestic environment” helps the African American deserve recognition and freedom in American social cultures’ “churches, and politics” (Mooney, 49). Accordingly, the black people should attempt to prove that it is only misunderstanding by sticking to neatness. Following that strategy, the black people probably approach a sort of fair treatment.

Considerably, however, Mooney proposes that apart from the principal society, the people from the African-American communities put pressure on African-Americans, for instance Mooney makes reference to W. E. B. Du Bois’ endeavour to inspire the architectural improvement of his race through two depictions, before and after what the wealthy and highly regarded black individuals’ dwelling might and has to be like. Mooney claims that Du Bois contradicts the picture of a dilapidated hut entitled “The Old Cabin with a picture of the mansion of J. W. Sanford in Memphis, Tennessee” (57). The point is possibly apparent that prosperity may be reached through the acceptance of the architectural iconography of the white society.

It is not only completely black people who are deemed as black identity holders but also biracial ones are considered so. When it comes to biracial people, they have always been considered as black identity holders. Likewise, Davis explains that biracial individuals have been presumed to take up a black identity. This supposition was grounded at the time of slavery when raping black female slaves was widespread; moreover their biracial children increased the affluence of the slave’s parent or master (qtd. in Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 337). The mere identity ‘choice’ for biracial individuals was the singular black identity. This social norm was so intensely rooted that it was not even imagined as a choice, and no one would have thought of another racial identity (Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 337). Likewise, Maria Root labels the singular black ‘choice’ as biracial, someone’s approval of the identity which society decides upon (qtd. in Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 337). Despite the fact that the closeness rate of their skin colour to blackness is possibly equal to its closeness to whiteness, there is no choice for the biracial people but black identity.

The concept of passing is fundamentally associated with identity politics and examines identity ontology. According to Gayle Wald, several reviewers assert that passing deconstructs identity whereas others state that it underlines the simultaneous unsteadiness as well as instrumentality of identity types (52). Their readings are undoubtedly established on their description of identity itself. The practice of passing leads the passer's original identity to decline and makes them appear in another identity which is not constructed in accordance with their racial background.

Traditional understandings of racial passing, which is dependent upon the modernist concept of unchanging and stable identity, emphasize that passing is to fake one's genuine identity. According to Samira Kawash, the interpretations explain that passing has things to do just with appearance and that the authentic identities underlying the misleading appearance stay intact (126). Likewise, Carl Van Thompson points out that passers endeavour to render their blackness unseen through mimicking "white mannerisms" constantly (15-16). In accordance with his views, those "impostors," putting on "the mask of whiteness," are "self-exiled within whiteness", furthermore they assent to an "unstable identity" (16). He adds that passing eventually leads to self-obliteration (18). Likewise, Jacquelyn McLendon proposes that the act of passing is possibly deemed as a type of "pretense or disguise" leading to identity disappearance and submission. Passing provides the passer with impermanence, anxiety and loss of place within a cultural and racial society (96-98). Accordingly, the passer loses his or her original identity and the self.

This traditional interpretation of passing depends on the modernist notion of identity or as Walter Benn Michaels labels it, "identity essentialism". Benn Michaels puts forward that cultural pluralists stick to identity superiority since in accordance with them, "instead of who we are being constituted by what we do, what we do is justified by who we are" (140). Modernism, which is in theory reliant on cultural pluralism, turns identity into "an object of *cathexis*" and into something which may be found or lost, protected or given up by "*deriving* one's beliefs and practices *from* one's cultural identity instead of *equating* one's beliefs and practices *with* one's cultural identity" (Benn Michaels, 141). The advocates of cultural pluralism assume inconsistency between the passer's authentic racial identity as well as their new supposed one. Therefore, Kathleen Pfeiffer believes that a lot of passing stories stress "the experience of

disconnect” between a character’s internal identity, usually black, as well as his or her external one, apparently white (3). Doing so, a great number of black authors unavoidably associate themselves with Harlem essentialism, propelled by the devotion to the cultural modernist pluralist concept of identity.

