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FLEEING, LOSING, AND LONGING: THE PASSING PARADOX IN LARSEN'S *PASSING* AND BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

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Abstract:
The complex phenomenon of racial passing as portrayed in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is the main focus of this paper. It explores how passing characters in literature navigate the fluid boundaries of racial identity, often oscillating between self-preservation and self-erasure. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the analytical framework, this study demonstrates that passing works both as a strategy of access to privilege and a site of profound psychological conflict. Through a close examination of the psychological, social, and emotional dimensions of racial passing, the essay identifies skin complexion as both a gateway to privilege and a source of internal conflict. By situating the narratives within historical and sociopolitical contexts, the analysis highlights how racial passing is not merely an act of (self-)deception but a response to a deeply entrenched social complex of exclusion and inequality. Ultimately, the paper exposes the personal costs and social implications of the negotiation of identity along the color continuum. It also discusses Larsen and Bennett's esthetics of the passing paradox: it enables temporary mobility while reinforcing the systemic hierarchies that make such passing necessary and, more importantly, shows that what passers flee from is what they eventually long for.

Keywords: Nella Larsen, Brit Bennett, passing, racism, USA

1. Introduction

The question of race has long been a defining concern of American literature, shaping both its themes and its characters. Among the many issues tied to race and racism, the practice of racial passing, which consists of light-skinned African Americans identifying as Whites, has occupied a central role in exposing the fragile nature of racial categorization. It also evidences the costs for African Americans of all hues of black skin

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for negotiating identity in a racially stratified society. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), written during the Harlem Renaissance, and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020), a contemporary reworking of the social phenomenon of passing, both explore how passing enables a necessary shortcut to social privilege, but comes nonetheless with an identity crisis, and questions social aspirations and the enduring problem of colorism.

This research applies Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze how Larsen and Bennett represent passing as both a response to systemic racism and a source of alienation. CRT highlights the fact that race is not a biological reality but a social construct designed to uphold systems of privilege and exclusion. Within this framework, passing is shown to be less a matter of personal choice than a survival strategy imposed by racial hierarchies. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness further clarifies how characters in both novels experience divided selves, torn between the performance of whiteness and the memories of black identity. By bringing together these two works across historical periods, this study argues that the persistence of passing demonstrates both the continuity of racial oppression and the enduring psychological toll it calls for.

In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois prophetically raised the issue that the color-line would be the problem of the twentieth century (11). A little less than 80 years later, in the essay "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look like?" (1982), Alice Walker carried forward Du Bois's prophecy, submitting that the color line would also be the problem of the twenty-first century, influencing not only the relation between races, but also the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same races, and of the women who represent both dark and light within each race (311). The current state of affairs in the US, with the widespread resurgence of the far right across the entire Western political landscape and the alarming revival of anti-Black racism, fully vindicates her argument. The color line is, with long forgotten acuteness, felt at two distinct levels today: at the interracial level, which expresses "*institutionalized racism*," and at the intra-racial level (Peters 163), which, in the case of the Black community, is "*the expression of dominant race ideals*" (Hall 102).

Russell-Cole et al. (141) link colorism to what Joy DeGruy terms "Post Traumatic Slave(ry) Syndrome" (PTSS), a concept that views slavery as the origin of a multigenerational trauma affecting African Americans, which in turn promotes intra-racial denigration as a form of self-protection. DeGruy explains that this syndrome encourages "*[appropriate] adaptation when living in a hostile environment*" ("Post Traumatic Enslaved Syndrome," 02:30–02:39, emphasis mine). As a result of this adaptation, some Black families strive to "*lighten the line*" (Russell-Cole et al. 145), driven by the belief that achieving freedom is synonymous with attaining whiteness (Walker 291). Eventually, some of those whose successfully achieve the goal of lighter skin's color adopt the phenomenon of passing as adaptation strategy.

Passing is strongly related to the issue of colorism, which refers to how different skin tones are valued differently, even within the same racial group. Lighter-skinned Black people frequently pass as white to avoid the unjust treatment that comes with being Black. In both Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, the

protagonists' decisions to pass are influenced by the pressures and biases associated with colorism, rather than just earning social prestige. These examples demonstrate how colorism influences people's sense of identity, relationships, and opportunity.

