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**RACIAL IDENTITY THROUGH A TRAUMA BASED APPROACH IN
PASSING (1929) BY NELLA LARSEN AND *THE VANISHING HALF*
(2020) BY BRIT BENNETT**

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ÖZET

Gizem Keçeli, Nella Larsen'in *Passing* (1929) ve Brit Bennett'in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) Romanlarında Travma Temelli Bir Yaklaşımla Irksal Kimlik, Başkent Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı, 2024.

Bu tez, Nella Larsen'in *Passing* (1929) ve Brit Bennett'in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) adlı eserlerindeki ırk ayrımcılığı temasını travma teorisi merceğinden incelemektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, ırksal kimlik ve toplumsal beklentileri müzakere eden karakterlerin yaşadıkları deneyimleri ve psikolojik dinamiklerini yakından inceleyerek, ırksal travmanın bu edebi eserlerdeki bireylerin psikolojik yapıları ve toplulukların dinamikleri üzerindeki önemli etkilerine ışık tutmaktır. Psikoloji ve edebiyat eleştirisi disiplinlerinden multidisipliner çerçeveler kullanılarak, ırksal travmanın ana karakterlerin deneyimleri boyunca ortaya çıktığı karmaşık yolları araştırmak için nitel bir metin analizi metodolojisi sunulmaktadır. Irksal sınıflandırmanın incelikleri, nesiller arası travma, kimlik oluşumu ve ırksal geçiş, incelenen başlıca konular arasında yer alıyor. Irksal travmanın teorik çerçevesi, karakterlerin psikolojik mücadelelerini, kişilerarası ilişkilerini ve toplumsal sınırları incelemek için eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunuyor. Böylece, ırksal baskının tarihsel miraslarının anlatılarda nasıl yankılandığı incelenerek sistematik ırkçılığın bireysel bilinç üzerindeki süregelen sonuçları açıklığa kavuşturulmaktadır. Ayrıca bu çalışmada, Larsen ve Bennett'in anlatı yapısı, karakterizasyon ve sembolizm gibi edebi araçları kullanarak ırksal travmanın karmaşık yönlerini nasıl gösterdikleri analiz edilmektedir. Bu amaçla, bu çalışma, yakın okumalar ve karşılaştırmalı analizler yoluyla bu yazarların ırksal adaletsizlik mirasını ele aldıkları birçok ama birbiriyle ilişkili yolu göstermektedir. Özetle, bu çalışmada ırk, travma ve edebiyat hakkındaki daha geniş söyleme ırksal kimlik inşasının inceliklerine dair yeni perspektifler eklenmiştir. Irksal travma teorik çerçevesinin bu edebi metinlere uygulanması yoluyla bu çalışma, bu tehlikeli ortamlarda gezinen bireylerin eylemliliklerine ve dayanıklılıklarına ışık tutmayı ve aynı zamanda sistemik ırkçılığın neden olduğu derin ve sıklıkla görünmeyen yaraların daha derin bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ırksal travma, geçiş, Nella Larsen, Brit Bennett, ırksal ayrımcılık

ABSTRACT

Gizem Keçeli, Racial Identity Through a Trauma Based Approach in *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett, Başkent University, Institute of Social Sciences, Master's of American Culture and Literature with Thesis, 2024.

This thesis analyzes the theme racial discrimination in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) through the lens of trauma theory. The aim of this study is to shed light on the significant effects of racial trauma on the psychological makeup of individuals and the dynamics of communities within these literary works by closely examining the lived experiences and psychological dynamics of characters negotiating racial identity and social expectations. Utilizing multidisciplinary frameworks from the disciplines of psychology and literary criticism, a qualitative textual analysis methodology to investigate the complex ways in which racial trauma is manifested throughout the experiences of the main characters is provided. The intricacies of racial classification, intergenerational trauma, identity formation, and racial passing are among the main subjects that are examined. The theoretical framework of racial trauma offers a critical perspective to study the characters' psychological struggles, interpersonal relationships, and societal boundaries. Thus, the ongoing consequences of systematic racism on individual consciousness by examining the ways that historical legacies of racial oppression resonate through the narratives are clarified. Additionally, in this study, how Larsen and Bennett illustrate the complex aspects of racial trauma using literary devices including narrative structure, characterization, and symbolism is analyzed. To this end, this study demonstrates the many yet related ways in which these writers address the legacy of racial injustice through close readings and comparative analysis. To sum up, fresh perspectives on the intricacies of racial identity construction to the larger discourse about race, trauma, and literature are added in this study. Through the application of a racial trauma theoretical framework to these literary texts, this study aims to shed light on the agency and resilience of individuals navigating these dangerous environments while also contributing to a deeper understanding of the deep and frequently unseen wounds caused by systemic racism.

Keywords: racial trauma, passing, Nella Larsen, Brit Bennett, racial segregation

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INTRODUCTION

1. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This thesis aims to discuss, analyze and compare Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) respectively by investigating the characters' traumatic experiences based on their racial identities. They both discuss the horrific experiences that African American women—despite their apparent white appearance—had because of racial segregation. Besides, since there is almost a century between the two novels, this study aims to find out how the portrayals of the characters differ because of the time gap in between. The fact that these writers describe the lives of African American women who have been subjected to racial discrimination, the traumas they have experienced, and the ways of healing they have experienced, can be attributed to their own backgrounds. In an interview of Bennett, in the *Guardian* (July 2020), she implies this reality as follows:

Interviewer: How did your mother's upbringing in the Jim Crow south inspire the novel?

Bennett: She told me about a town she remembered hearing about when she was a child, where everyone intermarried so their children would just get lighter and lighter. A town that was so invested in lightness that it wasn't just a matter of preference, it was something that was almost genetically engineered. I started to think about what it would be like to live in that town, to subscribe to that ideology, to reject that ideology, and then to actually be dark-skinned in a place like that.

Both Larsen and Bennett come from an African American background and their mixed-race background has created obstacles for them, more so for Larsen, at every stage of life. But just as they themselves did not surrender and continued to be strong women; one can observe almost similar endings for their characters. Trauma coping mechanisms of the four female characters in the two novels together with their families have enabled them to stand out and tall in their societies, with the exception of Clare.

This study adopts the arguments of the forerunners of trauma research who are Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra. The first chapter will focus on the issues of the perception of racial and gender identities and the resulting traumatic

experiences in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the second chapter will elaborate on the same issues in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. In the conclusion chapter, it is observed that both novels, although written in different periods, provide examples of the oppression of black communities and that these experiences lead to deep-rooted traumas in individuals. Strangely, the representation of black characters has not changed in the hundred years since these novels were written. While these two novels are distinct ones with different settings and time periods, they share some fundamental similarities such as the theme of racial identity and the complexities surrounding it, the concept of 'passing', the complexities of family relationships and the search for identity and a sense of belonging.

African American novelist and nurse Nella Larsen, Nellie in her birth certificate, is renowned for her contributions to the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and intellectual movement that took place in Harlem, New York City. She was born on April 13, 1891, in Chicago, Illinois, to a white mother and a black father. And she passed away in New York City on March 30, 1964. She also had a sister, Anna, from another father, 'who was light enough to pass'. In *In Search of Nella Larsen – A Biography of the Color Line*, Hutchinson (2006), states that customers who visited the Larsen residence most likely thought that the 'colored girl' was an apprentice or servant rather than the dressmaker's daughter, and it is possible that Nellie and Anna did not dispel this belief for commercial reasons (p. 41). In Chicago, white people frequently lost their jobs if it was found that they had black spouses or kids. Because they were assumed to be unrelated, a form of invisibility or 'passing' was (and still is) a normal part of daily life of the majority of members of black-white interracial families. And it was just as well in certain cases. It is clear that there are fragments of her own life in her novel and that this was inevitable. One way for authors to overcome and heal from this kind of trauma may be to reflect it in their characters. A black girl who has been rejected by her mother and society all her life cannot be expected to produce a work that is very heartwarming. The strong stance she maintains in her life is reflected in her characters, and it is her foremost duty to give a message to others like her. Instead of giving up or blending in with the crowd, accepting one's own self and standing up for oneself completes the process of searching for identity.

Larsen's most notable works include two novels: *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Both novels explore issues of race, identity, and the complexities of being biracial in early 20th century America. Larsen's writing often delves into themes of racial passing, where light-skinned African Americans would sometimes pass as white to avoid the social

and economic limitations imposed by racism. While Nella Larsen gained recognition during the Harlem Renaissance for her unique perspective and explorations of racial identity, her literary career was relatively short-lived. After the release of *Passing*, she encountered numerous personal and professional difficulties. Larsen struggled with her mental health, ran into financial problems, and was accused of plagiarism. Due to these difficulties, she withdrew from the literary community and eventually sought employment as a nurse.

Despite Nella Larsen's brief literary career, her writings are still analyzed and praised for their nuanced depictions of race and identity in early 20th century America. A summary of Larsen's literary career is given by Stringer (2022) as follows; *Passing*, a 1929 novel about African American women, received positive reviews and Larsen was the first black woman awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. However, her success was fragile due to plagiarism accusations. Larsen never published again and worked as a nurse later on. Interest revived in her fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, and her novels have been used to examine class, gender, sexuality, and racial identification in African American literature (para. 1). Her books have gained recognition for their subtle examinations of the difficulties and social constraints that people who are negotiating racial boundaries and cultural expectations must encounter. Larsen's sharp analyses of racial identity, intercultural conflict, and reflection offer insightful perspectives of the nuances of the African American experience in the early 20th century.

Larsen's *Passing* was originally released in 1929. The novella, which is set in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance era, addresses the complex theme of racial identity and the practice of 'passing,' in which someone of mixed racial background decides to show themselves as a member of a racial group other than their own. The novel centers on two African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who moved out of each other's lives long time ago. Irene is the one who kept her loyalty to her race, whereas Clare is the one who is brave enough to pass for white. As their friendship intensifies, tensions arise and secrets are revealed, setting up a spectacular climax. Larsen explores the psychological and emotional issues that result from leading a life of dishonesty and the continual worry of being found through the characters of Irene and Clare. Along with these topics, the book explores racism, socioeconomic class, gender norms, and the limited choices available to African Americans at the time. *Passing* is a potent examination of identity, the pursuit of belonging, and the compromises people must make in order to function in a racially segregated society.

It is still a notable literary work that raises issues of race, privilege, societal expectations and the complexity of interpersonal relationships.

American novelist Brit Bennett, on the other hand, provides the implied reader with other valuable examples of what Nella Larsen did. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is also a powerful investigation of the search for belonging, identity, and the sacrifices people have to make to survive in a society that is divided based on race. In her writing, she examines issues related to race, identity, and family dynamics. Bennett's writing has earned praise for its profoundness, emotional resonance, and sophisticated understanding of interpersonal dynamics. She has received praise for her ability to portray the nuance and complexity of these topics. Her writing frequently examines the difficulties of race, gender, and identity in modern America. Brit Bennett has won numerous honors and awards for her work. Her first book, *The Mothers*, was released in 2016. It was a New York Times bestseller and earned favorable reviews. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is widely acclaimed and enjoyed by audiences. It was chosen as one of Oprah's Book Club selections and spent more than a year on the New York Times bestseller list. Race, identity, and the value of familial ties are among the topics that are explored in the book. Bennett has also received recognition as one of the '5 Under 35' awardees from the National Book Foundation, which celebrates up-and-coming young authors of fiction. Bennett continues to make substantial contributions to modern writing as a well-respected and well-known author. She is highly acknowledged as a gifted and significant voice in the literary world, and her writings have won countless honors and awards.

Bennett approaches similar problems in a similar way. Just like in the other novel, in *The Vanishing Half*, which was published in 2020, issues of race, privilege, and the complexity of interpersonal relationships are explored. The story spans several decades exploring the themes of race, identity, family, and the impact of choices. In other words, the story jumps about, following the twins and their kids from the 1950s to the late 1980s, with swift assurance. The difficulties that Stella and Desiree face are subtly and creatively reflected in the difficulties that their children will later face in the future. Desiree and Stella Vignes, twin sisters, are followed throughout the novel as they grow throughout the 1950s in the little Louisianan town of Mallard. The girls are raised believing that because Mallard is recognized for having a large population of light-skinned African Americans, they will have an easier time getting ahead in life. The twins do leave home when they are sixteen years old, but eventually their paths separate from each other. After a disastrous marriage,

Desiree comes back to Mallard with her dark-skinned daughter, Jude. Stella, on the other hand, cuts all relations with her family, including her twin sister, and decides to 'pass' as white. Because of her choice, Stella lives an entirely different life while keeping her ethnicity a secret from both her husband, Blake, and their daughter, Kennedy. The story switches back and forth between the lives of Desiree, Stella, and their respective daughters, Jude and Kennedy. The narrative digs deeply into the nuances of each character's personal experiences and the various decisions they come to regarding their ethnic identities. The lives of individuals intertwine and clash as the years go by, exposing the effects of their decisions and the secrets they've held. The novel examines how aging affects people, how people seek a sense of belonging, and how family ties have an eternal impact.

The Vanishing Half explores issues including racial passing, colorism, the construction of identity, and how prejudice and cultural expectations affect people's lives. It poses significant issues of self-acceptance, racism, and how our individual histories are interrelated. Overall, the book offers a provocative examination of identity, ethnicity, and the quest for authenticity and fulfillment in a world that frequently imposes rigid categories and standards. A lengthy history of racial oppression gives rise to the act of racial passing. McKeon (2014) defines racial passing as "the external perception of being white – the privilege, power, and civic membership afforded to someone recognized as such" (para. 3). Therefore, the issue of passing is about evaluating the causes and consequences of passing. Wald (2014), on the other hand, states that passing is there to "illuminate complex questions of performance (how we "do" who we are), knowledge (how we "know" who we "are"), and authenticity (how we validate ourselves or receive validation for who we "are")" (p. vii). An exploration of identity is on the stage, and this can be monitored through the characters' choices of passing and not passing.

Although a century apart, the perspective of both novels is similar. Slavery no longer exists, but racism does not disappear under any circumstances. The slavery that the characters' ancestors may have experienced is likely to have caused trauma through gene transmission. Balaev (2008) defines massive trauma by stating that due to the timeless, recurrent, and contagious nature of traumatic experience and memory, massive trauma experienced by a group in the past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender. On the other hand, personal trauma can be transmitted to members of the same racial, ethnic, or gender group who were not there at the time of the incident; yet,

because of their shared social or biological characteristics, the trauma experienced by the individual and the group merges into one (p. 152). Thus, it can be clearly observed that the traumas that the characters in these two novels experienced may be transgenerational traumatic experiences, like an ancestral heritage from their ancestors whom they have never met. Krippner and Barrett (2019) explain transgenerational trauma by stating that "... methylation of DNA in a traumatized parent may result in behaviors around the offspring that cause similar methylation patterns anew in one or more generations" (p. 56). Besides, Prager (2016) states that the impact of the traumatic past is still felt today, influencing how people interact with each other, with parents and their kids, and even with specific representatives of different institutional orders (p. 16). As a result, the traumatic experiences that the passing characters experienced cause them to pass for white. Thus, they change the way they interact with other people around them. In fact, they have not only changed the way they communicate with people, they have also changed the people around them by leaving their places. In other words, the absence of slavery unfortunately does not mean the end of discrimination.

