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The Theme of “Passing” in the Novels of James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen

Dinesh Babu. P.

Department of English,

Ramanujan College (University of Delhi), Kalkaji, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The depiction of the experience of a very fair-skinned person of some “coloured” background who successfully passes into white society was a recurrent theme in early African American writings. In this paper an attempt is made to look at, and compare and contrast, two African American novels, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912) and Passing (1929) which deal with the theme of passing, written by James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen, a Black man and a Black woman writer. This paper analyses how the two novels reject the rules of colour division, rules which demand that one accepts a position within a predetermined hierarchy.

Key Words: Race, colour line, Black, Passing

Introduction

“Passing” refers to the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of social groups other than his/her own, such as a different race, ethnicity, social-class, gender, and disability status, with the purpose of gaining social acceptance. The term has been in popular use in the USA since the 1920s, though James Weldon Johnson dealt with it in 1912. The term was used in the USA to describe a person of mixed-race heritage assimilating into the white race during times when legal and social conventions classified the person as Black.

James Weldon Johnson’s (1871-1938) sole novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912)¹, and Nella Larsen’s novel Passing (1929)² treat such a subject which was a recurrent theme in early African American writing—the experience of a very fair-skinned person of some “coloured” background who successfully passes into white society. Indeed, the theme appears in the first novel of an African American author, Clotel, or the President’s Daughter (1853) by William Wells Brown³.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man is the story of a Black man who is able to “pass.” The hero of the story, who is born in Georgia, as the son of a white man by his family’s favourite Black servant, grows up with his mother in Connecticut, attending a racially mixed elementary school, and wanders through the American South, to New York, and to Europe, having adventures and making various observations on the race question. He is an artist and is very articulate. When the Ex-Coloured Man realizes that he cannot achieve his goal—a name, recognition, a better future and permanent fame as an innovative Black artist—he decides to pass for white. He ultimately marries a white girl and decides to pass permanently.

Nella Larsen's novel Passing tells the story of two light skinned women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry who are of mixed heritage and are light enough to pass as white. Clare ‘passes’ herself off as white and marries John Bellew, a racially prejudiced white man who knows nothing of her heritage and affectionately and jokingly calls her "Nig". Irene lives in Harlem, commits herself to racial uplift, and marries a Black doctor. The novel centres on the meeting of the two childhood friends later in life, and Clare’s attempt to fulfill her wish to be with Blacks in Harlem. But during the course of events Clare’s race is revealed to her husband, John Bellew. The novel ends with the sudden death of Clare by “falling” out of a window.

In *Passing*, when Clare Kendry comes back to be with her Black friends, she fulfills her longing for enjoyment with her Black friends in Harlem. But in *The Autobiography*, the narrator longs to be a Black man not for enjoyment, but for acceptance and fame as an artist and race leader. *The Autobiography* tells us what a talented Black person will lose when he passes as white. *Passing* tells us what will happen if a Black person who has been “passing” for white gets caught red handed by white people. These novels are about individual choices in a particular situation in the USA and their consequences, real or imaginary. The novels also suggest that wealth is not enough for one to be happy in the world; it is the fulfilment of desires that makes a person contented.

It has to be remembered that these novels are published at a time when “passing” was prevalent in the USA⁴. “Passing” in general and the Ex-coloured Man's narrative and Nella Larsen's *Passing* in particular have long been viewed as instances of racial self-hatred or disloyalty. Both are based, so the argument goes, on renouncing Blackness—an “authentic” identity—in favour of whiteness, an “opportunistic” one⁵. These previous interpretations have insisted on a “racially correct” way of reading the texts. However, such readings try to categorize the characters who often resist categories. Should “passing” necessarily indicate a denial of “Blackness,” or racial self-hatred and nothing more?

When we look at the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare as persons who value individualism, who are distinctive, disobedient, and inclined towards improvisation, we call for a much richer and more complex reading. When we recognize that the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare demonstrate ambivalence about whiteness as well as Blackness, we avail ourselves of the novels' more complicated nuances. The Ex-Coloured Man and Clare Kendry claim a full measure of individualism. One can argue that the Ex-Coloured Man's individualism is uniquely American, and evokes the Emersonian self-reliance because in order to succeed, he manipulates his identity⁶.

It has been said that such self-fashioning in terms of class, intellect, religion, and family history have been the hallmarks of the most celebrated national myths of the USA. In this tradition, the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare Kendry strive for equal opportunity, social mobility, and a self-determined unique identity which heretofore have been unavailable to Blacks. However, their very attempt and its consequences reveal the existing differences and inequalities the Blacks face in America in terms of social recognition, legal protection and employment opportunities.