2. Factors Favoring the Phenomenon of Racial Passing

Socioeconomic mobility and access to opportunity can be taken as one of the crucial factors favoring racial passing. In other words, passing frequently functions as a strategy for escaping poverty and gaining access to improved opportunities, including better education, employment, and social standing. In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella Vignes passes as white in order to secure a safer and more prosperous future for herself and her daughter. This reflects historical instances in which lighter skin could afford Black individuals' certain privileges. Similarly, in *Passing*, Clare Kendry adopts a white identity to marry into wealth and integrate into elite white social circles. These examples demonstrate that passing is often motivated by the desire for economic advancement. In *Passing*, Clare's 'former' friends think of misery or poverty as the first justification for her adoption of the phenomenon of passing. While recollecting these moments of gossiping among friends, Irene takes the readership back to that memory:

> *And she could remember quite vividly how, when they used to repeat and discuss these tantalizing stories about Clare, the girls would always look knowingly at one another and then, with little excited giggles, drag away their eager shining eyes and say with lurking undertones of regret or disbelief some such thing as: "Oh, well, maybe she's got a job or something," or "After all, it mayn't have been Clare," or "You can't believe all you hear."* (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 2).

In this passage from *Passing*, the recollections of Clare's former friends reveal how the community attempts to rationalize and come to terms with her decision to pass. The "*tantalizing stories*" about Clare symbolize a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, and denial that surrounds her disappearance from their shared world. The girls' "*knowing looks*" and "*little excited giggles*" suggest a blend of fascination and discomfort, indicating that Clare's passing disrupts their understanding of identity and belonging.

Above all gossip, Clare herself evokes the issue of misery, the feelings of living a miserable life, to confirm what people say about her decision to pass.

> *"Have I?" Clare exclaimed. "It, they, made me what I am today. For, of course, 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. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass.' You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt?"* (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 2).

In her own words, Clare acknowledges that the social conditions and prejudices she endured "*made me what I am today*." She expresses a determined desire "*to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham*," invoking the biblical curse traditionally used to justify the oppression of Black people. This reference highlights how deeply ingrained racial narratives contribute to the internalization of inferiority and social marginalization.

Economic security or the lack thereof, and class biases are clear factors that make people pass out of desperation instead of choice. The following dialogue between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry comes as a confirmation that economic imbalances can justify a decision to pass. Clare asks:

> *"But you've never answered my question. Tell me, honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?"*
> *Irene answered promptly: "No. Why should I?" And so disdainful was her voice and manner that Clare's face flushed and her eyes glinted. Irene hastened to add: "You see, Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money."* (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 2).

Irene does not merely provide a negative answer, that is, decline the idea of passing; she dismisses the entire premise, principle, and foundation of the question with the use of the rhetorical question. But, does Irene claim that passing is wrong in any ways? As announced in the previous paragraph, what complicates Irene's dismissal is the qualification she makes immediately after: "*You see, Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money*." This concession weakens the absolute nature of her earlier statement. The term "*perhaps*" introduces doubt, and the mention of money clearly implies that, were her financial situation different, passing might be a more tempting option to her. Irene's rejection of passing, then, is not necessarily rooted in principle, but in a relative position of comfort. She does not validate the wrongness of passing; she simply reveals that it is unnecessary for her for the time being. Actually, she is a middle-class woman. Her privilege as a middle-class Black woman enables her to refuse what Clare, in a more precarious position, has chosen, not because the choice is inadvisable.