Thadious M. Davis claims that in *Passing*, Larsen, who backs an individual identity rather than the “general objective of the New Negro Renaissance,” which is “the forging of racial identity”, disassociates herself with the principles of the Renaissance by her handling of the notion of identity as well as passing (242). Both Harlem Renaissance essentialism and white racial essentialism align a personal identity with the entire race or culture. However, this interpretation is deficient in considering personal identity features. Passing produces individuation because it presents the individual with an opportunity to identify himself or herself independently and refutes the imposed and inborn features. Pfeiffer maintains that the passer is able to blatantly sense “the urgings of self-reliant individualism” to dispose of a historically identified identity and to gain “a freer and fuller expression of selfhood” (6). Yet, passing for white is an effort caused by racial degradation of the blacks in the United States society. It is the outcome of some sort of an inferiority complex.

## **2. The Loss of the Self in *Passing***

The 1920s in the United States was an era identified by extensive apprehension as well as argument over exceeding racial restrictions, what is called "color line" between black and white people, intensified by the Great Migration, according to which hundreds of thousands of black individuals moved from the rural south to northern and midwestern cities. The people’s practice of exceeding the color line and endeavouring to claim recognition in another racial group dissimilar from their own one was identified as passing. Nella Larsen published her work in 1929 and reflected on the issue through her characters, Irene and Clare.

The disappearance of the self and attempting to look as someone else is a transparent issue in the novel. I argue that both Irene’s and Clare’s selves get lost, and they make attempts to escape from their natural existence as African-Americans. They no longer remain within the frame of blackness. Correspondingly, Sullivan claims that the word "passing" undoubtedly touches on the colour line crossing which was formerly very common in American stories of

"race"; however, in Larsen's work the word colloquially has the meaning of death as well. Accordingly, the novel's title alludes to the subject's fading in the story, or the likelihood of aphorisis, which is labeled as the loss of the subject behind the signifier in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* by Jacques Lacan. For Irene Westover and Clare, the two protagonists of the novel, the destroying signifier is nigger, a word coming to express their fight with the conflict of American racism as well as absorption (Sullivan, 1998, p. 373).

In *Passing*, the white culture affects Irene's and Clare's desires in a way that it obliges them to construct their desires in accordance with the ones of white society; therefore, they make efforts to act and behave like two other women who are not themselves. According to Sullivan, Irene and Clare are "tyrannized by the Other's desire"; furthermore, despite the fact that sexuality and gender complicate their connection, "the dynamics of white racism and the demands of assimilation" determine the two women's lives. Eventually, their lives are identified in the word Negro by "White racism"; moreover, that description decides upon the restrictions of their lives (1998, p. 374). What Sullivan tries to say is that the two female characters' wishes and aspirations are not their own but rather the production of the dominant white culture.

I assume that the key problem in the two characters' lives is their being acknowledged by the white society. They are terribly in need of recognition because they always feel rejected in the dominant culture. There is a clear connection between recognition and the Other's inscrutable desire, since as Jacques Lacan claims, "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (1978, p. 38). Accordingly, one's desires should not go out of the Other's circle of desires in order to be recognized. In *Passing*, Irene charges Clare, who is "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting", of a "deliberate courting of attention" (Larsen, 1929, p. 135), whereas she herself takes an excessive amount of time putting on clothes throughout the text. Both do so for the purpose of being recognized. In conversations, the "subject" has to find out the wish of the "Other" (Sullivan, 1998, 375). Similarly, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan claims that the "subject" implicitly asks the "Other", "What am I to/of you?" (1986, p. 48). According to Sullivan's and Ragland-Sullivan's ideas, the subject should learn the desires of the "Other" and longs to know the viewpoint of the "Other"; thus, Irene as the subject aspires to realize how Clare as the "Other" looks at her.

Whiteness and affluence are the preconditions for someone to be recognized in the bourgeois environment of *Passing*. Irene crosses the racial line by taking on white values,

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including white principles of beauty whereas Clare does so by superficially embracing a white identity void of white values (Sullivan, 1998, p. 374). Depending on that analysis, Irene abandons the black values and background while Clare only takes advantage of white identity and does not dispose of black values. I believe that Irene intends to be close to Clare so that she can bridge Irene and white culture. Correspondingly, Thadious M. Davis considers Irene's "attraction to Clare" as an "aesthetic attraction to whiteness," a "logical extension of her black bourgeoisie life- style and ideology" (1994, p. 326). Though Clare proclaims that Irene is her connection to blackness, Irene brings about her longing for whiteness through Clare. Having her "ivory face under that bright hair" (Larsen, 1929, p. 46) as well as her marriage to a white investor, Clare turns to be Irene's vicarious link to the white culture.