African American women have been subjected to segregation in every situation, regardless of their living conditions. This discrimination forced them to experience different traumas and to find a solution for themselves, even if it is through unintentional death. Unable to endure segregation, these women have at times sought ways to help other victims and at other times they tried their best to escape this reality. Unfortunately, despite the passage of time, one way or another, this segregation has not come to an end. A century later, it is still segregation that African American women face, and it is the main cause of their trauma. Social commentary on the racial dynamics of the respective eras is offered in both novels. There are also some differences between the two works. *Passing* has a deeper look into two friends' lives whereas *The Vanishing Half* is centered upon the lives of twin sisters. In spite of these variations, both novels provide deep insights into the nuances of racial identity and the effects of decisions about race and passing. The friendship between the two female protagonists and the fallout from Irene's encounter with Clare are the main subjects of *Passing*. *The Vanishing Half* focuses on the themes of family, motherhood, and personal development while exploring the lives and decisions of two sets of twin sisters.

These two novels will be analyzed through trauma theory together with gender and race-related approaches so as to figure out the consequences of segregation over black communities. Blackness is defined by Schöenfeld (2014) as "... imagined to comprise a set

of physical and character traits, was believed to be carried in and transmitted by the blood” (p. 99). It is therefore not surprising that blood continues to be such a potent and recurring motif in stories about mixed-race characters. The racial uncertainty causes some characters – one from each novel, to lose their identities, whereas the other characters are decisive about their races, thus, identities. Being black, being a black woman, being discriminated, not being allowed to be an individual and being marginalized even by their spouses are the most explanatory reasons for the traumas these characters’ experience. Despite all this, the characters have developed their own ways of healing, overcoming or ignoring. At this point, it is obvious that ignoring is also a way of healing, rightly or wrongly. Since both novels contain traumatic events that are rooted in the characters’ racial backgrounds and their genders, analyzing the novels by applying trauma theory will delve deeper into the root cause of the characters' experiences and reveal a different approach towards them.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is a theoretical framework that literary studies use to analyze how traumatic situations are portrayed in writing. It examines how trauma is portrayed, processed, and possibly resolved in literary writings using psychological and psychiatric perspectives. The importance of an individual's reaction to trauma and how this may impact their psychological and emotional health is emphasized by trauma theory. It acknowledges how trauma affects memory and how traumatic experiences are frequently fragmented and challenging to explain. Freud (1920) defines the term 'traumatic' as;

We may use the term *traumatic* to describe those excitations from outside that are strong enough to break through the protective barrier; in my view the notion of 'trauma' cries out to be applied to such a case given that the resistance to stimuli is normally so effective. (p. 166)

Trauma studies emerged as a branch and an interest area of psychoanalysis. Especially after the Vietnam war, American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognized the phenomenon, which had been ignored beforehand, as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) including the symptoms of shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis. (Caruth, 2016, p. 3). It is obvious that trauma is taken into consideration as a concept which is inseparable from PTSD, and psychoanalysis. Caruth (2016) also states that, the relation of PTSD with the specific kinds of events constitutes "category A" of the APA's definition of PTSD, which is "a response to an event "outside the range of usual human experience"" (p. 3). All in all, psychoanalysis together with psychiatry, sociology, history and literature come together in terms of trauma in order to explain what has happened or to cure. Literature has been used as a way to cure both the individual and the society depending on the traumatic experience. As Sarıkaya-Şen (2016) states,

Consequently, it seems that the representation of trauma in art, especially in literature, is of great significance. However, the representation of trauma does not necessarily mean that literary works describe or copy something existing out there. In fact, trauma narratives might present traumatic content when they represent trauma. (p. 26)

In fact, literature depicts traumatic experiences by blending both the presentation and the representation of traumatic content. As there are types of traumas, such as individual, collective and social, authors prefer to cure themselves individually or to cure the society collectively through their works. Some historical incidents have been the reason why authors preferred to write about those issues constantly. As a witness of the incidents, such as the Holocaust or 9/11, authors aimed curing both themselves and the society by their writings. A way to cure such traumatic experiences is responding and what these people do by writing or by drawing or even by singing has also been a way to respond to what happened and what had been experienced.

In the 1960s, a number of social issues led to the development of trauma theory, including the recognition of the prevalence of violence against women and children (including rape, battering, and incest), the identification of post-traumatic stress disorder in (Vietnam) war veterans, and the understanding of the psychological scars left by torture and genocide, particularly in light of the Holocaust (Mambrol, 2017, para. 2). In other words, traumatic events are defined as the violent, difficult-to-forget experiences that a person has and that have an impact on their lives. Thus, since these events have become more prevalent in communities, trauma theory has been on the rise. In the 1960s, there was an increase in research, thinking, and awareness of trauma due to these societal challenges and the traumas they brought with them. Since then, trauma theory has developed, examining the psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of different traumatic experiences and their implications for people and societies. LaCapra (2016) suggested these ideas about the dimensions of the duality of history and trauma;

Trauma and its causes may indeed be a prominent feature of history, notably modern history, which should not be airbrushed or denied. But simply to conflate history with trauma is to obscure dimensions of history that may help to avert the incidence of trauma or to mitigate and at least counteract its effects. These dimensions include efforts to diminish or even eliminate the causes of historical traumas often stemming from extreme differences of wealth, status, and power that facilitate oppression, abuse, and scapegoating with respect to class, gender, race, or species. They also include practices and policies that help to enable the working through of debilitating post-traumatic

symptoms and foster the difficult, recurrent, often interrupted movement from victim to survivor and social agent. (xi)

A balanced approach to studying history and trauma should be taken, taking into account both the significance of trauma and the larger picture of the past, as well as the necessity of treating the root causes of the trauma and encouraging recovery and resilience. History is not just a record of traumatic events but also includes efforts to recognize the roots - such as wealth inequality, power imbalances and social injustices - and prevent trauma. Nath (2022) stated that a traumatizing sequence of events may often leave a person mentally disturbed and undermine their sense of self. A trauma survivor's condition deteriorates if they are unable to talk about the incident and experiences they have had. They also experience trauma as a result of society's refusal to acknowledge their emotions (p. 40). A person's mental health and sense of self can be seriously harmed by trauma, particularly if they are unable to communicate or comprehend what has happened to them. Their condition may worsen and more psychological damage may result from their inability to discuss the traumatic experiences.

Trauma theory in literature, on the other hand, is concerned with how authors depict trauma and its consequences on people and communities using language and narrative strategies. This can involve examining how trauma is portrayed in particular literary genres, such as postcolonial literature or literature about war, or how it is addressed in the writing of particular authors. Literary trauma is essential for illuminating the deep effects of trauma on people and communities, encouraging empathy, and serving as an environment for thought-provoking conversations about societal issues. Through the perspective of fiction, it enables the implied reader to examine the complexities of human suffering and perseverance. Balaev (2012) explains literary trauma theory as "... a burgeoning discipline that examines extreme emotional states and profound changes of perception in a text by utilizing psychological theories on trauma and memory" (p.3), and she adds that "... trauma is a speechless void, unrepresentable, inherently pathologic, timeless, and repetitious" (p. 3). The experiences of the characters as African American women in the American literature can also be related to trauma theory. Even if the language used by these writers is not traumatic, all the events experienced by the characters can be observed as traumatic. With her cross-disciplinary approach, Caruth (1996) suggests that,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (p.12)

Psychoanalysis and literature use the same language to examine and portray the intricacies of the human psyche and the lasting effects of traumatic experiences. “Once traumatized individuals become haunted by intrusive re-experiences of their trauma, they generally start organizing their lives around avoiding having the emotions that these intrusions evoke” (van der Kolk & Ducey, 1989 as cited in van der Kolk & McFarlane, 12). This explains why the main characters and their daughters experience the same issues, which can be called as the results of the repetitive incidents. In trauma fiction, repetition is a potent tool for illustrating the persistent, invasive, and disruptive character of traumatic experiences. It highlights the long-lasting effects of traumatic events, helps to produce a realistic representation of how trauma affects memory and identity. Also, repetition is an element used in trauma fiction to make the implied reader feel the distractive attitudes of characters. Baelo-Allue (2012) argues this issue by stating:

The chaotic aspects of trauma are underlined through shifts in time and memory, a variety of voices and subject positioning, visual images, textual gaps, repetitions and shifting viewpoints. In this way, readers are able to feel the disorienting positions of characters going through traumatic experiences. (p. 70)

Psychological trauma, usually referred to as psychic trauma, is the term for the emotional and psychological reaction to an intensely upsetting or startling incident. It is distinguished by the severe disruption of a person's sense of safety, security, and wellbeing. Psychic trauma can be caused by a variety of things, including physical or sexual abuse, physical or mental violence, accidents, war, and witnessing or experiencing life-threatening situations. Caruth (1995) explains psychic trauma as “Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face” (p. 3). Intense feelings of sadness and the knowledge of terrible realities—which many people may not have faced or completely understood—are both parts of psychic

trauma. Traumatic occurrences sometimes expose victims to severe situations or events that contradict their preexisting notions about themselves, other people, and the world. On the other hand, Freud (1939) exemplifies “traumatic neurosis” as follows;

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis”. (p. 84)

As a result, it may be claimed that traumatic events leave undeniable marks on the lives of individuals in addition to confronting them with the grim reality. These two novels also involve the traumatic incidents that left unforgettable marks on the characters’ lives, such as the fear of similar horrific consequences as a result of acquired experiences.

The search for the identity can be named as another reason for the experienced traumas. Although identity is innate, it seems to be the only innate characteristic that can be socially constructed and changed. This leads directly to a traumatic experience, because the social environment starts to change the only thing that has existed since conception, the identity, and the feeling of abandonment arises. According to the psychologist and narratologist Michael Bamberg (2013), identity “designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory” (p. 132). In other words, there are too many determining factors for identity. Even a slightest change in one of those determiners may cause very big discrepancies in a person’s identity. Mostly it is believed that one is born with her/his identity already. However, outer factors may have an important impact while shaping this identity. One’s identity starts to be shaped by the parents from the very beginning of life. Thus, parents are the foremost factors in determining the identity. Then comes the other factors such as occupation, social environment etc. Literature is a form of art where both authors and the implied reader may find themselves. On the other hand, authors may create concept maps about the determiners of identity or they may use their works as a reflection of their self-identities. Barstad, Knutsen & Vestli (2019) state in their book that identity concerns have been the subject of numerous narratives, ranging from the classical Bildungsroman, which describes the

protagonist's growth and education from childhood to adulthood, through postmodern examinations of the fragmented self in literature and life experiences (pp. 1-2). Identity concerns have always been on the stage however one's understanding of the 'self' is constantly evolving from one definition to another. As a result, it can be brought forward that there are more than one definitions of the 'self' which is the underlying factor of identity.

Klages (2009) argues that the humanist model defines the 'self' as a conscious being with the capacity for logic and reason to learn the truth about how the world functions, who is capable of acting and believe in himself or herself without the influence of others, and who is also capable of thinking instinctually about the state of his or her own being (p. 89). The search for identity, in other words, the search for the self, can lead people to drag themselves into the unknown. Racial and gender discrimination interferes with this search. It ends in traumatic experiences because the person feels lost. George (2016) states that the painful legacy of enslavement has entrenched African American identity in paradox (p.13). The idea of race, which forms the basis of this identity, exposes African Americans to racism and the suffering that stems from this past, even while this identity is tasked with representing a people involved in a continuous struggle for social equality. African Americans' search for identity is incomplete because of racism. Previously subjected to oppression dating back to slavery, African Americans have often hidden their identities or sought ways to change them, such as passing. Being victimized in such a way because of their ancestral origins, which are in their blood and being, has caused them large-scale trauma.

On the other hand, Erikson (1995) comes up with two terminological matters about trauma:

First, in classic medical usage "trauma" refers not to the injury inflicted but to blow that inflicted it, not to the state of mind that ensues but to the event that provoked it. The term "post-traumatic stress disorder" is an accommodation to that medical convention. ... Second, in order to serve as a generally useful concept, "trauma" has to be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experience as well as from a discrete happening, from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event. (p.184)

Thus, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between trauma and stress. Trauma causes immediate pain, while stress gradually exhausts the person. On the other hand, trauma can also occur as a result of continuous persecution and can gradually consume a person. To summarize, it can be said that the effects of trauma and stress may be similar, but they have separate definitions. Passing is like a momentary pain, but the fact that it is the product of traumatized minds cannot be denied. As a result of experiences from the past, perhaps even genetically transmitted, a person decides to pass. From that moment on, the pain is recurring and growing, but the person has already made an identification that cannot be reversed. Negrea (2014), on the other hand, defines passing by stating that in addition to undermining racial categories by exposing how light-skinned ‘Blacks’ who decide to exist as white confirm the racial limitations that their passing demonstrates as socially constructed, the act also undermines white supremacists’ claim that whiteness is an exclusive property (p.39). According to this definition, by emphasizing that being white is not that important, those who pass both devalue white supremacy and try to prove that this discrimination is in fact a social construct.