A highly relevant moment in *The Vanishing Half* comes when Stella and Desiree still teenagers, are working low-wage jobs after the death of their father. This is where the first seeds of Stella's desire to escape Mallard and poverty takes shape, and where she begins imagining whiteness as an escape route. It ought to be mentioned that, due to destitution following their father's violent and abusive murder, both twins see their schooling prematurely ended by their mother. Adele Vignes actually needs help from her daughters so that they can all survive. Her announcement strikes the two girls, but particularly Stella, with unexpected shock:

> *…their mother came home from work and announced that the twins would not be returning to school in the fall. They'd had enough schooling, she said, easing gingerly onto*

> *the couch to rest her feet, and she needed them to work. The twins were sixteen then and stunned, although maybe Stella should have noticed the bills that arrived more frequently, or Desiree should have wondered why, in the past month alone, their mother had sent her to Fontenot's twice to ask for more credit. Still, the girls stared at each other in silence as their mother unlaced her shoes. Stella looked like she'd been socked in the gut.*
> *"But I can work and go to school too," she said. "I'll find a way—"*
> *"You can't, honey," her mother said. "You gotta be there during the day. You know I wouldn't do this if I didn't need to."*
> *"I know, but—"*
> *"And Nancy Belton got you teachin the class. What more do you need to learn?"*
> *She had already found them a job cleaning a house in Opelousas and they would start in the morning. Desiree hated helping her mother clean."* (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 1)

This scene in *The Vanishing Half*, where the twins' mother abruptly ends their schooling without any preparation, due to economic strain, in the wake of the violent killing of their father, Leon Vignes, under the horrific circumstances of racial violence, captures the raw emotional ravages which account for Stella's eventual decision to pass. In this way, the emotional rationale for Stella's future choice to pass is set up. The twin sisters share the same origin, yet their responses to poverty diverge. Desiree accepts her Blackness as part of who she is and seeks to improve her life within those boundaries. Stella, on the other hand, sees those boundaries as confining, but they are, all the same, escapable, if she is willing to erase her past. The psychological burden of poverty does not just produce discontent; it fosters a longing so deep that it makes racial passing conceivable, although it implies huge sacrifices. Thus, this scene justifies passing not through direct discourse on race, but through the despair of class stagnation and economic insecurity.

Another important reason that justifies racial passing is historical and social oppression as a result of colorism and skin tone. Both novels portray societies deeply divided along racial lines, where Black individuals experience systemic exclusion and prejudice. In such contexts, passing offers a way to temporarily avoid the harsh effects of colorism, which is of several orders, including restricted or outright denial of rights (to do decent work, for instance), threats of violence, and social marginalization. For several characters in both novels, passing becomes a necessary strategy for survival within such a segregating system.

As concerns the restriction of the right to work wherever possible, both Stella and Desiree experience it in *The Vanishing Half.* To offer jobs, white people consider the skin tone, the race, instead of taking qualifications, ambition, and skills into account. As a good typist,

> *Stella needed to find a new job, so she responded to a listing in the newspaper for secretarial work in an office inside the Maison Blanche building. An office like that would never hire a colored girl, but they needed the money, living in the city and all, and why should the*

twins starve because Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned that she was colored? (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 3)

Similarly, Desiree also goes through this historical and social oppression, exclusion from access to a job. It is historical in the sense that black color and race is associated the biblical reality of Ham's descendants as outlined in the novel with acute vividness here "*Too, they weren't quite sure that the good God hadn't intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat because he had poked fun at old man Noah once when he had taken a drop too much. I remember the aunts telling me that that old drunkard had cursed Ham and his sons for all time*" (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 2), and the aftermath of the Transatlantic enslaved laborers' trade. Here is what happens:

"Where you need me to drop you off?" Willie Lee had asked.
"Just at the sheriff's."
"The sheriff's?" He turned to look at her. "What business you got down there?"
"Told you. A job."
He grunted. "You can find cleanin work closer to Mallard."
"Not to clean."
"Then what you aim to do at the sheriff's?"
"Apply to be a fingerprint examiner," she said.
Willie Lee laughed. "So, you just gonna walk in there and say what?"
"That I want a job application. I don't know why you're laughing, Willie Lee. I been examining fingerprints for over ten years now and if I can do it for the Bureau, I don't know why I can't do it here."
"I can think of a few reasons," Willie Lee told her.
But hadn't the world changed a little since she'd been gone? And hadn't she walked into the St. Landry Parish Sheriff's Department with all the confidence in the world? She had stepped right inside that grimy tan building, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, and told the sheriff's deputy, a portly man with sandy blond hair, that she wanted to apply for a job. "The Federal Bureau, did you say?" he'd asked, raising an eyebrow, and she allowed herself to feel hopeful. She sat in the corner of the waiting room, racing through the latent print examiner test, grateful for a thinking activity for once, not the type of thinking she had done lately – logistics, like how long her money would last – but real analytical thinking. She'd finished quick, the deputy said, laughing a bit in amazement, might have been a record. He pulled out the answer guide from a manila folder to check her work. But first, he glanced at her full application, and when he saw her address listed in Mallard, his gaze frosted over. He slid the answer key back in the folder, returned to his chair. (Bennett, Part One, Ch 2).