The story is told in the third person narrative, and in describing the narrative voice of the novel, Jacquelyn McLendon touches on the issue of "the disguised 'I'". Despite the fact that the narrator is the third person, the story is "personal" since it is entirely Irene's; furthermore, it could simply be narrated in the first person. The "disguised I," places emphasis on Irene's repression and strengthens the theme of "passing" as disguise in *Passing* (1991, p. 159). McLendon's understanding of the "disguised I" leads to another anxiety of the novel, the problematic I. The first person would not be apt for Irene's narrative since the "I" as an empowered, integrated subject status avoided Irene (Sullivan 1998, p. 377). Accordingly, the "I" would not belong to Irene herself and be different from her as a passer.

Irene often identifies herself in accordance with the desire of the Other; therefore, an unmediated depiction of her voice would be incompatible with her indispensable lack. Wish is an indication of lack; thus, Irene's aspiration for security throughout *Passing* brings the instability of the "I" to light (Sullivan 1998, p. 377). She associates her faintness with a "need for immediate safety" (Larsen, 1929, p. 12) and finds out "that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life .... She wanted only to be tranquil" (Larsen, 1929, p. 200). Irene undergoes "the menace of impermanence" (Larsen, 1929, p. 188), which she ascribes to Brian's wish to move to Brazil and to Clare's disruption of her household. Her sense of permanence, her understanding of herself like a constant, integrated I, is constantly in hazard; furthermore, she is afflicted by a tense anxiety of destruction, even in Chicago prior to Clare's rejoining her. This tension is indicative of denoting the unavoidability of fragmenting the subject.

Based on the argument that Irene undergoes a problematic “I”, she hunts for an idealized figure to reflect herself as she does not remain black and must see herself in a different identity. In “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan throws light on the idealized image function in subjectivity. The notion is that subsequent to seeing their image in the mirror, the baby describes themselves as “I,” as subject at first. This reflection of the mirror is unified, masterful and, consequently, signifies “the mental permanence of the I” for the subject (1977, p. 2). Lacan adds that the supposition of the idealized image constantly involves incorrect acceptance since the reflection is not the self (1977, p. 6). At the beginning of *Passing*, Irene takes on Clare as her idealized image as Claudia Tate considers that Clare's regular connection with Irene renders Irene envious of Clare's unusual beauty. Tate adds that Irene is factually infatuated with Clare's beauty (1980, p. 142-44). However, the misrecognition eloquently becomes apparent after the mirror event.

Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” in *Passing* evidently takes place when Irene declines to reply Clare’s letters; consequently, Clare appears uninvited in Irene’s room. Subsequent to asking Zulena to allow Clare, Irene “at the mirror ... dusted a little powder on her nose and brushed out her hair” (Larsen, 1929, p. 114). When she comes back from rest room hurriedly, she practises the rejection she means to give Clare:

But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare's two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: "Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare! (Larsen, 1929, p. 115)

In case the mirror were not absolutely there in the scene and in case there were no elision of identities, the “kiss,” the “inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling,” as well as Irene's mention of “awe” may all be interpreted entirely as symbols of an erotic desire between the two individuals (Sullivan, 1998, p. 378). However, I contend that the presence of the mirror dampens that sexuality-based interpretation. While Irene stares at the mirror, Clare goes into the room; furthermore, the presence of the mirror creates ambiguity in Irene’s seeing the woman in front of her in the mirror. The vagueness lies in the fact that it is not known whether the woman is Clare or Irene herself. Additionally, Irene's response to Clare's going in restates the Lacanian infant's “jubilant assumption” of their image in the mirror (Lacan, 1977, p. 2) because similar to the mirror-stage infant, Irene shows that she is interested in the image and cries out with ecstasy. Her



“awed” shout, ““Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!’ ” implies that in Clare she observes an image which is in superiority as compared to the one she apprehensively accounts for prior to Clare's entrance; thus, the image is apter to signify the "mental permanence of the I" (Lacan, 1977, p. 2). As if to emphasize the identification between the two women, Clare even takes a seat in Irene's "favourite chair" (Larsen, 1929, p. 115). According to Helena Michie, the scene proves the fluctuation between Irene's "desire for Clare and identification with her" (1992, p. 151). Consequently, Irene notices in Clare an "image of her futile searching" for permanence (Larsen, 1929, p. 129). As the story develops more, she finds it difficult to separate "individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry" (Larsen, 1929, p. 185).