Racial discrimination based on trauma is a serious and multifaceted problem that includes the psychological and emotional damage brought about by both individual and institutional racism. This type of trauma can impact people’s mental health, sense of self, and general well-being, with significant short-term and long-term ramifications for both individuals and communities. Racial discrimination victims frequently have identity issues. When people internalize unfavorable stereotypes, it can cause an identity crisis. In this situation, they may experience conflicting feelings regarding their racial or cultural origin. Carter and Pieterse (2020) state that “race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) model offers a conceptual framework of propositions about how specific types of incidents of racism are linked to specific emotional reactions that reflect racial-related stress or RBTS” (p. 99). Thus, distinct incidents of racism trigger specific emotional and psychological responses. However, it is not only the individual who has such responses. Racial trauma impacts individuals as well as communities, affecting family dynamics, community cohesion, and cultural continuity, and can be passed down through generations. Another definition of racial trauma is that it “refers to dangerous experiences related to threats, prejudices, harm, shame, humiliation, and guilt associated with various types of racial discrimination either of victims directly or through witnesses” (Comas-Diaz, 2016; Helms et al., 2010, as quoted in Cenat, 2023, p. 676). This definition of racial trauma emphasizes both direct and indirect

experiences of threats, prejudice, and violence, which effectively conveys the complex and widespread nature of the pain caused by racial segregation. Similarly, Lebron et al. (2015) define the trauma of racism as;

The trauma of racism refers to the cumulative negative impact of racism on the lives of people of color. Encompassing the emotional, psychological, health, economic and social effects of multigenerational and historical trauma, trauma of racism relates to the damaging effects of ongoing societal and intra-social-group racial micro aggressions, internalized racism, overt racist experiences, discrimination and oppression within the lives of people of color. (p.10)

Racial trauma has severe psychological and emotional effects both on individuals and communities. Ramazani and Fazlzadeh (2016) state that people who suffer from racial trauma develop a sense of estrangement from both themselves and other people, feeling bewildered, dissatisfied, displaced, and ultimately alone. As the weaker members of a racially divided community, the trauma they have experienced makes them even more susceptible to prejudice (p. 36). As people become more and more susceptible to prejudice, their trauma increases simultaneously. Seeing that others do not show the same care that they show themselves leads to disappointment and therefore trauma. Carter and Pieterse (2020) explain the historical background of race-based traumatic stress by stating that originally centered mostly on racial issues, the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to psychology's current emphasis on multiculturalism. According to Carter, psychological literature once held the concept that people of color were inferior. This paradigm has since shifted, primarily as a result of academics challenging this view and claiming that people of color in the US are culturally distinct rather than inferior (p. 75). The 1950s and 1960s civil rights movements sparked a shift in psychology toward multiculturalism, which in turn challenged and transformed the antiquated idea of racial inferiority. In psychological literature, scholars like Carter have played a crucial role in rewriting the story, highlighting cultural uniqueness, and demolishing biased preconceptions.

2.2. The One-drop Rule

In the 17th and 18th centuries, interracial relationships between African slaves and European indentured servants in Virginia and Maryland began. Despite antimiscegenation

laws, these relationships persisted, sometimes through consent or force. White slave owners often raped their black female slaves, creating multiracial children known as ‘mulattoes’¹. This led to the informal one-drop rule, where anyone with any trace of black blood was considered black. This allowed white slave owners to justify the enslavement of more slaves with white skin and appearance (Khanna, 2010, p. 98). The history of slavery in the United States is where the term one-drop rule originated. It was created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the era of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation. Hollinger (2005) states that the principle was reinforced during the Jim Crow era when opposition to social equality for black people benefited from a narrow perception of black identity (p. 20). This was enforced by laws prohibiting black-white marriages, but there was less stringent regulation of non-marital and sexual relationships between white males and black females.

The idea was used to uphold the racial hierarchy of the time and to defend discrimination and racial segregation. American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines racism as “a form of prejudice that generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of a group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases, it can lead to violence” (para. 1). The term refers to the stigmatization of people belonging to certain groups because of certain characteristics they carry, such as skin color, hair style or eye shape. However, according to Jordan (2014), it is believed that the primary physiognomic characteristic used to distinguish between races is color. After all, for many years, Africans have been referred to with Portuguese/Spanish or the English term of color, ‘Negro’ or ‘black’. Although variations in hairstyles and facial features are acknowledged, they are rarely discussed in public in the predominantly white society (p. 101). Instead, skin color has been and continues to be the primary social indicator, with the arrangement of hair, nose width, lips, and other features frequently serving as supplementary reinforcements. The fact that these variables are all facial emphasized how crucial outward appearance is in social settings.

Despite all the other markers, skin color is still the most noticeable and socially noteworthy indicator of racial identity. There was a way to legalize this skin color related racial segregation by the ‘one-drop rule’ within the context of Jim Crow laws. The easiest way for an emerging term to be internalized by society is to legalize it. Otherwise, people will not take this newly introduced term seriously. So, in order to raise society’s awareness

¹ a person who has one black parent and one white parent or is of mixed black and white origin (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

about this issue, 'one drop rule' was legalized. Michaels (1994) explains under which circumstances a person is counted as black as follows;

... what is being enforced is not the claim that one drop of black blood makes a person black; what's being enforced is the claim that the perception that one drop of black blood makes a person black makes a person black. (p. 767)

The term one-drop rule is a historical and cultural term used in the United States to describe racial identity and establish racial classification. If an individual has even a drop of black/African blood or African ancestry, they are identified as black, even if they appear white. The term has spread across states over time and has even been explicitly legalized in some of them. Hollinger (2005) uses one drop rule and one hate rule synonymously (p. 18). In other words, he argues that racial discrimination is also an act of hatred. However, Khanna (2010) reminds that this term does not apply to the majority of black-white people who cannot pass. Instead, they were identified as black by others (p.98). Scales-Trent (1995) clearly emphasizes this dilemma and what it causes in *Notes of a White Black Woman* as follows:

Like my parents, I am a black American with white skin, an African American with both African and European ancestors. Thus, I live a life that is often disjointed, troubling. I also see the world in a different way...For my position does not allow me the luxury of thinking that the notion of race makes any sense. If you are black and white at the same time, once you finally realize that it is not you that is strange, you realize something very strange is going on in this society. Perhaps more directly and more starkly than other Americans, I understand "race" as a socially created metaphor, for my very existence unsettles expectations of "race". (p. 4)

The uncomfortable aspects of the complexities and contradictions inherent in racial identity are realities that cannot be ignored. Society's rigid racial categories unfortunately subject these individuals to stereotyping for generations.

Race, as a social construct, is in fact a completely artificial form of stigmatization. As time passed with a modernizing world day by day, the one drop rule was not completely gone but at least people started to get used to it. The dilemma that black-white people

encounter stems from the intricacies of managing several racial identities within a culture that frequently maintains distinct borders. This experience encompasses psychological effects, outward challenges related to discrimination and societal perception, and internal struggles with identity and belonging. Fostering a more compassionate and inclusive society that values and appreciates the diversity of multiracial identities requires an understanding of these difficulties. Liz (2018), on the other hand, defines one-drop rule as perpetuating the idea that being white is a fixed characteristic of a person. In other words, even though some people have some White heritage, they are not considered White until all of their lineage originates in Europe. That is what it means to be White, according to the logic of the one-drop rule, which states that any individual self-identifying as White would inevitably be genetically similar to the members of the original European population (p. 254). This explains why any person with one drop of black blood cannot be considered as white. The one-drop rule requires many people to identify as black, regardless of their true look or cultural heritage. This frequently results in discriminatory encounters and a confused sense of identity.

2.3. The Theme of Passing

Racial passing is a term which occurred in the antebellum period and it meant passing as white for escaping from slavery. The appearance helped people to pass so that they could behave as if they were not black, despite their racial ancestry. The definition of racial passing is as follows;

Racial passing occurs when a person classified as a member of a racial group is accepted or perceived (“passes”) as a member of another. Historically, the term has been used primarily in the United States to describe a black or brown person or of multiracial ancestry who assimilated into the white majority to escape the legal and social conventions of racial segregation and discrimination (“Passing (racial identity)”, 2022).

Racial passing is a multifaceted phenomenon that provides profound understandings of the nature of race, identity, and social inequality. In fact, passing, a term used to describe a minority, has been useful for individuals belonging to that group to gain a place in the society. In other words, if the skin color is light enough, a person can assimilate himself or herself into the white, and more accepted, majority. Thus, people feel the need to pass into

white to adapt to the environment, to be accepted and to be respected. However, it is not clear whether racial passing is a cause of trauma or a coping strategy. This is actually a completely intertwined situation. In other words, even if a person chooses to pass because they are trying to overcome a trauma, they may be exposed to completely new traumatic experiences after passing. So, there is a blurred line between the two possibilities. Thus, a complex relationship between trauma and coping is embodied in racial passing. It is both a strategic response to the oppressive realities of a racist society and a potential source of new, multifaceted traumas. As a result, the ambiguity of this issue cannot be denied.

The theme of 'passing' has a very important place in American literature, especially in African American literature. In African American literature, the theme of passing for white is a potent and intricate topic that delves into matters of race, identity, and social mobility. The psychological and social dynamics of African Americans who choose to pass for white in order to avoid racial segregation is explored through this theme. The arbitrary nature of racial categories and society's obsession with whiteness are often criticized in this theme. To state the importance of this theme, Hobbs (2014) makes the following comment;

Literature is a critical artifact that provides powerful evidence of the salience of passing for many African Americans. Passing has been a dominant theme in African American fiction for the better part of a century. The particular ways that black writers represent passing and its dilemmas have much to tell us about the subjective experience, its social impact, and the eras in which these novels were produced. (p. 7)

As a theme which helps the implied reader of American literature to comprehend the experiences at an individualistic level, passing has an undeniable effect on American literature. Hobbs (2014) also adds that the fundamental element of passing is racial indeterminacy. The unavoidable result of racial mixture is racial ambiguity, which arises whenever disparate groups of individuals come into contact with one another. However, it is one's responses to the uncertainty that could irritate or unsettle society as a whole (p. 8). As an individualistic practice, passing is the effort of the individual to become someone else. Racial indeterminacy, because of the societies' norms, makes the individual isolated, or to put it differently alienated, from the society. Thus, the individual feels the need of re-identifying the self so that the isolation is disappeared. Gutterl (2013), on the other hand, states that the narrative aimed to provide a passing narrative that rejected racial ambiguity

as the sole access point to white experiences, criticizing the mulatto elite and W. E. B. Du Bois, who viewed racial passing as a logical extension of their genteel performance (p. 167). In fact, there are those who state in this way that the theme of passing also has an ironic use. It is used on purpose to criticize the meaninglessness and injustice of this 'white supremacy'.

With the help of slavery's disappearance, black segregation started to be a racial attitude only, which gave black people a bit of hope in terms of their equality with 'others'. Thus, people started to look for their rights as it was the first time that they felt like a real individual. Black Americans developed a newfound sense of pride as a result of the expanding Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, which supported equality in American society and the end of Jim Crow enslavement. Blackness was once discredited by Jim Crow laws and Southern slavery, but it was now elevated to a new level; the prevailing sentiment at the time was "Black is in" (Khanna, 2010, p. 99). The 1960s saw a shift in racial attitudes as well as the emergence of black pride and identity, which was fueled by Civil Rights Movement's pursuit of justice and equality for African Americans. The American struggle for racial equality and civil rights witnessed an entire shift during this time. If it is 'Black is in', it means that racial discrimination is starting to ease. Because at some point slavery ended and at least black people are now able to live for themselves and within themselves. The biggest influence on this is of course the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s, a lot of social and political changes took place in the United States with this movement. What cannot be ignored in this context is that the categorization of society began to change and black Americans began to seek a place for themselves in society.

It is not only their race but also their gender that causes the traumas that the women in the novels experience. Not only are these women subjected to social oppression because of their race, but they also have an inferior status in the society just because they are women. This oppression of women is emphasized not only in social life but also in written texts through the use of literary characters, mostly the ones who are mirroring the authors. In fact, this oppression and discrimination is presented in many different ways in literature. Tyson (2006) states that the literary works of (white) male authors describing experience from a (white) male point of view were considered as the standard of universality before the centuries-long struggle for women's equality finally emerged in literary studies in the late 1960s (p. 85). The reason for this is that the works of (white) female authors, as well as all authors of color, do not represent experiences from a (white) male point of view. Thus, they are not included in the canon of literature for not being universal. In the mid-1970s women

authors started to show up more regularly in the literary canon. However, they were not equally valued as male authors. The presentation of traditional gender roles in this or that way often has nothing to do with the author, but the quality of the implied reader's expectations of these roles is directly related to the author. A lot of historical instances can be counted as the reason for this discrimination, such as the law of equal pay for equal work. As a result, examining racial and gender-based discrimination under a single framework, rather than treating them as two separate issues, would be more helpful in unraveling the roots of the characters' traumas. Thus, trauma theory would be the most appropriate means of analyzing the lives of African American women, some of whom decide to pass for white to escape at least from racial oppression.

The psychological and emotional effects of passing in the context of racial identity can be better understood via the lens of trauma theory. Both *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* entails the ongoing denial and hiding of one's true racial identity, which frequently induces a condition of heightened awareness, fear, and internal conflict. As the characters continuously deal with the risk of their concealed ethnic histories being revealed, rejected, or dangerous, this might be considered as a type of psychological trauma. The causes of this psychological trauma are inseparable. In both novels, there are separate characters who accept their identities and live their lives in some way, as well as characters who have not yet completed their search for identity and have problems with adaptation to their real self. Although there is a century between them, the experiences of the characters do not differ much in terms of the periods in which they are fictionalized. However, considering the authors, it is expected that they reflect the styles of the periods they lived in and the conditions in the current time to their characters. What is emphasized is that even after a hundred years, what is actually experienced is still the same. For this reason, unfortunately, the treatment to which today's writers are subjected has not changed compared to a hundred years ago.

All in all, both novels will be analyzed through the perspective of trauma theory. Even though the two works were written in separate eras and focus on distinct aspects of trauma, when viewed through the prism of trauma theory, they have certain characteristics in common. Both novels explore the traumatic events brought on by racially and sexist segregated societies. In *Passing*, Larsen examines the psychological and emotional toll that the protagonist, Irene Redfield, experiences as a result of passing. She struggles with the need to fit in, the anxiety of constantly navigating an environment that minimizes her racial

identity, and the dread of being exposed to. Similar to this, Bennett addresses the pain endured by the protagonists in *The Vanishing Half*, who are light-skinned Black women who decide to pass for white, divorcing them from their racial and cultural history. Repressed emotions brought on by trauma is another theme that is discussed in both works. Irene and Clare repress their emotions and wants in *Passing*, especially those that are connected to their racial identities and actual selves. Due to this denial, tension and an unresolved trauma undertone build up. Similar to this, in *The Vanishing Half*, those who decide to pass bury their racial identity and memories of the past, which has emotional and psychological ramifications. Both these works deal with trauma in different ways, yet they have racial trauma and repressed emotions as common themes. The implied reader can appreciate the experiences of the people and the wider ramifications of trauma in society through the perspective provided by these topics.