Another point I want to make is that by positioning the narrator and Clare Kendry at the intersection of the white and Black worlds, *The Autobiography of an Ex- Coloured Man* and *Passing* continually challenge the binary nature of America's racial ideology. The Ex-Coloured man and Clare embody the paradox of race and colour because they are both legally Black and visibly white. However, the Ex-coloured Man's response to this paradox defies his audience's expectations: He believes that it is possible for Blacks to aspire and succeed in America and cites Shiny—the narrator's class mate, a Black boy—as an example; yet he decides to seize his own opportunity for success by “passing” as white⁷. In *Passing* Clare Kendry's response to this paradox is quite ambitious and no one else would dare to do that: She is fully aware that if her husband came to know of her Black ancestry, she and her daughter would be mercilessly thrown out of his family and hence from the white community.

Moreover, in the novels, by “passing” for white, the Ex-Coloured man and Clare Kendry turn the ruling class's own assumptions about racial purity against them, and expose the ideology of “whiteness” in action. In allowing the world to accept them as white, the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare challenge the role of race in cultural identity. If the dominant culture fails to identify the Black race by the measures of physiognomy it has instituted to define the race, how can its elaborate system of intellectual difference and moral inequality based on physical difference be supported⁸?

Interestingly, the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare Kendry never tell anybody that they are white. Having seen them, people assume that they are white. Their white complexion and their education have helped affirm the notion that they are out and

out white people. In *Passing* it is also because Clare's white foster parents (her paternal aunts) have given the impression with their religiosity and virtuosity that everybody in the family is white. It is this notion of the white society about white people that has contributed to the white society's misunderstanding and mistaking of the Ex-Coloured man's and Clare Kendry's blood. They have just hidden the dark secret. That is all.

I argue that it is the notion of the white about the colour line as an adequate demarcation to differentiate people vis-à-vis their race, which invariably gives the Ex-Coloured man and Clare Kendry a chance to play their trick with their whiteness on the white society. The superficial notion of the supposedly marked differences is successfully challenged by Clare Kendry, by marrying John Bellew, a racist white man. It has to be seen that John Bellew does not see any of the so-called characteristics of a "Negro" in Clare in terms of her appearance, character and behaviour. He never finds anything "disgusting" in her. Yet, he assumes that a drop of Black blood would spoil anybody, no matter who s/he is. So it can be said that Bellew's staunch belief in the difference between the Black and the white is not the actual difference but just an idea of a difference between the two races.

Significantly, the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare Kendry in the novels "pass" primarily because Black people do not receive equal treatment and opportunities in the white-controlled world. Clare says, "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 thing. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass'" (159).

Moreover, white colour is not a stumbling block in mentally being a part of Black race while physically being in the white world. But Black colour is a stumbling block in physically being in a white world, because the colour line has been drawn with it. For Irene Westover Redfield, in *Passing*, "passing" is an opportunity to taste the public facilities which only white people are allowed to use. Since her white skin allows her to mask her Black blood and cross the colour line, she makes use of her opportunity⁹. It is a necessity which is prompted by her circumstances. Since she is from a middle class family, she wants to go to theatres; to visit beautiful places; and to have delicious food from restaurants where only white people are allowed to enter. Irene tells Felise:

I do ["passing"], but not for the reason you think. I don't believe I've ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. You've just passed the only person that I've ever met disguised as a white woman. (227)

And importantly, in *Passing* white skinned Black women pass for white not because white men are more beautiful than Black men, but because if they are able to pass and get a white partner, along with white men they are allowed access to what has been hitherto inaccessible to Black people in the United States. At one point, Irene expresses her belief that some Black men are superior to some white men. For instance, when she sees Clare Kendry dancing often with a Black man and frequently with Brian, Irene feels happy: "Irene was [...] glad that Clare was having the opportunity to discover that some coloured men were superior to some white men" (204).

I argue that in James Weldon Johnson's novel the Ex-Coloured Man does not, at any instance, reveal his identity because he knows fully well that such a disclosure will affect not only him but the life of his children as well. It is for their well-being that he intends to devote the rest of his life to being white. He is playing with fire which is capable of destroying not only his "achievements" but also his children's good future and prospects in America. That may be why he says, "My love for the children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise" (211). He seems to be quite sure that the time has not yet come for any Black man to aspire for equal opportunities and status in the white dominated

American society.

We see in Passing Clare Kendry's silence results as much from her own decision to deny her Black heritage as it does from outside forces. For instance, Clare Kendry has been ill-treated as a child by her drunkard white father and, upon his death, she is forced to live with racist white aunts in the North. Thus she is alienated in childhood from the Black community that, to the child's way of thinking, has abandoned her to racist whites, Clare Kendry as an adult gains her revenge on both worlds by "passing"¹⁰. Seen this way, her story is tragic. The novel presents Clare Kendry as the victim of internalized racism.