When Irene reaches the fact that she is lacking of the competence to “master” Clare, the identification between the two individuals turns to be more challenging. Sullivan argues that Irene renounces the attractive, “idealized white image” as she commences to doubt that Clare makes attempts to seduce Brian and that both plan to be disloyal to her (1998, 378). As soon as this doubt becomes apparent, Irene experiences a momentary disappearance of existence, “The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind” (Larsen, 1929, p. 163). As the image ultimately re-emerges in the mirror, it is “her dark white face” which is not merely white anymore and which she sees not with delight but with “a kind of ridiculing contempt” (Larsen, 1929, p. 164). I claim that later while Irene and Clare get together in front of the mirror for the last time, Irene goes through panic and blame over her sin of omission; she has it in mind but is unable to inform Clare that Bellew possibly deduces Clare's ethnic identity because he already sees Irene with Felise Freeland having brown skin, “Irene passed a hand over her eyes to shut out the accusing face in the glass before her. With one corner of her mind she wondered how long she had looked like that, drawn and haggard and ...yes, frightened” (Larsen, 1929, p. 196). Irene more and more loses her aptitude to control either herself or Clare; therefore, she undergoes a shrink of the "loveliness" in the mirror; moreover, the image is not masterful anymore but one of powerlessness as well as fright (Sullivan, 1998, p. 378-79).

When Bellew meets Irene and Felise Freeland, a big problem arises in Clare’s life. I believe that it is not merely Clare who mirrors Irene but Irene mirrors Clare as well; therefore, the mirroring

is reciprocal. After Bellew receives Felise to be Irene's reflection, he also identifies Clare reflected in Felise's face:

But the smile faded at once. Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features. He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure. (Larsen, 1929, p. 182-83)

The above-mentioned lines unveil that Bellew finds out Clare's African American identity. Greeting Irene with a smile denotes that he envisions Irene as a mirror of his white spouse; however, the smile expressively “fades” when he transfers his look from Irene to Felise, whose skin and hair label her as African American and disclose all what Irene and Clare already apprehensively hide from him.

Irene attempts to act out her own interests, “[i]nstitutively, at the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask.... she gave him the cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers” (Larsen, 1929, p. 183). While noticing Bellew's “displeasure,” Irene puts on the “mask” that signifies a form of self-concealment, and additionally her cool gaze indicates the manipulation of herself as the object of the Other's wish. Bearing resemblance to the Lacanian child, who yearns to become the object of her parents’ wish and accordingly contemplates the tantalizing likelihood, “Can he lose me?” (Lacan, 1978, p. 214-15), Irene alters the stare direction and uses the prospect of her own loss or fading to manipulate Bellew's wish. Revealing Clare’s black identity creates hardship for Irene and brings her away a big step from the white society. Tate says that the sole time Irene is alert that race even remotely leaves impact on her life occurs when the looming disclosure of Clare's racial identity is intimidating and hastens the disturbance of Irene's domestic safety (1980, p. 143). Irene starts to turn ambivalent about her African legacy; furthermore, that ambivalence is linked to Clare. Clare becomes perilous for her; thus, she must rescue her objective, white identity, by detaching himself from her. Clare’s identity exposure equals to the fact that she is also a Negro. The burden of her race makes Irene commence to crave “for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (Larsen, 1929, p. 181). She fails to hold that burden and has no adequate competence to put up with blackness. Endangering her life leads her to reject herself as a Negro and wish that

she were born a white child. Tate portrays Irene as “on the verge of total mental disintegration” (1980, p. 143), and at first she links her breakdown to her idealized image, Clare.