The exchange between Desiree and Willie Lee, short and seemingly casual, actually reveals deep social tensions and internalized racial limitations. When Desiree says she is applying for a job, he immediately assumes it must be for cleaning work a

form of labor that has long been seen as one of the few "*appropriate*" roles for Black women in segregated America. This conversation shows how psychologically the black community is affected in Mallard. A large number of them have accepted their fate and believe that the only work a colored person can do in the vicinity of white Americans is cleaning. Psychologically, they have been robotized to think and perceived their race in this way and Willie Lee does it.

Viewed through the lens of racial oppression, the narrator exposes the deeply embedded colorism that governs access to opportunity in mid-20th-century America. Stella's decision to pass is not simply a way to escape poverty, but a direct consequence of being structurally excluded from respectable, stable employment because of her race as well as the skin color of people from her race. The job they apply for is the one for which they would never have considered hiring a Black woman, regardless of her qualifications. In fact, the use of the adverb of frequency 'never' instead of the adverb of negation 'not' in the sentence shows the timelessness of the reality of the exclusion. It reflects a social order in which Blackness automatically disqualifies, no matter one's talent or training (Andrews 23).

Sorrowfully, it is noticed through a close reading of both *The Vanishing Half* and *Passing* that violence is another form of social oppression, in its various forms, that influences individuals to engage in racial passing. Physical violence, racial terror, and systemic oppression create a hostile environment where passing can become a necessary survival strategy. Scholars have documented how the threat of racial violence, such as lynching and police brutality, has historically reinforced rigid racial boundaries and instilled fear within African American communities (Anderson 112; Du Bois 45). This environment of danger compels some to pass as white to avoid harm and gain access to safety and social privileges.

In *The Vanishing Half*, race and skin color are central forces that shape the characters' lives, often with devastating consequences. Leon, the father of the twin sisters, becomes a tragic victim of racial violence, suffering a brutal lynching that abruptly ends his life. The circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear, highlighting the arbitrary and cruel nature of racial terror in the Jim Crow South. Leon Vignes's death, by all regards, evidences the little control that Black people have on their own lives and the little understanding they have of the basic reasons that usually push white men to action. The horror of his death is heightened by the fact that his twin daughters, hiding, watch every single detail of his killing unable to utter any single word, bearing that trauma to their grave:

> *…he [Leon, Stella's father] was whittling a table leg when five white men kicked in the front door and hauled him outside. He landed hard on his face, his mouth filling with dirt and blood. The mob leader – a tall white man with red gold hair like a fall apple – waved a crumpled note in which, he claimed, Leon had written nasty things to a white woman. Leon couldn't read or write – his customers knew that he made all of his marks with an X – but the white men stomped on his hands, broke every finger and joint, then shot him four times.*

> *He survived, and three days later, the white men burst into the hospital and stormed every room in the colored ward until they found him. This time, they shot him twice in the head, his cotton pillowcase blooming red.* (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 2).

Also, this lynching profoundly impacts the novel's exploration of identity and survival. The trauma inflicted on Leon's family and community exemplifies what Joy DeGruy terms "Post Traumatic Enslaved Syndrome," a multigenerational trauma resulting from slavery and racial violence that shapes behaviors and coping mechanisms within African American families (DeGruy 45). The fear and vulnerability generated by such violence help explain why some characters might choose to pass as white, that is, to escape not only social marginalization but also the physical danger posed by their racial identity. Passing, then, emerges as a complex response to this layered violence. It is both a survival strategy and a source of internal conflict. It reflects the painful negotiations of identity in a society structured by racial hierarchies and colorism. As Russell-Cole et al. argue, colorism within Black communities can be seen as a form of intra-racial violence that compounds the trauma of external racism and influences decisions about passing (Russell-Cole et al. 141).

