

# Nella Larsen's "passing"

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



The history of racism traces its roots back to the times when skin color really mattered. A few centuries ago it was the main criteria according to which people were forced to judge each other. The skin color was determining their social status, lifestyle and the attitude of the surrounding society. Also, it used to be an unwritten law during elections, job interviews, etc., to discriminate the blacks, which caused a full-scale limitation of their rights. In fact, in modern society nothing has dramatically changed in the perception of the racial diversity. The only change that has come into being is the difference between light-skinned and dark-skinned black people.

It has been noticed that people with light hue of skin have more privileges than those who can be described as the African Americans or the Blacks. This phenomenon is called colorism (however, for some reason Webster's Dictionary doesn't indicate this term) and denotes a type of racial discrimination towards the dark-skinned while their close counterparts -- the light-skinned people are treated more respectably at all levels of social system in the USA and other countries.

It can be explained by the fact that although there exists a great variety of anti-racist movements, people unconsciously refer to the old stereotype that white skin is an ideal color for a human creature (together with blue eyes, blond hair and thinness) and is taken as success. Consequently, the rest has to either change their color as Michael Jackson did or reconcile themselves to the circumstances of reality. Note, that colorism is not only associated with the blacks.

Unfortunately, this notion as well concerns communities that differ from the white race. Therefore, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Arab, the Native American people are also to be “blamed”. Desire to match the “ideal” pushes them to absurd: Arabs resort to the help of the surgeon who will refine their nose shape, Japanese do the same in order to change the color and shape of their eyes, etc. People from all over the world have established all kinds of organizations, clubs, and associations, where they assemble to discuss urgent problems of the blacks to protect their rights and work towards the improvement of their life standards.

Among the indicated above groups it's possible to distinguish some Black organizations such as “The Blue Vein Society” where the black person should have his blue veins clearly seen from under the skin in order to get a membership. Another association would not allow the black participate in its activity unless his skin hue is no darker than a brown paper bag. Therefore, individuals with lighter tone of the skin are considered to be closer to the white race and are treated accordingly.

The issue of the skin tone has been vividly discussed in mass media but unsurprisingly enough has never become a subject of hot debate among the authorities. In 1920s a well-known American black female author Nella Larsen decided to write a book, which would codify the influence of the color tone of the blacks on their relationships among each other as well as social attitude and life opportunities in general. The book “Passing” was published in 1929 and received favorable reviews from the majority of readers.

During the Harlem Renaissance era starting at the end of WWI and lasting till 1930s, those having the light hue of the skin have considered themselves almost white easily getting their privileges. As for the blacks, they have come to the point where the society forced them to hate themselves for their skin color. Thus, the main problem of the book seen from various angles is colorism.

It would be wrong to consider colorism less essential than racism as, in fact, it is even more dangerous as it provokes tension inside the black communities who ought to preserve their identity forcing people with darker skin to feel as if they were less valuable, unimportant human beings having minimum rights and benefits. The recognition of the notion of colorism assists us in dividing the negative phenomenon of racism into several separate problems that therefore can be much easier to solve.

The book "Passing" depicts the story of two women Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry who have not been in touch for a long time, but reunited already having husbands, children and their own lifestyles. Both of them are light-skinned black females, but Clare was the one who has been passing as a white woman during all of her life in spite of the fact that her husband was a violent opponent of the blacks.

Through the whole book one can observe a debatable notion whether it is worthwhile having a light tone of a skin to identify oneself as the black and to refuse from the advantage an American white citizen receives on regular basis or to perceive oneself as a white person and to try to penetrate into the white society with all its opportunities and "equal" rights leaving behind

black culture and identity. Irene opposes the idea of abandoning her black roots and subconsciously takes pride in her origin. Being strongly attracted to Clare, she, however, disapproves her behavior in terms of endeavoring to reach the white upper crust.

Interestingly enough, Irene's character doesn't have a strong incentive in life. Her existence amounts to nothing more than her family and setting up charity activities for the local cream of the crop. She assumes that her light skin allows her to look down on her dark-skinned companions. This can be clearly observed in the dialog between her and Clare after the latter has spent some time chattering with two of Irene's black servants Zulena and Sadie leaving behind general opinion. (Larsen 79). With an ulterior motive, Larsen chooses to place two black women in the role of servants in particular. It is difficult for Irene to overcome the stereotype of the racial diversity and to lower herself to the level of black low-income servants who nevertheless along with their mistress belong to the same group of the blacks.