CHAPTER 1

NAVIGATING RACIAL IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN NELLA LARSEN'S PASSING

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) focuses on how a 'mulatto' can have more than one life at once by passing. As Ginsberg (1996) defines, passing is a false 'white' persona assumed by a person who is legally and culturally classified as 'Negro' or black due to a portion of their African ancestry (p. 3). Writings by Larsen demonstrates how African Americans' inner life might be torn apart by uplift's demand for racial dedication. The uplift is about the glorification or superiorization of their racial identities. Because of her own mixed-race upbringing, Larsen was able to recognize that, even in the 1920s, the majority of Americans who were socially classified as 'Negroes' actually had mixed racial ancestry. This led Larsen to wonder how racial authenticity could exist if there was no such thing as 'pure' race (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2022, p. 537). Larsen was among those who had the chance to talk about their own community against all the difficulties. Her personal life was also struggling as she was one of those African Americans and in her works, she reflected this part of her identity through the characters she created. Wall (1986) supports this argument by stating that,

As they navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen's protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other. They fail. The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen's protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all "pass." Passing for white, Larsen's novels remind us, is only one way this game is played. (p. 98)

As they could not fit in the society like others, the majority of the society which were non-blacks, they created false identities so that they could become a part of the accepted majority. They could not take on the identity of their roots nor the false identity they created. This indirectly led both the characters in literary works and resulted in the real people's psychological suicide. What this horrific experience left them with was inertia, considering

it is inconceivable for an individual whose true self has been lost to discover their place in the world.

As a novella written during the Harlem Renaissance, *Passing* bears the characteristics of the period in which it was written. The Harlem neighborhood of New York City serves as the symbolic center of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American cultural movement that peaked in the 1920s. Though there was a lot of inventiveness in the artistic, performing, and musical arts during this time, literature was arguably the art form that was most important to African American writers during this period. The 'New Negro' movement reached its artistic peak during the Harlem Renaissance, when members started to celebrate their African heritage and to embrace self-expression. Aware of the popularity of primitivism and intrigued by the ideas of American cultural pluralism – which in some cases influenced by left-wing ideas, in other by the struggle for Black civil rights; they additionally acknowledged a market for books written by Black authors on 'Negro' subjects (Britannica). African American authors or artists had finally found a place for themselves in the world of art afterwards. Being able to talk about themselves was the starting point for their fight and eventually, that brought the freedom.

The main theme of the novella, as it can be understood from the title, passing, is such a traumatic issue that these African American people have to overcome it and make their decisions about to pass or not. The reason is that their rebellion will not come to an end and as a result, some of this community have to become someone else for a variety of reasons. The main reason is, to be accepted by others. Ginsberg (1996) explains that identity construction and imposition, acceptance and rejection, and the benefits and drawbacks that go along with them are all aspects of passing. The borders that are drawn between identification categories and the societal and personal fears that result from crossing them are also important aspects of passing. Ultimately, specularity – the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen – is what passing is all about (p.2). Rejecting the past self and accepting the current self as well as being unseen while black but being seen when passed for white are the motives behind Clare's passing. Piper (1992) explains this issue by stating that this stems in part from both their national collective fear of memory and their profound reluctance to face the difficult truths about their past and origins, as well as each person's personal fear of remembering their own pasts – not just the traumas of socialization they endured as children and adolescents, but also the painful truths of their own adult behavior, including betrayals, derelictions, and failures to uphold their own convictions and ideals (p.

21). In order to avoid remembering and reliving these horrible experiences, individuals who have the luck and courage to do so pass for white. Some traumas from childhood and their entire past push them to search for a new and different identity from the existing one. They actually do not know that this will lead to a complete loss of identity. Passing for white, which is chosen as a trauma coping strategy, turns into the trauma itself. Clare Kendry is that one in this novella. Passing is almost the biggest issue that makes big changes in the characters' lives in the novella, *Passing*, by creating a false white persona of Clare, who passed for white long ago. However, it is not surprising that in the end, the character who passed for white goes back to her safe zone, which is her original roots, the black community. And her life is over there, at her happiest place.

The novella is narrated from Irene Redfield's point of view, who is one of the two main characters and who decided not to pass from the very beginning. This is actually a strategy that Larsen used. In order to reflect her own experiences, Larsen chose Irene as the narrator. In his book *In Search of Nella Larsen*, Hutchinson (2006) supports the idea of how Larsen made the connection between her own life and *Passing* by stating that,

Clare's childhood resonates strongly with Larsen's own in important details. But rather than recounting the tale from Clare's point of view, or that of an omniscient narrator, Larsen filters the narrator's perceptions of Clare through the clouded perspective of Irene Redfield, the other main character, thereby leaving Clare a mystery. (p.294)

The implied reader witnesses all the experiences, especially the traumatic ones, through the eyes and with the filters of Irene. However, John (2021) opposes the idea that Irene is the narrator of the novella by stating that "the narrative is focalized almost wholly through Irene's consciousness, though it is not narrated by her: this distinction is important as it distances the narrative events from her biased voice while still allowing unprecedented access to Irene's thinking" (p. 35). It is important to be aware of this distinction as it creates a major difference in terms of the comprehension of Larsen's representation of Clare and Irene. It is like Irene's subconscious is talking throughout the novella and it is obvious that Larsen used this style on purpose. Being of mixed-race descent herself, Larsen relies heavily on her personal experiences and battles with racial identity to mold the story and characters in the novella. Larsen's parents were West Indian and Danish immigrants, and she struggled to blend in with both the black and white cultures. Similar to Clare and Irene, Larsen was

marginalized and had to deal with the preconceptions and expectations of two distinct communities in a society that was sharply split along racial lines. On the T Book Club's *A Discussion on Nella Larsen's Passing* (2021), Bennett supports this idea by stating that;

From early childhood then, Larsen experienced race with the knowledge that her inability to fit in the proper categories made her a problem that must be mitigated somehow. If Larsen felt on the outside of her own family, she also lived outside most black American experiences at the time. She was a child of immigrants, so she had no Southern ancestors of any race.

Larsen made it her style to reflect this in her characters, especially in *Passing*. The fact that her characters also had a mixed racial ancestry, and always felt in-between, became a mirroring of Larsen's own life. As a result, Larsen uses Irene as the narrator of the novella together with Irene's subconscious, so that Clare can be kept as a mystery as the implied reader is never able to know what is going on in Clare's mind. The implied reader can only see Clare's acts, but not the motivation behind these acts. This can be regarded as Larsen's attempt to hide herself and inner world from reflecting it to the outer world.

Though the novella does not follow a linear order, it is not difficult for the implied reader to follow the plot. This narrative approach complements the story's themes of identity, metamorphosis, and the enduring effects of individual and societal history while enhancing the story's depth and complexity. Instances are presented as flashbacks upon the encounter of the two characters at a rooftop restaurant of a hotel in Chicago. By not following the chronological order, the novella allows the implied reader to see the big picture by putting the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. When the structure of the novella is taken into consideration, it is seen that the novella is divided into three main sections that describe three successive periods of time in the lives of these two main characters: encounter, re-encounter and finale. The novella's opening two chapters describe a stage in which people observe and measure themselves against others in order to get a sense of who they are. In this approach, one might recognize oneself by looking in another person. This other person is Clare for Irene, and Irene for Clare. As they live completely different lives, every attempt ends in great frustration as they realize the futility of their efforts to see and learn about themselves. The pieces of a missing identity are represented, reflecting the lack of authenticity as they both are in search of their identities. Thus, they are represented as each other's doubles. Irene

continues her life as it is, however, Clare becomes a completely different person after passing, which is a marginal decision. That is why it is impossible to see themselves in another. Being unable to find the self one way or another results in the loss of identity for both characters. Irene questions the reasons why she cannot have such a life like Clare while Clare does exactly the same for herself about Irene. Everybody seeks what he lacks, and this issue creates the main trauma in both characters, which creates the backbone of the novella. Irene regrets from not passing whereas Clare regrets from passing.

The trauma in this novella is a result of repeated actions, which are the two friends' encounters, for more than once, as well as their racial backgrounds. A long time after Clare left her hometown in the first place, the related trauma is triggered when these two friends run into each other in a casual restaurant and see each other again. After almost fifteen years, Clare and Irene run across each other unexpectedly. Clare encounters with her past-self, and this becomes Irene's self-recognition. As Freud (1920) states;

Now having seen that the patient repeats rather than remembers, and does so under conditions of resistance, we may now ask what it really is that he repeats or acts out. The answer is that he repeats everything deriving from the repressed element within himself that has already established itself in his manifest personality – his inhibitions and unproductive attitudes, his pathological characteristics. (p. 51)

The repetition of actions makes people remember the incident that caused the trauma, and this is why people keep repeating the repressed experiences. Repeating and thus remembering was an issue of concern for these two women. They come together repeatedly and that is a way of healing themselves from the experienced traumas. The repressed parts of them are trying to rebel and assert themselves at every turn. But unfortunately, it is not possible to eradicate them, no matter how much they are repeated and remembered. Even though the author consciously uses this as a trauma coping strategy, the trauma is so ingrained in the characters' identities that it is almost impossible to use this strategy to heal the characters. Sullivan (1998) makes the connection between this style and the author by stating that *Passing* by Larsen explores the concept of racial identity and the concept of death. The title suggests the disappearance of the subject, aphanisis, and the struggle of the 'twin' protagonists, Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew, with the nigger signifier representing their struggles with American racism and assimilation (p. 373). The

two characters are seen as ‘twins’, which is to symbolize the identical other. Although they choose to lead different lives, these two women grow up in the same environment and have similar families. Despite the fact that they take two different paths in their lives, the ‘other’ they have been using to define and recognize themselves since childhood is now someone else and they both envy the other. Afterwards, not only do they not find themselves, but the conflicts of their existing selves begin.

A thorough examination of Irene, both as the novella’s protagonist and narrator, is crucial to comprehend her horrific experiences and being able to connect them to those they share with Clare. Larsen uses Irene as the narrator of the novella on purpose. The reason for this is to enhance the novella’s depth, psychological complexity, and narrative intrigue. This perspective explores racial identity, passing, and moral ambiguities, highlighting central conflicts and tensions. Irene is a middle-class African American woman who makes not passing for white an issue of pride. She is married to a dark-skinned doctor, Brian Redfield. Irene is proud of her African American root, or she behaves as if she is until she confronts with the fact that she is not. She has a well bound life until she comes across with Clare Kendry, who makes Irene realize that it is not Irene’s ideal life that she has been living until then. Clare, on the other hand, is married to a white businessman, Jack Bellew, and he does not know anything about Clare’s racial identity as she passed for white long ago. If Jack had known the reality about Clare, he would not have married her as he keeps lynching African Americans again and again throughout the novella. Hutchinson (2006) states that in *Passing*, white prejudice is evident – especially in the persona of Jack Bellew. Larsen uses Jack to heighten the suspense at the middle of the novel, gain Irene’s sympathy, and undermine Clare’s moral stance. After that, she penetrates Irene’s consciousness with a nurse’s precision -not harsh, but strict- to identify the causes and consequences of the problem, the nature of a sickness that Irene is unable to recognize (p. 97). Jack Bellew is there to symbolize the rest of the American society, who has the superiority over African Americans. Irene and Clare feel inferior to Jack throughout the novella. Jack does not hesitate to insult African Americans as he is not aware of the fact about these two women. Blackmer (1995) states in her article that;

Larsen connects the arbitrarily segregated lives of these two married women by having them meet accidentally in the rooftop restaurant of a Chicago hotel, where they are not in company with their husbands, and where Irene, in this instance, has resorted to “passing” to escape a

sweltering heat wave. Clare's chance meeting with her long-lost childhood friend instigates a potent desire in her, described in an effusive letter intertwining romantic and racial longings for Irene, to escape the isolated life of deception and secretiveness forced upon her by "passing". (p. 53)

The two women inexplicably have both a racial and an emotional relationship, which they both want to ignore. The coincidence of the two, all alone, without anybody's accompany, reveals the feelings and thoughts they have been covering up for a long time. This comes a moment of awareness for both.

Additionally, Chicago is of considerable importance here. Gillespie (2015) explains the importance of the city of Chicago by stating that it appears to have created an unyielding topography of racial fixity and unbreakable separateness: neighborhoods like Lincoln Park are associated with the white, affluent, and educated, while the 'South side' is associated with African Americans (p. 282). Each and every detail is worth being delved into, even the locations. On the other hand, according to DuCille (1991), Irene perceives Clare as a sort of 'alter libido', which she is determined to reject in order to maintain her comfortable middle-class lifestyle (pp. 104-105). Their longing for each other is also a longing for their past selves. Clare is somehow forced to pass for white because of the society's oppression together with her aunts' oppression. She is raised by her aunts, who are white, and at a very young age, she feels how she is humiliated even by her aunts. Even though they belong to the same family – her father is African American, and her mother is white – and that is why the aunts do not stop despising Clare. Thus, she decides to pass, she decides to become someone else by creating a false identity, away from her aunts, away from everyone she knows. She wants to leave her whole life behind to create a new Clare. In order to be accepted by and respected among the society, she has no chance except for passing. However, being unable to tell the whole truth to her husband and having the risk of giving birth to a darker-skinned child are the realities that she cannot hold with. At that instance Clare states that she has been so lonely, and she has been looking forward to getting together with Irene again for a long time.

Passing for white, which is an escape method for the victims of mixed racial ancestry, can actually result in a person being caught in the hail while running away from the rain. In other words, while trying to escape from one's own identity and create a new one, one has

to confront one's past from time to time, which can cause a great traumatic experience. Davis (2016) states that passing is about the self and society, individual image and imagining, self-image and self-imagining, societal image and social transformation, as it comes to lived experience. The breadth, source, content, and management of personal identity are all relevant to passing (p. 344). The individual wants to get rid of the past and create a new self. All this, hence passing, arises as a result of self-imagining. The individual needs to imagine the self in a new identity and this makes the passing possible. An example of this in the novel is the truth that Clare wants to get rid of all her past, and therefore all her traumas, but Irene is the biggest obstacle to her fulfillment. She is so alien to her new environment that she can never stop looking for Irene to take her back to her most innocent moments. The novel begins with a scene in which the implied reader understands Clare's efforts to reach out Irene for many years. Irene receives many letters from Clare. She never gives up sending her letters all the time, to which she never receives an answer. At the very beginning of section one, encounter, the implied reader sees the scene as follows:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (Larsen, 1929, p. 539)

Irene knows that Clare is trying to reach her. However, she is determined not to care and not to react in any way. Clare turns into a haunting ghost, much like the letter. Despite Irene's refusal to have Clare in her life, she is unable to give up on her. Clare abruptly invades her life and brings the past back to her with the letter. The reason Irene tries to ignore these letters is that each one is a reminder of the day Irene quietly disappears.