Stella has not been able to get over the murder of her father. In her quest for answers – sensible reasons that might explain their father's death – Stella holds an important conversation with her twin sister. This is a conversation that deserves close attention:

> *In the bedroom, the twins sat, legs swinging over the mattress edge, and pinched at a piece of pound cake.*
> *"But what did Daddy do?" Stella kept asking.*
> *Desiree sighed, for the first time feeling the burden of having to supply answers. Oldest was oldest, even if by only seven minutes.*
> *"Like Willie Lee say. He do his job too good."*
> *"But that don't make sense."*
> *"Don't have to. It's white folks."* (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 2).

Listening to the twins discuss their father's death brings to mind that that Senghor was wrong, in his asserting that *"la raison est hellène*" (which literally translates into "Reason is Hellenic" my translation) cannot be true. In effect, on the one hand, an attempted culturally oriented translation of Senghor's caricature could be "*Emotion is African, reason is Greek*". On the other hand, an attempted interpretative translation can give: "*Negroes act based on their feelings and emotion; they are intuitive while Western actions are more rational, analytical, and intellectual*", which is rooted in Greek philosophy.

Desiree's resignation – "*Don't have to. It's white folks*." – is a statement about power, not logic. As Saidiya Hartman writes, the violence of the enslaved trade and slavery produced a context in which black suffering was rendered unremarkable and black life

nonessential (Hartman 14). The mob's actions are not about justice or reason; they are about maintaining dominance, no matter how senseless the method.

Finally, beyond external factors, passing is also influenced by internal emotional and psychological struggles. Clare seeks belonging and validation, while Stella is driven by the desire to protect her family. These motivations reveal that passing is not merely a practical decision, but also a deeply personal one, shaped by complex feelings about identity, heritage, and self-preservation. As a result, the act of passing carries emotional costs and moral ambiguities.

As Thadious M. Davis argues, "*Clare's passing is not a necessity of survival, but a strategy of reinvention*" (Davis 238). Clare does not only seek safety, but a new life shaped by privilege, comfort, and power. Her indifference to the race shows that her passing is based less on fear and more on personal ambition and detachment.

Furthermore, Farah Jasmine Griffin asserts that "*Clare embodies a kind of passing that is driven not by danger, but by discontent with limitations*" (Griffin 185). Clare does not even show the sociological curiosity that some outsiders may express toward Black life. Her identity is purely functional – she passes not to protect, but to benefit, according to this passage. Also, this behavior echoes Judith Butler's theory of performativity: identity is something acted out and maintained through repeated social performances. Clare performs whiteness to access the life she desires, thus treating race as a role rather than a rooted belonging (Butler 25). Her speech, appearance, and behavior are all carefully adjusted to fit white society's expectations. These predispositions make it easier for Clare to passing the strategy.

Likewise, in *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's first act of passing occurs unintentionally but sparks her awareness of a new possible self. When the shopgirl in Darlene's Charms mistakes her for white, Stella does not correct her. Instead, she embraces the moment, laughing and saying, "*White folks, so easy to fool! Just like everyone says*" (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 3). Her words are playful, yet beneath this apparent amusement lies the emerging desire to cross a social boundary that has long excluded her. As Emily Bernard explains, the impulse to pass may begin not in fear but in longing – for respect, recognition, and a sense of belonging denied by one's assigned identity (Bernard 97).