Nella Larsen in her book "Passing" brings up the gender issue among those willing to escape from their black roots and become one of the whites. This is vividly described at the beginning of the book while women are having a talk about Clare's friend Claude Jones who used to be black but has passed and turned into a Jew. The idea of his break-in doesn't arouse a protest or indignation among the young ladies; moreover, they consider Claude's abandonment of his origin a weakness that can easily be forgiven and forgotten: "Oh, he's a scream all right... Still, it's his own business" (Larsen 37).

At the same time, women are looked at as traitors trying to cross cultural and skin color lines. Applying theory in practice, image makers unnoticeably turn the audience away from the dark-skinned by putting an image of a black male, not on any account a black woman, into the movie and making him fall in love with a white girl or in very rare instances a mulatto girl who in future will give a birth to less darker generation.

Larsen also emphasize the role of man by describing Clare's husband John Bellew who was an ardent racist and an enemy of the blacks. John Bellew becomes a personification of racism, not mentioning colorism, and places his convictions higher than his love for Clare. His belief in Clare's real origin start growing very fast revealing the truth of the racial issue of his wife as the book goes on. Irene finds herself under the tension of both Clare and John who keep constraining her to pass. Who knows what would happen if John had time to talk to Clare before her death? Divorce? Soul-searching?

In any case, nothing has higher price than life, particularly the hue of the skin. But Clare suspects that there is only the slight chance that her husband would change his attitude towards the blacks. Throughout the book Clare is a devoted follower of the idea of passing as she oftentimes describes the positive sides of the world she is living in to Irene. However, later on she starts complaining about the awfulness of her state and tells her friend that ultimately she would be happier and safer than herself.

Unfortunately, the problem of skin tone differentiation remains of current importance even nowadays, in spite of all the technological advances and scientific progress, which seemingly have to contribute to the development

of moral values. Basically, the reason lies in the human nature, which cannot be in any way modified or suppressed for a long time. According to the study of the PhD student Mr. Michael Harrison, the issue of colorism has a great impact on a business sphere.

He claims, for instance, that when two black people with equal experience, talents and personal characteristics are applying for a job, the one who is the light-skinned black individual will most likely occupy the desired position, no matter how sad it is. Plenty of people are making a statement regarding being not implicated in racism, but whenever a conversation deals with colorism and the topic of light-skinned and dark-skinned black individuals reaches the boiling point they shade.

Together with mass media representatives they are playing a strategic game where they refer to such celebrities like Mariah Carey, Van Diesel, and Halle Berry as the black, purposefully leaving the fact that these famous figures are light-skinned black people without consideration. This policy shapes the worldview of how the black person must look like and creates an image of exotic appearance of the light-skinned individuals. This results in a new different approach toward those people whose skin is of ebony color.

Obviously enough, they are most likely not to get a proper education, decent job and all those regular amenities of life taken for granted by white citizens. Experts say, that in average 70% of dark-skinned black African Americans tend to have menial jobs more often than their light-skinned partners as the last ones make 30% of lower-paid salaried workers. Overall, social opinion

served through media has become so powerful and influential lately, that it's hard to think about the future.

Try, for example, to imagine a light or a dark-skinned angel from the top to the bottom, his face expression, hairstyle, clothing, etc. At best, you will get an image of the Angel of Death. Or an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Morehouse College Larry D. Crawford in his study (1997) asks the audience whether they have ever thought why "does the general complexion become darker and darker when you travel from upper to middle to lower class African communities?

Why is it that most homeless men are dark complexioned? Why do we become affectively shocked or disturbed at the sight of a light complexioned homeless man? Why does the former seem more natural and the latter utterly out of place? Why is it that most homeless women are also dark complexioned?" He also refers to the fact that the majority of slaves were dark-skinned black people as the argument of a great difference between the latter and those who had light tone of skin.

Is it possible to fully realize an enormous size of the problem of skin color? Would it be better if our mankind was created color-blind? Is there any excuse why individuals with white skin color making 10% of world's population rule the world and establish priorities for others? Is it possible to explain this phenomenon to our grandchildren? Who is the one to stop the on-going mutual misunderstanding reflected in so many generations of the whites and the blacks, both with light and dark hue of skin?



It goes without saying that during a course of the years the issue of racism and colorism has been relevant globally and constantly. History should have taught us a good lesson about the consequences of human distorted apprehension of skin hues through worldwide slavery, Civil War and numerous unknown historical events.

#### REFERENCES

1. Larsen, N. *Passing*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
2. Crawford, D. Larry. "Racism, Colorism and Power". National Black United Front. 19 October 2006