It would be wrong to say that those who live with what they have instead of finding an escape route do not experience trauma. Not being able to express one's own wishes or not being able to take any action to realize them is also a form of trauma. This is because the reason for living as it is, without seeking a way out, is learned helplessness. In the novella,

this exact person is Irene, and she, as a domestic woman, is so devoted to her husband's life. She leaves the place where she is born and raised, Chicago, and moves to Harlem so that her husband can earn more money from his practice as a doctor. Because, in her repressive upbringing, this is what she is supposed to do as a woman, to serve her husband's ideals. One day, she is back in Chicago for a visit when,

For a moment she stood finding herself and dabbing at her moist face with an inadequate scrap of handkerchief. Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized that she was about to faint. With a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a cab parked directly in front of her. The perspiring driver jumped out and guided her to his car. He helped, almost lifted her in. She sank down on the hot leather seat. (Larsen, 1929, p. 541)

Being in a neighborhood full of white people is disturbing for her. She wants to escape from that open space to protect herself. The fear of being noticed by the others about her real identity never leaves Irene, although she is not hiding it obviously. Somewhere inside her, there is an effort of Irene's to hide herself that she cannot resist. She applies powder for a few times throughout the novel to have a whiter appearance, and she does this without being aware of it. She feels as if she is disguised, like wearing a mask. At each instance, she wants to hide it, without knowing what she is actually hiding. "... Irene made some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance" (Larsen, 1929, 541). All the traumatic experiences she has about her race does this to her. In the beginning, she has her own truth about her racial identity, and she is fine with it, but when someone close to her changes it, Irene begins to doubt whether it is true and does not know how to act. Horvitz (2000) explains what happens when repressed traumatic memories become apparent again by stating that early psychological and neurological research on the connection between trauma and hysteria – from which contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapy is originated – showed that repressed traumatic memories could be retrieved and associated emotions could be expressed, which would reduce the symptoms of hysteria. Put another way, the imagination of the future is only possible in psychotherapy when the memories of the past are recalled, told or understood (p. 57). After remembering the day that Clare disappears, without any explanation from anyone, Irene can finally make the connection of her passing away. It is a whole new traumatic moment that led her to question

her own existence and identity. That creates a big question mark in her mind, and she starts thinking about what her life would have been like if she had passed, too.

Okazaki (2009) defines racism as a system of cultures and institutions incorporating social power and producing unequal outcomes for different racial groups, rather than only the manifestation of individual negative attitudes, beliefs, and deeds against minorities (p. 104). Thus, an individual who suffers from racism does not need to exhibit negative behavior. The individual may be exposed to inequality but does not need to action. Instead, they content with what they have. Deep down, and perhaps unknowingly, Irene also wants to pass. However, she cannot admit to herself or to those around her what exactly she is going to pass for, because she does not know herself. These actions of Irene, who is always trying to mask herself, to change the space or the people around her, can also be described as traumatic. An example for such actions of her is when Irene asks the taxi driver to take her to a place higher than street level, so that she can escape from that open place easily. Again, this is a symbol for her desire for separation from the others. She is now upgraded to a higher privileged society. Because of the heat, she goes somewhere cooler to calm down, the rooftop restaurant of Drayton. There, symbolically, she goes up, to a more privileged space when compared to the streets.

Stepping out of the elevator that had brought her to the roof, she was late to a table just in front of a long window whose gently moving curtains suggested cool breeze. It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below. (Larsen, 1929, p. 541)

She is finally removed from the crowd, and she moves to the top, where there is a selected society. This transition shows, despite being considered as darker because of her lifestyle, it is easy for her to become a part of the privileged ones.

Actually, Irene experiences an obscure passing at this very moment. Gillespie (2015) explains this obscure passing by stating that “this detail alone is enough to make the passage significant, as it spatially encapsulates the protagonists’ ambition for social and professional advancement in a world hell-bent in keeping them in their place” (p. 285). Irene has the desire to pass, but she is never able to unleash it. While she tries to cool down there, a woman with her husband comes in. It takes a while for both the women to recognize each other, it

is Clare, and it is Irene. Clare sits next to Irene and orders imperiously, as if they only met the day before. Irene has no intention of sitting down at first, but Irene wants to learn what Clare has done through all these years. Back to their childhood, they are like inseparable. However, Clare's sudden disappearance results in as a traumatic experience for Irene.

The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. The to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. (Larsen, 1929, p. 549)

The novella explores what happens when one represses the experienced traumas. In other words, when one tries to hide their identity, the new environment may not be as expected. Khan & Kochar (2023) state that, ironically, Irene attempts to infer the race of the individual based just on appearance and complexity, mimicking the white people she meets. Irene's ability to identify Clare from the time she laughs is evidence that a person's appearance does not fully capture their identity or background (p. 192). It is just a simple laugh of Clare that makes Irene realize that it is Clare. While Irene is trying to figure out why Clare is looking at her and whether Clare is staring at her because she notices that Irene is not white, Clare's laugh clears all the questions from Irene's mind. "'Why, of course, I know you!'" The other exclaims. 'Don't tell me you're not Irene Westover. Or do they still call you 'Rene?'" (Larsen, 1929, p. 544). Irene is called as 'Rene, which symbolizes the incomplete and missing identity. Omitting some letters from her name is like ignoring some parts of her identity as well. Later on, Clare does not stop calling her as 'Rene, keeping reminding Irene her incomplete self.

Clare wants to learn almost everything that has gone around Irene's past. However, Irene does not want this conversation last long, and she wants to leave. Actually, she wants to escape from facing the reality. Because of her curiosity, she cannot leave any way, so they continue talking. For a few times, Clare questions why girls like Irene does not pass by asking questions such as "'But you've never answered my question. Tell me, honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?" Irene answered promptly: 'No. Why should I?'" (Larsen, 1929, p. 551). Irene believes that passing is not only about changing one's racial

identity, but it is also about leaving the family, and the background. Khan & Kochar (2023) analyzes this situation by stating that “thus, explicitly stating that though the racial segregation was divided into binaries, the differences weren’t as rigid as one might assume” (p. 193) as Clare states that ‘a little nerve’ will be enough to pass. For Clare, race is not a big issue, and it should not be. Anyone can pass. Clare is described from the focal point of Irene as a person who has the highest standards of beauty and perfectness as well as being seductive. However, at each instance, somehow Irene manages to connect Clare’s beauty with her African American roots.

The people who belong to the black community, also known as the minority, have developed different strategies to overcome racial discrimination. The women in the novel reflect these different approaches to racial discrimination. To give an example, on one of the following days, Clare invites Irene and Gertrude, one of their childhood friends who is also light-skinned but does not pass, to her hotel room. This gathering does not make Irene happy. Khan & Kochar (2023) defines this gathering as three distinct approaches to racial segregation that women in the Harlem Renaissance took are represented by these three women. While Irene, who married a black man, lived with the black community and only rarely passed for cultural benefits, Gertrude, who was married to a white man, was truthful about her race to emphasize honesty over opportunism, and Clare regularly lied about being white, even to her husband to enjoy white privileges (p. 193). While drinking tea in Clare’s hotel room together with Irene and Gertrude, one of Clare’s friends, the women start to talk about their kids. However, people who pass for white, like Clare, have a hesitation of having children because of their racial backgrounds.

After taking up her own glass she informed them: “no, I have no boys and I don’t think I’ll ever have any. I’m afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too- too hellish” (Larsen, 1929, p. 556)

With this fear of reproduction with the original identity, Clare decides not to have any other children. The one black drop in her blood causes her to have the risk of sustaining the generation.

Balaev (2012) explains the traumatic experience here by stating that in fiction, the traumatized protagonist raises awareness of the uniqueness of personal pain, which is frequently linked to broader societal issues and cultural ideas. Fictional trauma presents an image of the victim, but it does so in a way that implies the protagonist is a representative of the 'everyperson'. In fact, a major goal of the protagonist is frequently to allude to a historical era in which a specific race, culture or gender has gone through a collective trauma (p. 17). Clare's ancestral roots, as the superior one among the society, or her race, causes her to have such traumatic experiences that she hesitates to live her life as she wishes. It prevents her from achieving her dreams about anything. It is impossible for her to do so with such a husband. While the three women are sitting together, Jack Bellew comes in and joins the conversation. As he calls his wife 'Nig' they start talking about negroes, in other words, Jack starts to state his hatred about them "... they give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (Larsen, 1929, p. 559). Unintentionally, he insults the three women.

The concept of individualism versus sense of community have a big difference for individuals. Dragulescu (2014) puts forward the idea that people on both sides of the color line may experience trauma as a result of their racial identification given America's horrific history of racial discrimination. The subject experiences the trauma of being the target of racism as an African American, and as a person with white skin, he or she also experiences the shame and guilt of being the face of the white racist who committed the crime (p.92). It does not matter on which side one is, either passed or not, each of them envy the life of other together with the guilt of being passed or not passed. There is no such a thing like race loyalty for Clare. She sees her roots as something to belong to rather than something to be owned; "... No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it" (Larsen, 1929, p. 565). Bringing their own ethnic identity together with them, either obviously or not, they also bring its responsibilities without being aware of them.

Both women are jealous of each other's lives. Irene sees the missed opportunities while Clare sees that the community takes care of Irene. Irene's choice of organizing 'the Negro Welfare League Dance', where both black and white people can attend, demonstrates her allegiance, devotion, and passion to her racial group, like she does in all black community-based occasions. The class issue enters the discussion as Irene advises Clare not to attend this organization. Clare wonders why white people attend to such an organization and Irene answers "'Various motives,' Irene explained. 'A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, to gaze on these great and near

great while they gaze on the Negroes” (Larsen, 1929, p. 576). African American body becomes a spectacle to look at and those people become objectified. And of course, Clare wants to be a part of that organization. Apart from her responsibilities, Clare is represented as a very beautiful and attractive woman throughout the novella, to whom any woman can emulate.

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. Irene, with her new rose-color chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. (Larsen, 1929, p. 579)

Despite the fact that Clare is represented as a breathtaking woman, Irene is the one who is ordinary. The main difference between the two women is that, unlike Irene, Clare is brave enough to pass for white. This is also another factor that makes Clare charming. As mentioned earlier, Irene is already suffering not only from being an African American, but also from being a woman in the society of the time. Clare’s passing for white takes her one step further than Irene and all she has to deal with is existing as a woman. As a result, there is an attraction between Clare and Brian, which Irene also notices. Irene has to deal not only with Clare’s beauty but also with her husband’s interest in Clare. On the other hand, Brian is a symbol of Clare’s supposed life. Although Brian tries to prevent Irene from seeing Clare, he cannot also stop seeing Clare, as well.

Even though she seems to be attached to her racial ancestry, for a few times does Irene wish for not being born as a Negro, as she cannot help wishing for being in Clare’s shoes. That is to say that, despite the fact that Irene looks happy with who she is, she wants to be someone else, who does not need to hide anything about herself among the society. Kawash (1997) explains Irene’s race loyalty as “less a loyalty to the dignity of her race than it is a loyalty to the very principle of race, insofar as it is the condition of order, predictability, and security in her life” (p. 157). Irene’s obsession with safety, considering the environment that she is included in, is a non-negligible fact. Thus, she is only loyal to her safe zone, without any relation to the race itself. Clare’s charming beauty and her freedom, as a result of her passing, becomes the issues that Irene envy for. Together with her admiration for Clare, her admiration deep inside does not let Irene’s feelings go. This also leaves the door

open for her to be jealous not of her husband but of Clare. She does not want to share Clare, not Brian. Brian is just a border between these two women here.

Sitting alone in the quiet living room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. (Larsen, 1929, p. 592)

There are lots of things that Irene has to suffer from. Being a woman is already difficult for her and Irene has to suffer from many other things, as well as her ancestral heritage. Though she does not look dark on the skin, she has the one black drop that has been left from her ancestors. Unfortunately, that is quite a burden on her shoulders. As Hollinger (2005) explains, because of the 'one drop rule', everyone who can identify their African, or what was formerly known as 'Negro', heritage is automatically considered black (p. 8). If she had not been born into this family, she would not have had to deal with any of this. But because of that one drop of black blood, and because she is not as brave as Clare, she is experiencing all these traumatic moments.

Brody (1992) puts forward the idea that unanticipated events create a different kind of trauma by saying "at this point in the text, unorthodox alliances are drawn between the characters. Suddenly, Irene begins to side with Clare's white husband, John Bellew" (p.1062). In order to keep her safe zone, Irene has to eliminate Clare from her life somehow. Thus, she will be able to avoid the upcoming traumatic events that the possible relationship between her husband and her friend will bring. Irene concludes that she can no longer withstand the growing and visible attraction between Clare and her husband because she already lost her original childhood friend and she cannot stand losing her husband, too. Revealing Clare's true identity to her husband is one solution she can think of, but she does not have the heart for it. Brody (1992) states that;

Irene detests Brian because he refuses to conform to her vision of their marriage as exemplifying the status quo. Brian, who hates America, does not want to be the stereotypical Black bourgeois doctor with a light-skinned wife and two sons. He would like to practice medicine in

Brazil – to go beyond the bounds of conventional expectations; but of course, Irene for whom status is everything finds this problematic. (p. 1063)

The similarity between Brian and Clare is disturbing Irene. It has been a long time since Clare escaped from an environment she did not like, and Brian is still looking for a way out. The common thing they both want to escape from is the Black environment. This common ground is what drew them to each other, according to Irene. Then, this attraction has to be stopped somehow. Irene cannot help thinking this way because she cannot repress her feelings for Clare. She cannot face the risk of letting her husband go and she cannot face the risk of having extra traumatic experiences in her life, as she has already had enough of them.

Another encounter occurs between the two, thus there comes another traumatic experience for Irene. As she walks together with one of her black friends, she sees Jack. It does not take long for Jack to understand that Irene is not white. Afterwards, through the end of the year, which is also through the end of the novel and through the end of Clare's life, they attend a party at Freeland's apartment, which is used as a contrary symbol to Drayton. Irene is not happy at all because her psychology does not let her be so. She panics as Jack learns the truth and besides, she cannot stop thinking about what is going on between Clare and Brian. Having learnt the reality about Clare, Jack comes to the party in a rage and starts hurling insults. Irene is with Clare at the time and Clare suddenly falls out of the window. It takes a while for Irene to get out of shock and "centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: "death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window" (Larsen, 1929, p. 603). Nobody knows whether Irene pushes Clare from the window, or it is just an accident, this fall causes Clare's death. Thus, Clare becomes a "... symbol of the eclipse of the potential of both Irene as an independent woman and the Harlem Renaissance as an artistic movement" (Blackmer, 1995, p. 53). Unintentionally, Clare's portrayal becomes a unique and leading point in African American literature.

The hidden fight between Clare and Irene about their racial identities never comes to an end. Clare is not happy with whom she really is, and Irene is completely the opposite until she sees Clare again after all those years. Because of Clare's feelings, she cannot accept her own identity. This shows the implied reader that Clare has a great control over her life. Toth (2008) states in his article that "... Clare embodies a certain threat and a certain freedom – or rather, she embodies *the threat of freedom*" (p. 59). Clare has no doubt about passing for

white, as she believes that only this way, she can be free of any social norms about African Americans. Clare is an affectionate woman. She is not happy with her own racial background only and she does not care about Irene's racial background. On the contrary, she is happy with Irene, she loves being near her. She insistently invites Irene to some places again and again, and Irene never directly says yes to any of these invitations. Inwardly, she likes being with Clare, too. Larsen (1929) explains this bond by these lines; "She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever" (p. 36). Irene cannot forget everything about Clare suddenly. They have so many in common however, Clare's rejection of her real identity makes her estranged. Irene does have a desire for security. Being a woman is already difficult and moreover she is an African American woman in the United States. She cannot handle this situation, and this is why she keeps rejecting her real identity.