What is more, in the light of this passage, the immediate reason behind Stella's decision to pass is not from danger, she has, of course, experienced the feeling of danger before, at her father's killing. It is a discovery. In that moment, she realizes that she can be someone else and be treated differently. This is in line with Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where identity is not fixed but constructed through repeated social behaviors (Butler 25). Once Stella sees that her appearance allows her to be treated as white, the idea of passing becomes not only possible, but desirable. So, it can be agreed upon that Brit Bennett explores how passing allows Stella to "*escape the fixed narrative of Blackness in Mallard*," a place where identity is rigidly monitored and limited by color (Bennett, Interview). Passing offers Stella the chance to redefine herself on her own terms, an act of reinvention that will shape the rest of her life. As Judith Butler explains, identity is often performed unconsciously through repetition (Butler 25). Likewise, Emily Bernard

argues that the first decision to pass is often impulsive or emotional rather than logical (Bernard 97). Therefore, both Stella and Clare embody forms of passing that reveal the complexity of agency, where choice exists, but full deliberation does not necessarily follow.

It is deemed crucial to mention that the desire, longing, and social pressure influencing the choices of the passers in both novels are often rooted in psychological trauma. In other words, the trauma endured by these characters deeply affects their emotional state and influences their decisions. As a result, their choice to pass cannot be considered fully deliberate. The case of Stella in *The Vanishing Half* is particularly revealing. From the day her father is killed, she falls prey to psychological trauma, which manifests steadily reoccurs through nightmares on her father's death scene replayed with her herself as the victim:

> *Her nightmares were always the same, white men grabbing her ankles and dragging her screaming out of the bed. She'd never told Desiree. Each time she'd snapped awake, Desiree snoring beside her, she felt stupid for being afraid. Hadn't Desiree watched from that closet too? Hadn't she seen what those white men had done? Then why wasn't she waking up in the middle of the night, her heart pounding?* (Bennett, Part Three, Ch. 7).

The social oppression and racial violence inflicted on African Americans often leave lasting psychological scars. The violent and dehumanizing death of her father haunts Stella, isolating her emotionally, even from her twin sister. She cannot share her trauma, for fear of being seen as weak. This demonstrates how deeply affected she is, and suggests that her later decision to pass is rooted in this internalized fear. As Frantz Fanon explains in Black Skin, White Masks, colonial violence and racism produce a "*psychic split*" in the Black subject, causing alienation and trauma that affect identity formation (Fanon 109). Similarly, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma disrupts conscious experience and memory, leading to unconscious motivations behind behavior (Caruth 4). Stella's nightmares and silence show this internal suffering, which likely influences her decision to pass as a means of escaping trauma rather than a calculated, deliberate choice. One may even argue that Desiree does not permanently pass because she is not psychologically damaged in the same way.

3. The Social and Psychological Dimensions of Passing: A Paradoxical Phenomenon

This section looks at passing as a way to survive, but also as something that creates deep emotional pain. By focusing on Clare Kendry in *Passing* and Stella Vignes in *The Vanishing Half*, the analysis shows that passing brings heavy psychological effects. These include feeling alone, guilt, and confusion about who one really is. Passing may help some characters live a better life in society, but it often makes them suffer inside. Both novels make it clear that the decision to pass affects the mind, the emotions, and the sense of identity.

Psychologically, nostalgia is one of the first and most painful consequences that those who choose to pass must face. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry expresses this feeling in a very touching and powerful way. The passage in which she writes a letter to Irene can easily move the reader to tears. Clare, who once believed that passing would free her and give her a better life, now finds herself trapped in deep sadness and regret. She writes:

> *". . . For I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . ." Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, "and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago. . . .* (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 1).

These words clearly show that Clare feels empty and lost. Although she has escaped racial discrimination and entered white society, her emotional life is broken, entirely. Her longing for connection and belonging is stronger than the comfort she has gained. Her nostalgia becomes more intense with the use of the word "pale". This word shows that the white world, although rich and safe, has no warmth or soul for Clare. Her choice to pass has taken her away from her roots, and now she sees time endlessly stretching into a quiet, quiet, unyielding monotony. Scholars like Thadious M. Davis confirm that Clare's desire to return to her Black identity reflects a deep internal struggle and a loss of emotional grounding (Davis 233). She thought that passing would be liberation, but it has turned out to be another prison.