I argue that Irene makes two attempts to destruct Clare, and both attempts stem from racist behaviours done towards black people and escaping from blackness as Clare is not in a white identity anymore. The first destruction involves Irene's damage of Clare's letters at two dissimilar times in the story. Notably, both letters refresh for Irene the remembrance of John Bellew's racist attack while Clare is present there. Clare's first letter, sent to thank Irene for attending the tea party in Chicago, just rings a bell of the degradation of listening without a sound to Bellew's racist invective for Irene, as a result she

tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black crepe de Chine lap. The destruction completed, she gathered them up, rose, and moved to the train's end. Standing there, she dropped them over railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water. (Larsen, 1929, p. 83)

Tearing the letter metaphorically connotes Irene's effort to stay away from Clare as “Nig.” She splits it into “tiny ragged squares,” and disperses the pieces in a gesture of removal, which Sullivan deems to be a forced fading of “Clare's asserted presence”, bringing with it Bellew's abhorrence of “niggers” (1998, p. 380). Subsequently, Irene believes that if Clare appears personally, she “had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse her recognition” (Larsen, 1929, p. 84). Without thinking, she reproduces the white racist's deeds, desiring Clare's loss through a rejection to recognize. The second letter, Irene gets in New York, also brings the terrible remembrance, “bringing with them a clear, sharp remembrance, in which even now, after two years, humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled” (Larsen, 1929, p. 9). She tears it, “tearing the letter across” and throws “it into the scrap-basket” (Larsen, 1929, p. 109), expressing both her fury at Clare as well as the breakdown she feels with the recollection of Bellew's loathing. The remembrance of racial discrimination she has received before is due to Clare; therefore, Irene tears the letter in order to dispose of Clare. Irene does not want a Clare as a Negro to link her to blackness and to be a high wall between the white society and her, but she wants a Clare as a purely white woman building a bridge between the white world and her.

The destruction of the two letters occurs prior to merging Clare and Irene in the mirror. However, after Irene finds her corporal being in Clare in the mirror, she obliterates that image

subsequent to commencing to suspect Brian and Clare as well as Clare's identity revelation. Thus, Irene expresses another destruction of Clare, crashing a white teacup. As she becomes furious at noticing Brian apparently courting Clare at another tea party, Irene either drops or flings the teacup to the ground with "a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup" (Larsen, 1929, p. 171). I claim that the broken teacup scene uncovers Irene's own collapse or loss of control; however, to conceal her perplexity, Irene explains to Hugh Wentworth that she has smashed the cup deliberately because it "was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the Confederates ever owned" (Larsen, 1929, p. 173). The broken teacup helps Irene realize that it is necessary for her to break and dispose of it everlastingly. Evidently, the breaking of the teacup with its "white fragments" foretells Clare's imminent death (Sullivan, 1998, p. 81). On the other hand, Brody believes that the cup, like Clare, is an ugly object calling to Irene's mind her black heritage, which she fails to endure anymore. It also indicates "Clare's own broken body" in the end of *Passing*. Irene thinks about a way to free her stable life from Clare Kendry (1992, p. 1062) as well as her "menace of impermanence" (Larsen, 1929, p. 187).

I believe that both Irene and Clare fail to leave their black heritage and embrace new racial identities everlastingly, and their attempts to do so lead them to their destruction in the end of the novel, Clare's death and Irene's loss of consciousness. Whether Clare herself jumps or Irene pushes her, Bellew's announcement, "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (Larsen, 1929, p. 208), initiates Clare's fading from the window. In the Lacanian version of disappearance of the subject, while making efforts to find out the wish of the "Other" with the question, "[h]e is saying this to me, but what does he want?", the subject gets lost behind the "signifier" in conversation with the "Other", (Lacan, 1978, p. 214). Accordingly, Clare's death from the window is the other's desire. Similarly, Frantz Fanon also reckons that for black subjects in conversation with the "white Other", the reply has to be this, "Turn white or disappear" (1991, p. xxi). Clare cannot turn white eternally and must disappear out of her blackness. Bellew's speech, "damned dirty nigger", denotes his wish for Clare's exclusion; therefore, Clare, who is belittled in Bellew's mind for associating with Negroes, has to perish although Irene precipitates the death announcing, "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame in red and gold. The next she was gone. There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. "Nig! My God! Nig!" (Larsen, 1929, p. 209). The most noticeable reading, which has been given the widest approval, is that Irene in a moment of ephemeral

madness pushes Clare out of the window (Tate, 1980, p. 145). There is no clear evidence for Tate's interpretation; therefore, suicide can be another interpretation. Tate also believes that Clare examines the pieces of her life; furthermore, she disappears, leaving behind a hurting state, which she fails to change. She is completely in a state of solitude; therefore, committing suicide is the ultimate getaway from the degradation awaiting her (1980, p. 145-146). In both cases, Irene's pushing her and Clare's suicide, Clare dies out of racial issues. Clare, like Irene, undergoes a problematic subjectivity resulting in her fading, or the disappearance of the subject behind the signifier. Her loss proves the fatal connection Lacan puts forward between signification and subjectivity because the word "Nig", similar to the Lacanian signifier, "manifests itself ... in the murder of the thing" (Lacan, 1977, p. 104). Accordingly, Lacan's term, signifier, is equal to Clare's blackness.