Despite the fact that there is nothing about slavery, as this novella was written in 1929, there is much about racial and gender-related issues in this novella. Clare is such a character that she makes Irene wish of not being born a Negro. However, racism is still present and people from African American heritage, especially women as they do not have an important place among the society, still suffer from discrimination. Passing is shown as a way of escaping this reality, however, not all those women who belong to African American ancestry have the chance to pass. According to Bland Jr (2019),

People who are phenotypically ambiguous concerning race are clearly living in a different cultural environment now than the one Larsen's novel describes. During the Harlem Renaissance, there was no option for a public expression of racial hybridity. Jim Crow segregation simply did not allow it. Larsen's characters had to make an active choice between either passing as white or living as black. (p. 69)

Because of the strict Jim Crow laws that separated people based on race during the Harlem Renaissance, people with mixed racial identities had to decide between identifying as black or passing for white. Depending on the circumstances and the limitations of the era the novel was written in, the characters have only two choices. Larsen leaves the implied reader with the 'mystery' of who kills Clare at the end of the novella. Tate (2017) states that some critics see a writer who fled the racist environment in America to paint corny melodramas about conceited black women who pass for white. This critical perspective has overshadowed

Larsen's abilities and reduced achieving the position of a minor Harlem Renaissance look (p.601). Larsen has to obey the limitations somehow, but she also wants to use the characters as a way of expressing her own traumatic experiences.



CHAPTER 2

LEGACY OF PAIN: EXPLORING TRAUMA IN BRIT BENNETT'S

THE VANISHING HALF

In an interview on Good Morning America (2020), an American morning news program which is an Emmy-winning one, Brit Bennett states that she had this inspiration in writing *The Vanishing Half* (2020) in a conversation that she had with her mother. She also adds that she does not expect the novel to arouse interest that much. She defines the book itself as follows:

“The question at the center of the book is really ‘What makes me, me?’ and ‘What makes you, you?’ and I think that those are questions that we are all constantly thinking about. So, I hope that ‘The Vanishing Half’ leads you to think about them in a different way,” Bennett said. “There are a lot of love stories in this book – between sisters, between mothers and daughters, between romantic partners. ‘The Vanishing Half’ really is about how we love people across space and distance and time and circumstance and that's something that really resonates with me right now.” (Good Morning America, 2020)

Despite the differences in time and distance, people's love for each other does not in any way prevent them from continuing their search for identity.

Even though the character descriptions are not limited by race or gender, the implied reader observes that the characters themselves create these limitations and classifications as they get deeper into the characters. This is because both social pressure and prejudice exhibited by ‘others’ force the characters to do so. Britt also explains her feelings about the book by stating that she also believes that there is some escapism in the book that people seem to be reacting to, even though she did not anticipate that when the book came out it would be framed as being topical or as like referring to some sort of current discourse. In addition to being a book about individuals traveling to many various locations, it also follows characters as they attempt to build connections and show love for one another over time and space. (Good Morning America, 2020). Before she started writing, Bennett probably did not expect it to be such a compelling novel, but thanks to the style and descriptions she used,

she was able to take the passing plot out of the monotony and make it stand out. Sanders (2020) defines *The Vanishing Half* as follows;

This is not to suggest that race and racism do not exist. In the wake of the heinous and racially charged murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, alongside months of protests across the nation, it is obvious that race is undoubtedly a deeply entrenched social fact that has costly impacts on people's lives—consequences that Bennett conveys with literary artistry throughout *The Vanishing Half*. (pp. 6-7)

Bennett is working in two genres at once, drawing on the established melodramas of both while alluding to the well-worn clichés of passing literature and the widely used idea of long-lost twins. Her voice, all-knowing, straddles several storylines. Reznick (2021) on the other hand, defines Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* as a novel that broadens our understanding of identity in terms of both race and gender while also portraying a racist and prejudiced American society. However, unlike other passing novels, Bennett's novel addresses the complexities of both racial and transgender passing. Thus, she manages to capture an identity that is relevant to the 21st century (p. 271). Whichever type of passing it is, this passing is only for identity purposes.

This chapter will explain how the traumas experienced by Larsen's characters are rooted in their segregation experiences. It is an undeniable fact that gender or race segregation, either visible or subtle, causes trauma in any case. But whether the underlying traumatic experiences come from childhood or are internal differs from person to person. In other words, trauma may be caused by the one-on-one individual experiences or by the experiences that family members are exposed to. Reese and Stella, the two passing characters of the novel, seem to have these traumatic experiences mostly from their childhood.

The novel begins 13 years later, when the lives of the twin protagonists Stella and Desiree have fallen apart. In other words, from the very first moment, the implied reader begins to follow the retrospective memories of these twin sisters. Unfortunately, the novel does not follow a linear order and the events are presented in a mixed chronological way to show the disruption and fragmentation in the lives of black communities. This can be named as an indication of traumatic effect of the novella. Fragmented and non-sequential storytelling is a potent literary method in this novella that mirrors the bewildering and

widespread effects of trauma on the protagonist's mind. This non-linear technique illustrates how traumatic experiences break the continuity of vision and memory. Another goal here is to confuse the perception of time and space (Harrisoiv-Kahan, 2009, para. 1). In this way, the author creates a deeper comprehension by shifting the implied reader's focus from time and space to the disruption and fragmentation experienced by the characters. Additionally, the implied reader may observe how the twins' decisions have affected their lives over decades and the long-term ramifications of those decisions according to this arrangement. In the novel, after learning about what happened during those 13 years, the implied reader finally understands what happened after those 13 years. And this is not an ordinary way of writing. In this way, the implied reader is able to visualize even the twins' facial expressions, as if witnessing every single moment. The story is told in the third person narrative about how and why the twin sisters Stella and Desiree goes their separate ways, why they can never get back together, and how the unity of the family is actually never damaged despite everything that happens through all these years. Although there are unexpected instances from time to time, the relevance of trauma theory to this novel is undeniable due to its plot and its proximity to the reality of racism, which unfortunately persists in the 21st century.

In terms of trauma, psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, history, and literature come together to explain or treat the condition. Depending on the traumatic experience, literature has been employed as a means of healing both the person and the society. In this novel, *The Vanishing Half* (2020), the implied reader can see a damaged community, the black community, because of the segregation they are exposed to. LaCapra (2016) states that trauma is a significant aspect of history, particularly modern times. However, conflating history with trauma obscures aspects that can help mitigate its effects. These include efforts to diminish historical traumas due to wealth, status, and power differences, and policies that facilitate post-traumatic healing and the transition from victim to survivor (xi). As a novel written in the modern times, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) still reflects the traumatic experiences that the minority has because of the differences in terms of the status. Because this minority group has less power over the society when compared to the majority, white people, they cannot find a place for themselves among the society. Thus, it becomes logical to pass for white and become a part of the superior ones. Balaev (2012) explains trauma as an indescribable blank that is unrepresentable, pathological by nature, ageless, and repetitive (p. 3). In other words, it is quite pathological for one of the main characters of the novel to

pass for white. The untimely disappearance of this character, Stella, has traumatic consequences for those she leaves behind.

The Vanishing Half (2020) is not only about two twin sisters – Stella and Desiree – who leads their lives in two separate ways after vanishing but also about their daughters – Kennedy and Jude –, mother – Adele – and partners – Blake and Early –, who are also affected by this separation. The novel shows how Stella and Desiree’s personalities, lifestyles and family structures are traumatized by the racial segregation, as well as the other characters, and the twins’ wish for escaping from it. In their childhood, the twins used to live in Mallard, a town full of people who are obsessed with whiteness and in which “...nobody married with dark” (Bennett, 2020, p.5). On one hand, Desiree is the braver one, when compared to Stella, and she is the one who always dreams of running away from the place where she lives. On the other hand, Stella is the clever one, who loves going to school. Additionally, both Desiree and Stella have a very light skin color, however it is only Stella who later on has the idea of passing for white. The twins’ father is murdered by white men despite his light skin.

The novel starts from the middle of the story of these people. Then the implied reader is brought back to the beginning of the incidents and finally the mystery is resolved at the end of the novel in a dramatic way. The twins and their daughters, they all are traumatized as a result of the racial oppression they are exposed to, and this stops them from living their lives as they wish and as themselves to a large extent.

Passing like this, from moment to moment, was funny. Heroic, even. Who didn’t want to get over on white folks for a change? But the *passé blanc* were a mystery. You could never meet one who’d passed over undetected, the same way you’d never know someone who successfully faked her own death; the act could only be successful if no one ever discovered it was a ruse. Desiree only knew the failures; the ones who’d gotten homesick, or caught, or tired of pretending. But for all Desiree knew, Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so. (Bennett, 2020, p. 74)

There is a big possibility of ending in failure for passing for white. And passing for white can both be caused by traumatic experiences and end in traumatic experiences, too. Bouson

(2000) explains this by stating that African Americans have been forced to deal not only with individual and/or family shame and trauma, but also with cultural shame and racial trauma because they are viewed as the racially inferior and stigmatized group. This is demonstrated by a race cognizant application of shame and trauma theory, which has primarily studied the painful effects of shame and trauma on individuals and families within the dominant white culture (p.6). This oppression causes trauma not only to the individuals themselves, but also to their race and culture. Stella, for example, finds a way out of this ongoing oppression on an individual level, but she is by no means able to completely erase her family from her life. Therefore, all these experiences turn into a familial trauma related to the race to which they belong. Although Stella manages to be halfway through her life by pretending to be white, it cannot be called as a success yet. Carter (2019) suggests that "... negative race-based encounters can lead to extreme levels of stress and thus may have the potential to produce traumatic reactions" (p. 1). The concepts of beauty and being valued depending on the skin color among the neighborhood causes one of the twins to pass for white. Thus, changing the neighborhood that she belongs to and changing the people around her was the only way out for Stella as she wants to be accepted and valued by her environment. She starts to pretend as if she is white, and she sees how easy life this way is.

Wall (1986) states that "... *Passing* contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity" (p. 98). The sexual and racial identity are accepted as two non-separable figures that create a person's whole identity. Unfortunately, Stella and Desiree suffer from both of these figures. For Stella, ignoring the others left behind is not easy but her identity search is better this way. She has to stop going to school because of financial restrictions despite her desire of being a college student, unlike Desiree. She and her twin sister starts working as maids in Duponts' house, which belongs to white people. However, this does not last long, and Desiree convinces Stella to run away from this desperate life. "You can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood. Somehow, the Vignes twins believed themselves capable of both" (Bennett, 2020, p. 7). The twins want to escape from everything that they have at the time, so they go to New Orleans. Although it looks impossible for the twins to live a life in New Orleans on their own at the beginning, "...they never returned again. Instead, after a year, the twins scattered, their lives splitting as evenly as their shared egg. Stella became white and Desiree married the darkest man she could find" (Bennett, 2020, p. 4). According to George (1973), instead of trying to escape deficiency, the aim of developing such a

personality is to base oneself within it—or, to put it another way, to construct oneself around its sustained void (p. 141). The escape is not like a real escape for Stella. It is the new identity that she tries to fit in. She starts the process of self-recognition by this escape, “... or maybe she’d seen that escape door vanishing too and realized that everything she wanted existed outside of Mallard” (Bennett, 2020, p. 15). Leaving Mallard may be the only way out to find freedom and to be valued for Stella. Because, in Mallard everybody is obsessed with lightness. “In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far” (Bennett, 2020, p. 5). Although Desiree is able to build a life here with her extremely black daughter, the prejudices of this environment does not help her at all. Knowing this, Stella cannot imagine going back in any way, she completely erases that place from her consciousness. Living in such a restricted environment does not help Stella to be happy. This is the beginning of the journey of searching for happiness and her inner self for Stella.

When the term ‘passing’ was first introduced into the literature, it was actually used to escape from slavery. However, over time, the term also becomes a defense against racism. The very first step of escaping from the realities that put a person in danger is to escape from the environment that a person lives in. In the novel, Stella’s escape starts when she goes to Boston to apply for a job and after she gets the job, she never comes back to New Orleans again. She does not even give a call to her twin sister to inform her about the news. Stella begins her new life in Boston as a ‘white’ woman. She does not talk about her family, her sister and Mallard. She creates a completely new identity which has no family bonds, as if they are all gone. She marries a white man, Blake. Back in Blake’s childhood,

his father, hated his son running around with a doll, nigger doll at that time, but Blake carried him everywhere, whispering all of his secrets into those plastic ears. . . One day, he stepped into the yard and saw chumps of cotton scattered all over the grass. . . The dog must have got it, his father told him, but Blake always imagined him tossing that doll into the dog’s snapping jaws. . . For some reason, he thought the cotton would be brown. (Bennett, 2020, p. 202)

Blake is taught by his father that racial segregation is justified. Blake discovers that it is not a good idea to befriend the ‘nigger doll’ and reveal his secrets to it, even though he does not personally find anything wrong with it (Reznick, 2021, p. 277). Having been raised with

such a consciousness, Blake cannot be expected to be understanding towards black people. He is Stella's boss when they met. In time he falls in love with Stella, so they get married. They have a daughter, Kennedy. Kennedy is presented as "the newborn in her arms was perfect: milky skin, wavy blonde hair, and eyes so blue they looked violet" however, despite the definition of perfect here, there is still something wrong, "Kennedy felt like a daughter who belonged to someone else, a child Stella was borrowing while she loaned a life that never should have been hers" (Bennett, 2020, p. 158). Stella can never give up feeling guilty inside as she knows that this was not real her. She never confesses to her own family. Instead, whenever her daughter asks about Stella's family, she continues keeping everything like a secret; "gone...My family is gone" (Bennett, 2020, p.159). Even though she knows that her family has not gone anywhere, she does not want to reveal her own identity. Nerad (2014) supports this behavior by stating that passers are frequently perceived as assuming an identity that they do not actually 'own' in terms of law, psychology and culture. As a result, it is conceptualized as the violation of one's 'real' identity or as an 'inauthentic' performance (p. 10).