Just like Clare Kendry, Stella Vignes also suffers emotionally after choosing to pass. Her psychological pain is mostly shown through fear, shame, and silence. From the day her father is killed by white men, Stella has carried the weight of trauma. This trauma appears clearly in her recurring nightmares. This shows that Stella is scared, not only of the past, but of her own feelings. She hides her fear and does not speak of it, even to her twin sister. The fact that she keeps this pain to herself proves that the trauma has fastened its tight grip on her whole psyche. According to Frantz Fanon, racial violence often creates a deep wound in the mind, one that affects identity and behavior in lasting ways (Fanon 109). Stella's trauma is not only a superficial fear; it has become part of who she is.

Later, when she begins to pass, her silence and fear continue. She never tells her husband or daughter about her past. This secrecy of her past life causes her to live in isolation. As Paul Gilroy explains, passing can lead to "*double consciousness*," where the individual feels split between two identities and belongs to none fully (Gilroy 73). Stella's quiet life in the white community may seem peaceful, but inside she feels alone and unsure. She avoids Black people and is afraid her secret will come out. The longer she passes, the more her past haunts her. Even her relationship with her daughter becomes difficult because she cannot fully explain who she is. All this proves that Stella's choice

to pass is not free from consequences. The social comfort she gains comes with deep psychological costs.

What is more, another important point in the psychological dimension of passing is that it creates a deep paradox. What the characters run away from is exactly what they later long for, and what they once desired becomes what they try to escape. The case of Stella reveals how paradoxical passing is. Clare Kendry, for example, chooses to pass in order to live in freedom and luxury. Although she succeeded in passing undiscovered for a very long time, she, at the end, says:

> *"How could you know? How could you? You're free. You're happy. And," with faint derision, "safe." Irene passed over that touch of derision, for the poignant rebellion of the other's words had brought the tears to her own eyes, although she didn't allow them to fall. The truth was that she knew weeping did not become her. Few women, she imagined, wept as attractively as Clare. "I'm beginning to believe," she murmured, "that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe."* (Larsen, Part Two, Ch. 2).

One of the strongest proofs that passing leads to emotional suffering and regret is presented here. This is a powerful moment that proves the paradox of passing. Clare ran away from her Black identity, thinking it was unsafe and shameful. But now, she realizes with a piercing clarity that the world she yearned to join has only deepened her fear, placing her furthermore into an isolating abyss.

4. Passing as Social Negotiation: Family, Community, and its Consequences

Passing may appear simple, but it usually comes with huge consequences. It is a social negotiation, not to beat around the bush. Both Clare and Stella's cases show that passing is a performance that requires constant attention and careful control. From the day they enter white society, they begin to act, speak, and live as strange, performed selves. They hide their past, change their behavior, and even shun contact with Black people to keep their secret. It shows that passers do not live the life they want but socially negotiate how their new life wants them to live it. Every part of their life becomes a stage where they must act like white Americans.

In the case of Stella, when a Black family moves into her neighborhood, she reacts with fear and panic, not because they threaten her safety, but because they threaten her performance (Bennett, Part Three, Ch. 7). Stella's performance is so complete that she teaches her daughter not to question their identity. This shows that passing is not just about appearance; it becomes a daily act of survival. Erving Goffman explains that identity is something people perform to meet the expectations of the social environment (Goffman 17). Stella's entire life is shaped by this logic. She performs whiteness at home, in public, and even in her private thoughts. But this performance leaves her tense and isolated. Judith Butler also argues that identity must be repeated over time to exist, but repetition can become a trap (Butler 25). Stella cannot escape the role she has chosen. Her

whole world would collapse if the truth came out. Like Clare, she finds that passing is not freedom. It is a life of acting, fear, and self-denial.

Additionally, Passing creates deep consequences not only for the individual but also for the relationships they leave behind. In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's choice to pass destroys her connection to her twin sister Desiree and cuts her off completely from the Black community. The narrator presents her departure into passing as follows: "Then one evening, a year later, Desiree came home from Dixie Laundry to find an empty apartment. All of Stella's clothes, all of her things, gone. Like she'd never been there at all." (Bennett, Part One, Ch. 3). From the moment she leaves Mallard, and especially her twin sister Desiree, she keeps her new life a secret, even from her daughter who presses her with questions:

> *"Where are you from, Mommy?" Kennedy asked her once during bath time….*
> *"A little town down south," Stella said. "You won't have heard of it." She always spoke to Kennedy like this, as if she were another adult.*
> *"But where?" Kennedy asked.*
> *Stella poured warm water over her, the bubbles dissolving. "It's just a little place called Mallard, darling," she said. "It's nothing like Los Angeles."*
> *She'd been, for the first and final time, completely honest with her daughter, only because she knew the girl was too young to remember.* (Bennett, Part Three, Ch. 7).