Clare's death stems from being black, and she loses her life as a black person. Brody claims that Clare's collapse as an upper-class white" spouse would be a wanted "fall back into her past life as lower-class black Clare Kendry" (1992, p. 1061). She dies as a black woman, and Irene says, "Clare Kendry had remained almost what she had always been" (Larsen, 1929, p. 133), a lower-class Black individual. However, Irene entirely crosses her racial line to the white side as her support to John Bellew reveals "No, no! 'I'm quite certain that he didn't [push Clare]" (Larsen, 1929, p. 216). She defends Bellew as if she belongs to the white society. I claim that Clare embraces her death happily because as the narrator says she "seemed unaware of any danger ... There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips and in her shining eyes" (Larsen, 1929, p. 209). Clare's final vision demonstrates that she goes towards death consciously and "perhaps proudly as a Black woman"; furthermore, Clare never has the fear of being realized, but it is Irene who holds that fear. (Brody, 1992, p. 1663-64).

I reckon that Irene's desire to destroy Clare through letters and the teacup is an attempt to shatter herself. Irene is ruined when Clare undergoes corporal collapse because she is unable to "separate....herself from Clare Kendry" (Larsen, 1929, p. 185). Clare's fall to her loss leads Irene to go through nausea as she envisions that Clare may stay alive. The nausea stems not only from "fear, but also from "the idea of the glorious body mutilated" (Larsen, 1929, p. 213). "The glorious body" does not entirely belong to Clare; however, it is a "shared, idealized image of self"; therefore, its deformity signifies both women's breakdown (Sullivan, 1998, p. 382). While

Irene attempts to free Bellew from blame, her unsteady subjectivity breaks as she says, “No, no! I'm quite certain that he didn't. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I-’ ” (Larsen, 1929, p. 216). Considerably, the subject, Irene, is dismantled by the utterance of the “I”, as the storyteller claims, “Her quaking knees gave way under her” (Larsen, 1929, p. 216). She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark” (Larsen, 1929, p. 216). Saying her final and most problematic word, " 'I-' ", Irene loses her consciousness. Her passing out, the "darkness" that swallows up I, is another example of aphanisis in *Passing*, which is the reflection of Clare's brutal death. Her last word is “I”, and she fails to complete her last sentence. This vividly unveils that Irene does not belong to herself as a subject and cannot have her own voice because she is someone else.

### 3. Conclusion

Both Irene and Clare live in the white society where black people are not recognized and even rejected. Black characters in the novel are dealt with unfairly and have unequal opportunities to develop, besides racist behaviour of the white culture lets them down. Therefore they make attempts to escape from their realities as black women. Living in white society, Irene and Clare lose themselves and embrace the white identity. They go through the problem of white recognition, thus their objectives are to receive it. To gain white recognition, Irene and Clare melt their black identities in the white culture or they are obliged to disappear. Irene does not pass for white as transparently as Clare does because she is afraid of being found out, however she believes in the idea and takes on the white values. But Clare passes for white evidently and completely abandons her black heritage although she cannot find comfort in the white culture. Irene would pass for white everlastingly if she were sure that her authentic identity would not be exposed at all. The cruelty of the whites compels Clare to escape from her identity and embrace a white one. Irene and Clare become the mirror of one another, and Irene employs Clare to reach her to the white world, therefore as soon as Clare’s authentic identity is in danger of exposure, Irene renounces her as her idealized image as she wants Clare as the holder of a white identity. Another point is that Clare cannot prolong her passing for white eternally and dies subsequent to the disclosure of her black identity, thus she loses the self. Irene loses her consciousness when Clare dies, therefore this lends support to the interpretation that both are one person in one body.

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