When Stella decides to pass for white, what she really does was to harm her own identity trying to fit in the ideal American world, the white-dominant one, which is described by Du Bois (1989) as follows;

a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (p. 3)

Despite her efforts, Stella can never become a part of this 'American world'. Even though she represents herself as white, she never stops marginalizing white people. She avoids having even a small talk with them. Thinking what others think about her continuously retains her from being one of them. However, at the same time, she cannot establish rapport with black people. Once a black family moves into their opposite house, she hesitates to get in touch with them, but Kennedy and the neighbor's child become friends. As a result, Stella has to make contact with them. Loretta, her new neighbor, names Stella as the one who darkens her door. This definition by Loretta disturbs Stella and she starts to consider her relationship with these people. In time, she worries about being realized by those black

people. As her husband and friends know that Stella will never have contact with any black person, she has to hide her relationship with those people. As a matter of fact, she overreacts when she hears that a colored man offers to buy that house. Stella stands out to protect her neighborhood from this 'black' family, to keep this neighborhood safe. Until then, Stella keeps her nose clean. This is why her husband is shocked when she reacts that much.

His shy Stella making a scene! Although maybe he shouldn't have been surprised. A woman protecting her home came from a place more primal than politics. Besides, in all the time he'd known her, she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro. ... But Stella wouldn't even hire colored help for the house— she claimed Mexicans worked harder. He never understood why she averted her gaze when an old Negro woman shuffled past on the sidewalk, why she was always so curt with the elevator operators. She was jumpy around Negroes, like a child who'd been bit by a dog. (Bennett, 2020, p. 153)

Her rejection of black people shows that she also rejects her inner self. Stella believes that she can manage this escape only if she behaves logically.

Kennedy, on the other hand, grown up without knowing anything real about her mother, has no problems with the colored people. She can easily become friends with them, and she sees no problem in talking to them. However, there is a moment when Kennedy also tags her black neighbor friend as 'nigger'. Kennedy is playing games with Cindy when Stella found them in their own garden crying.

"You know what she said to Cindy? Well, the girls were playing some game and Kennedy was losing so she said, 'I don't want to play with a nigger.'"

Her stomach sank.

"Loretta, I— "

"No, I understand," Loretta said. "I don't blame her. It all comes from the home, see. And like a fool, I let you into mine. The loneliest goddamn woman in this whole neighborhood. I should've known. You stay away from me" (Bennett, 2020, pp. 209-210)

Stella snaps Kennedy as soon as they get in home. When she looks into her eyes, she can see everything about the people "she had ever hated" (Bennett, 2020, p. 210). She does not want

her daughter to become one of those who she has been escaping from. As her daughter does not know anything about who real Stella is, Kennedy cannot understand why Stella reacts that much. After thirty-two years, Stella returns to Mallard, which is no longer listed on any map, to convince Desiree to talk to Jude about not contacting Kennedy. When she sees her mother, Adele, she understands that she is suffering from severe memory loss. Adele asks Stella to pick Desiree up from work and finally the twins embrace. Stella begs for Desiree's forgiveness. Then, she goes back to Boston and tells everything about her real identity to Kennedy.

Freud (2003) defines "traumatic neurosis" as "a condition consequent upon ... and other life-threatening accidents has long since been identified and described" (p. 59). Not being as lucky as Stella, Desiree is back home, in Mallard, together with her young daughter, Jude and without Stella, as she already abandons Desiree in New Orleans and vanishes. Desiree cannot have a successful marriage, instead she is tortured by her very black husband. Her only way out is to come home after those years, trying to find money and happiness. Being exposed to violence repeatedly cause Desiree's biggest traumatic experience and she thinks of sorting this out by going back home, as a trauma-coping strategy, at least for a while. Also, Laplace and Pontalis (1973) define one's trauma as "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and the upheaval long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (p. 465). In other words, trauma is defined by an excessive amount of excitations compared to the subject's tolerance and ability to become accustomed to them and physically work them out (Laplace and Pontalis, 1973, p. 465). Rather than becoming accustomed to or tolerating her husband's violence, Desiree decides to work this trauma out by going back home, at least until figuring out her next step. She wants to take a break and start thinking logically and peacefully at her childhood home and town. It does not take long until she comes across with Early, her ex and impossible boyfriend. From the very first moment on she saw Early, they immediately become close.

Early is a bounty hunter who is in search of missing people and that is why he used to spend most of his time on the road. After his encounter with Desiree, he remembers how to love and he devote his life to Desiree, her mother and chasing Stella. "For years, Early tracked Stella Vignes until she was no longer Stella Vignes" (Bennett, 2020, p. 99). Actually, everyone is aware that Stella is not their Stella anymore, but they always have the hope to see her again one day. Desiree defines her sister's passing for white as "becoming someone

else”. It can be said that this is the symbol of having multiple identities or the loss of identity. This uncertainty of identity can be shown as an example of one of Stella's traumatic experiences. Indirectly, this traumatic experience also becomes Desiree's trauma, too. Because these twins have the same family, the same skin color and almost the same experiences. Therefore, the reason behind this common trauma is almost the same. In this respect, Root (1992) states that the majority of trauma experiences had by women, people of color, and those in lower socioeconomic status are neither unique nor special. Rather, several traumatic incidents that impact these groups occur on a daily, ongoing, cumulative, and extremely frequent basis (p. 230). It is at this point that the oppression experienced by Desiree's daughter, Jude, comes to the fore, as the majority of Mallard's inhabitants are white.

As Jude is now in a white dominant town, in order to prevent herself from being seen, she cannot dare to swim in the river. Jude is not directly subjected to any verbal racism, but her skin color is interesting enough to make her feel the oppression of people looking at her. She does not take an exact action against this oppression. Bryant-Davis (2005) states that “racism must not be objectively defined to produce a response in a victim. If the victim perceives the event as potentially racist (a reasonable assumption for a person of color, given the above), a response may occur” (p. 576). Because Jude's father is extremely black, the girl herself inherits this trait from her father. The racist reactions of everyone who sees her in Mallard are also traumatizing for Jude. On her first day at school, everyone stares at her for a long time just because of her skin color. Therefore, it can be observed that traumas of the same origin are passed on from generation to generation in this way.

In fact, Desiree does not recognize Jude as her father or herself. Jude is strikingly similar to Stella in terms of her character. Here, too, there is a transferred trauma stemming from identity. Like her mother and unlike her aunt, Jude is never able to be anyone but herself. After a while she leaves Mallard and moves to Los Angeles, to study at UCLA. At the beginning, she used to call her mother daily, but as time passed, she gives up calling or writing, although she promises to do so. Her friends used to call her ‘Tar baby’ and make fun of her skin color. She seems like she is fine with her skin color but “she wasn’t foolish enough to hope that someday she might be light, but a deep brown maybe, anything better than this endless black” (Bennett, 2020, p. 110). In Arjun Nath’s *Traumatic Racial Encounters in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child* (2022), the protagonist, similar to Jude, suffers from racial discrimination, hegemony, and supremacy in a society where her experiences and way of life have been completely molded by the color of her skin and the

fact that she is a woman by nature. She experiences an identity problem as a result of her dual marginalization, first for being African American, and, second, for being a woman. She also experiences a lot of anguish and suffering because of the loss of identity and her duty to deduce double consciousness. The character is traumatized as a result of these traumatic experiences (p. 37). This is exactly a summary of what Jude goes through. Somewhere in her mind, she is looking for a way out of her darkness, for example a cream to make her whiter. Her grandmother tries to help Jude to be lighter or brighter. She always looks for a sense of equality, “in the dark, you could never be too black. In the dark, everyone was the same color.” (Bennett, 2020, p. 110). The time of darkness is the only time that back in Mallard, a white boy uses to spend time with her, or kiss her. While working as a caterer in Beverly Hills, Jude sees a woman who looks just like her mother. It does not take long for her to realize that she finally finds Stella, but she can do nothing. After a while, she finds Kennedy in a local theatre as Barry, Jude’s friend, is also there. Afterwards, she does not give up her fight to find her aunt.

Oppression visibly causes trauma, but these traumas are not necessarily permanent. As people develop new goals or perspectives, they can come to terms with who they are and learn to be happy with who they really are. An example of this in the novel is the love story of Reese and Jude. From the very first moment on of her coming across to Reese, he does not care about her skin color. They meet at a party to which Barry invites Jude. Barry is an actor who takes part in theaters as a queer character. After Reese comes into her life, Jude stops looking for a way of becoming whiter and a sense of equality. Sanders (2020) states that Bennett presents Reese as a literary foil to Stella. Jude’s longtime partner Reese is a genuinely endearing person. Reese first appears to us as a cowboy at a Halloween party, but as we read on, we find out that he is more than just a kind man who offers Jude a beer (p. 7). Two people, unhappy with something about themselves, encourage each other about their real identities. Schönfelder (2013) explains this situation by stating that novels that deal with family and childhood trauma examine the nuance short and long-term effects of trauma exposure in a variety of ways and adds that the main themes of these trauma novels are broken and shattered identities and identity crises that shape a person’s life long after the traumatic event or experiences (pp. 74-75). The two main themes that emerge – broken and shattered identities and identity crises – highlight the profound psychological effects of trauma that can persist long after the initial events.

The phrase ‘broken and shattered identities’ alludes to the disintegration of the self that can happen after traumatic experiences. Trauma can cause a person to feel disconnected from others and from themselves, upsetting their sense of continuity and coherence. Trauma is not a singular experience; instead, it takes on different shapes and impacts people in different ways. Both Reese and Jude experience identity crises as a result of the traumas they inherit from their families, and accordingly, they feel disconnected from others and from themselves. However, they manage to heal each other through their love for each other. Reese admires Jude; he loves watching her although Jude does not want him to do so. The reason is that she thinks there is no chance for her to be liked by another person. “He didn’t mind that she was dark, maybe, but he couldn’t possibly like it. Nobody could” (Bennett, 2020, p. 139) says June when she realizes that Reese is watching her again. And Reese replies: “I ain’t those people back home. Sometimes you act like you’re still back there. But you’re not, baby. We’re new people here” (Bennett, 2020, p. 140). The endeavor for finding a new identity of these two is obvious.

Trying to become someone else in a new place because of the external factors is a wish of a traumatized person as that person is in need of an escape. This is why Jude’s wish for becoming someone else in a completely new environment makes her similar to her aunt, Stella. Right after this conversation between the two, Reese’s real story comes out. Jude makes him talk. Reese tries on his father’s clothes when he is home alone and one day his sister’s friend comes in and they drink alcohol, then they kiss. But suddenly Reese’s family comes and sees them. Reese’s father is a dominant man who oppresses Reese because of his self-identity choice. As quoted in Dülger (2022), “as affirmed by Brown, ‘Discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and constriction of these groups’ are also examples of oppressive behavior and, thus, traumatic” (p. 29). Reese is also one of those, together with Desiree, Stella and Jude, who suffers from oppression and as a result he has traumatic experiences because of his father. This destines him, like Stella, to impersonate a new self. Sanders (2020) has the comment about Reese below;

What I loved most about Reese was Bennett’s thoughtful and refreshing decision to not essentialize or fetishize him. So often in literature and media, queer characters are used for straight readers’ discovery, understanding or unlearning, thus implicitly upholding heteronormativity. Yet, in *The Vanishing Half*, Reese is simply allowed to be who he is, without explanation, justification or questioning. (p. 7)

Without any hesitation, Reese manages to present himself as he is. No matter how hard he tries at his family house to prove himself, he can become what he always wants to be in his new life, with the help of Jude. On the other hand, he helps Jude to have self-confidence, as well. Valuing each other just for who they are, without any explanation or judgment of each other, enables them both to achieve happiness.

All these three women, Stella, Desiree and Jude, belonging to the same ancestry suffer from 'internalized racism'. Despite not experiencing racial segregation first-hand, the environment they live in lead them to feel segregated. Starting working life in a white family's house, maybe, cause the twins to feel inferior. In the following period of their lives in New Orleans, they cannot have quality jobs, as well. Not because of their skin color but because of their education level, they cannot make it. Tyson (2006) defines 'internalized racism' as caused by the psychological indoctrination that a racist culture uses to instill in people of color the belief that white people are superior and continues as follows:

Before "Black is beautiful!" and "Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud!" sounded the call for a radical change in African American self-definition and self-perception in the late 1960s, many African Americans suffered from internalized racism. And despite the success of black-pride advocates, many people of color continue to suffer from it today. (p.362)

Either light enough like Stella and Desiree or too black like Jude, the white superiority on a daily basis around them causes this traumatic experience. The psychological pressure of this superiority causes the characters to always see themselves as inadequate. They all try to escape from this inadequacy by leaving the environment they are currently in, whether it ends successfully or unsuccessfully. Those who suffer from internalized racism have the consideration of the self as worthy of the least of everything and they have the wish for being white or looking more white. The twins have a lighter skin when compared to the third generation, Jude, however they still have the same ideas about having a quality life. This is true especially for Stella. This is why she vanishes and starts a new life as a white person in Boston. Despite being the braver one, Desiree cannot manage what Stella does. She cannot pass for white; she cannot behave as if she is completely white, and she cannot introduce herself and lie to others by stating that she is completely someone else. Nerad (2014) defines passing as "... is now understood by many scholars as synonymous with performance: it is

the iteration of a set of behaviors, cultural codes, language, etc. ascribed to a specific identity category such as race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and so on” (p. 9). ‘Passing’ is viewed as a type of performance in which people take on and continually embody the language, cultural norms, and behaviors connected to a certain identity category. Thus, it is obvious that a person could pass for anything, it does not have to be the race only. An example of passing for opposite sex is seen in the upcoming chapters of the novel, as well. Reese, Jude’s partner is such a character.

On the road from El Dorado, Therese Anne Carter became Reese.

He cut his hair in Plano, hacking off inches in a truck stop bathroom with a stolen hunting knife. Outside of Abilene, he bought a blue madras shirt and a leather belt with a silver stallion buckle; the shirt he still wore, the buckle he’d pawned in El Paso when he ran out of money but mentioned still feeling its weight hanging at his waist. In Socorro, he began wrapping his chest in a white bandage, and by Las Cruces, he’d learned to walk again, legs wide, shoulders square. He told himself that it was safer to hitchhike this way, but the truth was that he’d always been Reese. By Tucson, it was Therese who felt like a costume. How real was a person if you could shed her in a thousand miles? (Bennett, 2020, p. 107)

Reese does everything to hide his womanhood. He does not want to be seen as a woman because life will be easier this way. He reconstructs his identity, which is a traumatic event as well, so that he feels more like himself. Probably this is because of the environment in which he grows up, an environment in which all the privileges belong to the masculine identities. Rivera (1989), a multiple identity clinician, suggests that it is highly typical for them to have masculine violent defender personas and feminine seductive and/or docile personalities, but their vulnerable child personalities are often female (p. 27). Either gender apartheid or racial discrimination, people are forced to become someone else in order to feel confident.