The way Stella's relationship with her daughter is marked by distance and fear of exposure is highlighted here. When Kennedy asks innocent questions about her family, Stella either avoids the truth or lies to protect her secret. Her reaction to the question about her mother, almost dropping the storybook, shows how even the mention of her past brings emotional instability. The passage clearly reveals that Stella's passing affects not only her identity, but also the intimacy and honesty within her closest relationships. She declares her parents dead to avoid being asked questions about them.

In addition to personal and family fragmentation, passing also leads to community fragmentation. Once people decide to pass, it is obvious that they will be able neither to defend nor to relate with people from their communities. As it is proven that their new lifestyle is engrained in lie, denial, and secrecy, it then justifies their failure to henceforth defend or relate with their racial identity. Neither Clare nor Stella is an exception. On the day Clare meets Irene in Chicago, the latter tries to invite the former to her place because Clare is desperate to share a moment with Irene. It becomes an occasion for Clare to disclose the *porte du non retour* she has crossed some time ago, as presented in the following passage:

> *Clare shook her head. "Really, I'd love to, 'Rene," she said, a little mournfully. "There's nothing I'd like better. But I couldn't. I mustn't, you see. It wouldn't do at all. I'm sure you understand. I'm simply crazy to go, but I can't." The dark eyes glistened and there was a suspicion of a quaver in the husky voice. "And believe me, 'Rene, I do thank you for*

asking me. Don't think I've entirely forgotten just what it would mean for you if I went. That is, if you still care about such things." (Larsen, Part One, Ch. 2).

It is clearly shown here that Clare Kendry, after deciding to pass, can no longer freely connect with her racial community. Farah Jasmine Griffin explains that the passer often finds herself unable to return to the world she left behind, not because she is unwelcome, but because she no longer knows how to belong (Griffin 91). Clare's emotional voice, filled with regret, reflects that exact situation. Thadious M. Davis also notes that passing requires not only the rejection of race but also separation from the very networks of kinship, friendship, and memory that define community (Davis 232). Clare thanks Irene for the invitation, but she also reminds her of the cost: "*Do not think I have entirely forgotten just what it would mean for you*." This sentence confirms that Clare understands the wall between them. Her passing has placed her outside of her community, where she must live with silence, fear, and the loss of true belonging. her story shows that the cost of passing is not only personal, it breaks trust, creates distance, and leads to a painful loss of belonging.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that racial passing, far from being a simple or free act of choice, is a complex phenomenon shaped by deep psychological wounds, social pressure, and structural inequalities. In *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett, characters like Clare Kendry and Stella Vignes are not only victims of a racist society but also active agents negotiating their place within it through performance, secrecy, and self-erasure. Their decisions to pass are often born out of trauma, fear, or the desire for social elevation, yet these very acts generate emotional isolation, relational breakdowns, and moral dissonance.

Passing functions as a daily performance, requiring the constant suppression of true identity and an exhaustive management of one's public image. Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Erving Goffman's concept of social masking help uncover the psychological toll exacted by such performances. At the same time, this paper has shown that passing is never neutral: it carries a profound cost, especially in terms of family and community ties. As Stella cuts ties with her twin sister and Clare floats between Blackness and whiteness, both characters are forced into emotional solitude. In their pursuit of whiteness, they lose the very connections that gave them meaning and belonging. In both novels, passing brings temporary access to privilege but long-term consequences of alienation.

All in all, this paper suggests that the phenomenon of passing is not simply a narrative of escape or ambition; it is a paradoxical process, a trade of visibility for invisibility, of survival for authenticity. It reveals how racism and colorism can fracture identity, create impossible choices, and leave individuals suspended between worlds they can neither fully inhabit nor fully reject.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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