When the novel opens, Clare Kendry has married into the white world of wealth and security. Clare has completely broken with her past, has reshaped herself, and feels no guilt about her decisions and actions. After twelve years of separation, Clare Kendry becomes bored with her life as a white woman and wants Irene Redfield to act as her passport back into the Black community. But Clare Kendry does not wish to be permanently a part of Harlem. She is like a tourist or an occasional visitor who enjoys the milieu. Clare has already chosen to alienate herself from Black American culture. She is not simply a victim but a willing agent in her own alienation, cynically determined to have it both ways. She wishes to remain in her lucrative white marriage and at the same time wants to be with African Americans in Harlem. Complicating these conflicting possibilities even further, Larsen allows us to know Clare Kendry's story only through another woman, Irene, who from the beginning maintains serious reservations about Clare Kendry's manifold potential to upset the delicate balance of the life Irene has very methodically constructed around her husband and children¹¹.

When we compare the narrator and Clare Kendry, we see that in the Autobiography, the narrator realizes that he has never really been a Black man, but only "a privileged spectator" (210), that he has sold his birth-right "for a mess of pottage," having only yellowing manuscripts to remind him of "a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent" (211). And in Passing Clare does not display any race loyalty. For example, it is said in the novel: "No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it." (182). Interestingly, the Ex-Coloured Man has not experienced the company of Black friends, except of Shiny for a short time, whereas Clare is living with her living memory of her childhood friendship and her experiences with Black children.

When we contrast the two characters, we find that in James Weldon Johnson's novel it is after watching a dreadful lynching scene that the Ex-Coloured Man decides to "pass" as a white man. It is a deliberate attempt, though he says he accepts how people take him. Whereas in Nella Larsen's novel, Clare Kendry's "passing" is a forced one. It is a compelled opportunity. Her aunts in the North strictly instruct her not to tell anything about her connection with the South. Then, later on, she makes use of this opportunity and falls in love with John Bellew and marries him. But she never tells him that she has Black blood in her. On the other hand, though the narrator passes and lives as a white man, before his marriage with a white woman, he informs her that he has Black blood in him.

In the two novels, as a matter of similarity, the Ex-Coloured Man and Clare Kendry refuse to accept the caste status of the Black, and reject the rules of colour division, rules which demand that one accepts a position within a predetermined hierarchy. In both the novels the noticeable absence of Black skin, the mark of racial identity, highlights the breakdown of categories. The act of racial "passing" stands as a challenge to the regulatory boundaries imposed between the races by subverting the very notion of racial purity on which such hierarchical divisions are founded.

I argue that in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, the Ex-Coloured Man's continuing to "pass", with his refusal to name himself, becomes a threat to white society because that society cannot identify and safely control him. He remains unknown and thus, a continually potential subversive force. But, in Passing when Clare Kendry's husband, John Bellew, finds her in the company of her Black friends at a party and when her real identity is revealed, her subversive potential is in a sense shattered; she becomes a known entity and is relegated to her "proper" position. And thus Clare Kendry is born, and

she dies, as a Black person. The Ex-Coloured Man remains in that system at the close of the novel when he chooses to pass and becomes a land speculator and business man.

In my view, James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen have portrayed in their novels a dimension of Black life rarely present in stories about Blacks, in the sense that the novels are, in their own way, statements of racial pride. The narrator inherits his music talent from his mother who is Black. The protagonists are from middle class families. Johnson's protagonist leads a life that would make anyone envious of him and, in the end, he has the last laugh on the white man by intermarrying. And, in Passing, the Black middle class lead a life of their own. When the Black women pass for white, they, in a sense, laugh at the follies of the white world in differentiating races by creating a colour line.

However, I presume that Johnson's Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured man and Nella Larsen's Passing, can also be seen as explorations of the contradictions inherent in the Black experience of middle-class life, including their inability to overcome racial discrimination, objectification, and irrational hatred by their elevated lifestyle, refined manners, and impressive achievements¹². For Black elites, many of the social benefits that should have been attached to their class status were effectively negated by their racial identity. To dramatize these, Johnson and Larsen draw characters who are, by virtue of their social class, education and appearance, unusual in the extreme.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say that in the novels of James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen, the Ex-Coloured man and Clare Kendry are compelled to assume false identities that ensure social survival but their "passing" result in psychological suicide. "Passing" for white, their novels remind us, is one way this game is played. And in James Weldon Johnson's novel the Ex-Coloured Man does not endeavour to make any value judgment upon his actions. But, rather, the novel gives us a platform to analyse the protagonist's actions in the light of those conditions which were prevalent in the twentieth-century United States of America. The racial conditions in America compel him not only to suppress his dream of being a Black artist, who can make history and represent a race, but to take up and perform the role of a moderately successful white man. Nella Larsen, through the theme of "passing" in the novel, comments on issues of marginality and cultural dualism in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, Nella Larsen's Passing depicts the complexity of the racism and sexism which confront the Black woman in her quest for an assimilated and unified identity. And significantly, Nella Larsen's most striking insights are into emotional dilemmas confronting Black women like Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. And the two novels on the theme of "passing" written by Black, rather, "mulatto" authors give us an idea of how the white skinned Blacks in the USA play with the rules of colour division, rules which demand that one accepts a position within a predetermined hierarchy.

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