The Vanishing Half uses the concept of transgender passing to further dismantle the notion of essentialized identity. Reese, Jude’s transgender significant other, embraces Jude for who he is. She does not realize he used to be Therese when she first sees him. Jude’s perception of Reese as a male illustrates how gender is performative and flexible. In order to create a more inclusive and fair society, gender performativity and flexibility expose

gender identity as a sequence of performative activities that subvert conventional norms and enable people to express their gender in an authentic manner. The rigid categories are deconstructed by society's incapacity to discover the passer's true identity, just like when someone passes for white. In fact, gender transition is portrayed in the novel as the emergence of a new identity, much like in passing for white (Reznick, 2021, p. 274). Reese does not have a problem with his new identity, unlike Stella. The reason is that he is not happy with his previous female identity. He does everything he can do to make his female identity vanish, like bandaging his chest. The traumatic experience here can be summarized as Reese's feeling the necessity of hiding his other identity. He does this to prevent others, especially males, from approaching him. That is why he does not go to a club for a second time, for example.

Consequently, it is evident that those people who pass for white for any reason have ambiguous identities. Navigating ambiguous identities and passing for white are complex parts of larger discussion of race and identity. They are a reflection of the continuous fight against inflexible racial barriers and the endeavor to define oneself in a multicultural society. Questions left unanswered in these people's minds, being uncertain about the self and outer oppressions cause these people to pass for white, pass for opposite sex or pass for anything else. The feeling of being lost and being unable to thine their own selves to be true forces people to pretend as if they are someone else, who is more accepted and valued by others. Reznick (2021) explains how 'racial passing in *The Vanishing Half* obscures the difference between acting and performing an identity' by stating that the story challenges the notion of a 'true self' by showing Desiree's white identity as something that can be set aside while in front of an audience through her portrayal of whiteness. In Stella's performance, passing is shown as the emergence of a new identity rather than the concealment of an existing one. Her death therefore illustrates the idea of performativity, which holds that a person's feeling of race is continually played out and created via the repetition of their behavior and cultural expectations, as opposed to being a given (p. 273). Stella's newly acquired racial identity has almost only one goal: to fulfill societal expectations, in other words, to gain a place in society. An identity can be either acted or performed, and when it comes to the difference between acting or performing an identity,

she wanted Desiree to see how convincingly she played her role, but
she was living a performance where there could be no audience. Only a

person who knew her real identity would appreciate her acting, and nobody at work could ever know. (Bennett, 2020, p. 197)

By keeping this new identity as a secret, Stella makes her black identity vanish as well as herself. She does not have a chance to mention what she has been doing to Desiree, when they are in New Orleans. If she did so, it would break the spell. *The Vanishing Half* explores the subjectivity of identity, contrasting it with the U.S.'s prejudice toward minority group, highlighting the performative nature of identity and the contrasting perceptions of being and acting (Reznick, 2021, p. 280). As being restricted with the outer world's limitations and prejudice, almost all the characters in the novel have to experience race and gender based traumatic experiences. They all try to cope with these traumatic experiences in their own way, such as leaving the place they used to live, or passing for this and that. No matter which way they try, they are exposed to a deeper trauma each time because passing, as the coping strategy, is not a healthy one.

CONCLUSION

In this study, Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* have been analyzed from perspective of trauma theory, and with an insight into the one-drop rule and the theme of passing in order to lay out the intricate traumas that characters experience as African American women. This approach outlines the protagonists' intricate traumas stemming from gender and racial discrimination. In both novels, gender and race are the main drivers of the traumas experienced. Both novels share themes of racial identity, passing, family relationships, and identity search, despite different settings and time periods. This thesis contends that all four of the women – Irene, Clare, Stella, and Desiree – manage to develop unique ways to challenge the normative structures of the societies they belonged to. Despite the fact that the strategies they used are different from each other, each character finds a way to fit in. Clare, however, dies before she can find a complete solution to the discrimination which she tries to overcome throughout her life. Clare and Stella are the only two characters who manage to behave as if they are someone else, whereas Irene and Desiree resign themselves to their fate without seeking a way out. The American society depicted in both books is one in which underprivileged groups – like women and racial minorities – find themselves stuck in unchangeable circumstances. As these women cannot change the circumstances, two of them decide to change their identities instead. Through the use of extreme means of survival, all four of these characters offer the chance to come to terms with their horrific experiences and take action against the racially segregated society. Their personal traumas are rooted in separate factors, however, what they look for is the same, a completely new identity. Thus, each of them can have a chance to fit in the American society.

The portrayals of the characters in these novels are very similar to each other in terms of race and gender based traumatic experiences. Despite her white appearance, Clare identifies as black because of the one-drop of black blood she carries. Also, because of her desire not to be subjected to the oppression that black people are subjected to, she leaves the environment where she is born and raised and is reborn as a completely different person. The biggest factor in Clare's hesitation is her aunts, who are all white and who raised her. Stella, on the other hand, despite her relatively light skin color, witnesses the lack of acceptance of black people in the environment where she is born and raised and the inferiority of those who have one-drop of black blood compared to whites, no matter how light their skin color. For this reason, just like Clare, she leaves her environment and experiences a similar re-birth as a completely different and new person. Stella and Clare act

out their new identities so frequently that it becomes obvious that they do not fit them. The most important goal that brings these two characters together is that despite their new identities, they still do not find happiness. In other words, the racial and gender-based traumas they experience turn into deeper and bigger traumas instead of disappearing. The complexities of the relationships grow bigger as these characters keep living. It is not only about their relationships with their families but also about their relationships with each other. As a result, both novels delve into the lives, especially the traumas, these women experience and the consequences they face.

Despite their thematic similarities, these two novels offer different perspectives on the characters' experiences. The most fundamental difference between these two novels is the periods in which they are set. While *Passing* is set in the 1920s, *The Vanishing Half* covers a time period from the 1950s to the 1990s. When the differences in the styles of these two novels are considered, evidently, while Larsen goes into more detail about her characters and their psychological states through her descriptions, Bennett describes her characters from a broader perspective. It is obvious that the characters who passed, Clare and Stella, are not completely the same. For instance, unlike Stella, Clare sometimes gives her new identity up as she wants to be together with 'her' people. When she is not together with her husband and daughter, she turns back to her origins and behaves as if she does not do anything about her identity and as if she does not experience all those traumatic moments. However, Stella resists until the last moment, and after everything is revealed, she returns to the house where she is born and raised for once. But it is not a permanent return, and Stella returns to her 'own' life. Despite the similarity of their traumas and trauma coping strategies, their longing for their own selves also differs. This symbolizes completely different traumatic experiences. The fact that the new identities they assumed does not actually belong to them causes a loss of identity and produces a new trauma about their identities. They do not know who they really are anymore. In contrast to Desiree, Irene sometimes dreams of being white. Her loyalty to her essence, unlike Desiree, is not constant. Although she never expresses it outwardly, she aspires to be white. Desiree, on the other hand, lived and continues to live her life satisfied with her self and identity. This is another traumatic moment. Because she cannot assimilate her own self, she experiences a loss of identity, resulting in a completely new trauma. This is another difference among the characters, there are four women, each of whom lives separate traumas rooted in separate reasons. In addition,

while Larsen focuses only on the two friends, Bennett focuses on the twin sisters and what goes on around them.

The one-drop rule should be considered as an important background knowledge for these two novels. In fact, it is clearly observed that all this is because of the one-drop black blood they carry, even though none of the characters are completely black. In order to uphold the racial hierarchy among communities, even in fiction, the rule continues to exist. The fact that the authors of these two novels also have an African American ancestry and are exposed to this rule in their personal lives leads them to use this rule in their works. Despite the time gap of hundred years, the traumatic experiences that the authors themselves have been exposed to due to this rule have not changed, and the characters they have created have also been exposed to this rule. What is also significant about these two novels is that, despite the hundred years between their writing, there has also been no change in the representation of the traumatic experiences of the characters, nor in the motivation behind these experiences. This shows that the normativity of American society has unfortunately not changed in all these hundred years. The discrimination experienced by minority groups has continued and continues, both in fictional literature and in real life. That is why Larsen and Bennett somehow integrate their own lives into their personal characters and use their art as an expression and a trauma coping strategy for themselves. Both novels depict the suffering that colorism inflicts on ladies with darker skin, either real or fictional. Larsen conveys her personal experiences to the implied reader through the characters of *Passing*. Irene is the narrator of the novel, because Larsen can actually look at herself as an outside eye. Bennett's motivation and inspiration for writing *The Vanishing Half* is based on a story she heard from her mother, which helps her not to get away from reality. These two African American women, Larsen and Bennett, mirror through their characters the difficulties, in-betweens, and ebbs and flows of the black community. Even though a hundred years have passed, traumas experienced by real black people have not changed, and neither have the fictions about them in literature. As a result, it can be said that *The Vanishing Half* serves as a revisiting to *Passing*.

The theme of passing should also be taken into consideration in order to observe the trauma coping strategy of the black people. Among the four most important characters, two, even three with Reese, of them decide to pass for white or for the opposite gender. The traumatic experiences that these three characters experience are caused by race and gender related issues. In fact, it is precisely at this point that identity issues become visible because

the characters are subjected to discrimination in one way or another and they decide to pass. The pain caused to them by this discrimination, whether racial or gender based, becomes so great that passing, however difficult, becomes inevitable for them. Their courage to pass comes from their strength in the resistance to trauma. On the other hand, other characters who do not pass, or do not dare to pass even if they imagine it, are left to their fate. That is why Irene is willing to rat out Clare to her husband, and Desiree is willing to forget Stella, so that they do not have to take the big step of passing, so that they do not have to look up to those who have already passed. It is actually a form of otherization, where the one who does not pass etherizes the one who does. Reese's passing is motivated by a completely different motivation and is completely different from that of the others. His passing is motivated by the fact that he does not find his real identity, in terms of gender, and that he does not enjoy living in a male-dominated society. The reason why he fears male domination is mainly because of his bad-tempered father. Hence a familial trauma is observed here. Although Reese's passing has nothing to do with racial background, all three characters choose the same trauma coping strategy, which is passing.

Passing ends up with two separate portrayals of two separate characters. Clare, on the one hand, is the only one who gets hold of her own life and destiny instead of obeying the social norms or the requirements of collective identity. It is not known whether her death is a suicide or an accident, but still, she never changes her stand against and amongst the society until her death. Irene, on the other hand, has a fear of individuality or self-reliance. She is living her life by obeying the social norms and the requirements of collective identity. She is also being dictated by the surrounding people, which helps her live a peaceful life. The portrayals of these two characters consist of traumatic experiences, however, it is possible to see two separate –and traumatic, endings of these characters. The main trauma these characters experience is actually rooted in their racial identities. Since they have been marginalized in some way since childhood, their desire to mask themselves never comes to an end. While Irene tries to hide her current identity and self with only minor makeup tricks or minor space changes, Clare passes for white, which is a major decision that can be made in one's life. Even if it happens later, the fact that Clare lives like a real white person and at times looks down on Irene reveals the fact that Irene is not very happy with who she is at her core. In other words, Clare's racial identity shift reveals a deep-seated trauma for Irene. The part of Irene that she suppresses until then no longer fits inside her. This woman, Clare, who is once one of her own, is now from the other side. So, she begins to feel anger towards both

her ancestry and towards this woman, wondering why she does not deserve it too. For this very reason, Irene is now traumatized too, even though it seems that it was only Clare who is traumatized in the first place. Both of these women's traumas are rooted in their common childhood.

The Vanishing Half, on the other hand, has a very definitive ending. After her homecoming, Stella vanishes again, like she did many years ago. Returning to the place of her birth and upbringing, the source of her passing, long after she passed, and again being dissatisfied with this place, not feeling that she belongs there, shows Stella's recurrent trauma. Since trauma is the result of the repetition of actions, Stella's trauma is repeated when she returns her hometown. The fact that the only thing that Mallard reminds her of is why she left Mallard. As a result, it prevents Stella from staying there. She is no longer the old Stella, so it is not possible for her to fit into this environment. Unfortunately, she cannot fit into the new identity she has actually passed for, as well. At this very point, an in-between situation is occurred. Just like in the Larsen's *Passing*, the character has to experience a brand new trauma as a result of her way of escaping from her trauma, which is passing. The portrayals of the characters are so detailed that the implied reader becomes a first-hand witness to their traumatic experiences. The mother's return to their childhood as if Stella has never left them, when she sees her long-last daughter again years later, Desiree's embrace of her sister instead of succumbing to her anger when she sees her, and the cousins starting a brand new life from that moment on, are all depicted as separate traumatic moments. What a passing mother passes on to their child is shown through Jude and Kennedy, which sets a good example of how familial trauma is passed on to the next generation.

To conclude, this thesis has examined how, in the selected novels, trauma is portrayed in relation to gender and racial concerns and has demonstrated how segregation traumatizes people, especially women. These novels describe the protagonists' suffering and bear witness to traumatic events. Both novels depict the trauma processes of the characters in a very detailed way. The characters use their new identities, which they can never fit in, to somehow challenge the normative American system, but without much success. The normative American system includes prejudice among minorities and these four women belong to that minority because of their races, because of the one-drop black blood in their bodies. Thus, they are excluded from the society by norms. As a result of this exclusion, the characters are subjected to a trauma and as a result two of them have to go as far as assuming a new self. Since the characters cannot fit in their new identities, or selves, it cannot be said

that they manage to overcome their traumas. Thus, one cannot infer an exact solution to overcome such gender and race based traumatic experiences. All in all, all four women admire each other in some way. Those who lack courage to pass and remain loyal to their race admire those who pass because they are living a whole new life, even if nothing is as it seems. Those who pass admire those who remain loyal to their race because they go on living their lives in their so-called safe spaces. However, the traumas experienced by both sides are different, even if they are based on the same roots. Here, literature is a tool used to process and illustrate the trauma based on race and one-drop rule. Apparently, passing is one of the possible trauma coping strategies, but there is no guarantee that it will have a positive outcome. It is a rather astonishing and regrettable fact that, despite the hundred years that have passed between the writing of the two novels, the time settings are not that far apart, yet the style of the authors, their perspectives on events and the representation of their characters have not changed in the slightest.

Apart from trauma theory, *Passing* and *The Vanishing Half* could be read through the lens of feminist criticism as both of the novels have a focus on women's relationships, which this thesis does not focus on in particular. Furthermore, *Passing* can be analyzed within a biographical context from Clare's perspective as Larsen mirrors herself in Clare. In this way, it is possible to examine how Larsen's own traumas are reflected in the characters that are actually adapted from her own life. Finally, it should be noted that although these novels do not offer clear solutions to the problems they deal with, the questions they raise are never irrelevant to our contemporary setting, considering the fact that racism and gender-based discrimination still exist today.

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