

## RACIAL IDENTITY IN NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

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“True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them.”

- *Quicksand* 124

In the year 1929, many African American writers emerged and determined their identity as one of the most important problems in the Post I World War. The major writers of the Harlem Renaissance are W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. During the Harlem Renaissance period, Nella Larsen published two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Both these novels were widely reviewed and extremely acclaimed by the critics. Larsen was highly proclaimed as the rising star among authors of the Harlem Renaissance.

Nella Larsen's parents were immigrant of the United States. She was born in the year 1891, to a white Danish mother Mary Hanson, and a Danish West Indies father Peter Walker. Soon after her birth, her father left his family; therefore her mother married a Danish immigrant named Peter Larson, who later changed his spelling as Peter Larsen, in the year 1984. She was the only colored child in the white family and grew up as a step-daughter on the South side of Chicago. Before she established herself as “Nella Larsen”, she had quite a number of changes in name: “Nellie Walker”, “Nellie Larson” and “Nellye Larson”. The frequent change of her name indicates the attitude and experience of consequent dislocations. Larsen claims that she was unsolicited by her white step- father and half-sister and that she spent time in Denmark as a child. Although Thadious M. Davis's biography of Larsen does not approve these points and he claims it to be false. He believes Larsen never visited Denmark and had no relationship with her mother and also states that her biological father was light enough to pass. He argued that Larsen compensated her pain and trauma by her fictitious trips to Denmark and had an interesting family background in order to gain status among the blacks. But in Larsen's biography, Hutchinson strongly disagrees with Davis's information about Larsen. Hutchinson said Larsen's biographer's pathologized Nella Larsen's life in a “pattern not atypical of the way children from interracial families had often been misunderstood” (Hutchinson 3). In spite of positive reaction Davis's biography of Larsen, Hutchinson says, “Red flags kept going up as I saw potentially productive features of Larsen's Danish and interracial background dismissed, her relationship with her white mother negated or minimized, and her ambivalence toward the black bourgeoisie and the rhetoric of race pride attributed to internalized racism” (Hutchinson, 3). Hutchinson also some got records that she did indeed traveled to Denmark.

In her childhood, Larsen was educated in the school in Chicago. In 1907, she joined in Fisk University, the most prominent African-American school of the time. The school, in which

W. E. B. Du Bois was an alumnus, and where he emphasized the mission of educating students to be race leaders. “The psychological impact of its race-centeredness on Larsen cannot be underestimated” (Davis, 53). From the year 1908 to 1912 Larsen’s life was so mysterious. She claimed that she studied for two years at the Copenhagen University as an auditor. But Davis guesses that, “Larsen may have married shortly after leaving Fisk and spent at least a year in a small southern community” (Davis, 67-68), though it does not go beyond the speculation. In 1912, Larsen joined as a Nurse in New York’s Lincoln Hospital and in Home Training School. In 1915, she was graduated from Lincoln School and started her career as the head nurse at the Tuskegee Institute Training School for Nurses in Alabama. Her profession was quite responsible, that is, her job was an administrator, a teacher and a practicing nurse. But the life in Tuskegee was not suited for Larsen’s sensitivity. Later she returned back to New York and appointed as a district nurse in the New York Department of Health in 1918.

In New York she started a new life and married Dr. Elmer Imes on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1919. She considered her marriage would take her to the top in the society. Imes had completed his Doctorate in Philosophy at the Michigan University and became a member of the African American elite. Larsen’s marriage with him made her also to enter into the privileged African American society. In the year 1921, Larsen resigned her job in City Department of Health, and started her work at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, where the Schomburg Collection of Materials on Black Culture was started, as well as a natural interest in literature, led Larsen to take advantage of her social contacts for writing and publishing. With the encouragement of her colleague and supervisors at the library she also got a certificate and became certified librarian.

When she was working as a librarian Larsen met novelists like Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Carl Van Vechten and Dorothy Peterson. She utilized the books in the library to a great extent. She was quite aware of the both the past and current literature. In 1926, she published two short stories, namely “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom”, in the magazine called *Young Magazine* under a pseudonym Allen Semi. Her stories never had any black characters; they presented versions of the thriving characters and themes of disgruntlement and concealment that were developed in her novels. She was recognized as the writer only after the publication of her first novel *Quicksand*. It was highly acclaimed by W. E. B. Du Bois, and won a Bronze Medal from the Harmon Foundation in 1928. Her second novel, *Passing* was published in 1929 through which she gained a better place among the African American writers. She was the first African American who won Guggenheim for creative writing. She was a great and a successful woman during the Harlem Renaissance.

Her marriage life was not long lasting. She found out that her husband Dr. Imes had an affair with a white woman at Fisk University. Later she went to Europe with Guggenheim grant and lived there for two years. She divorced her husband in the year 1933. In early 1940’s she had totally relinquished from the literary world and started her noble profession by nursing the people in the hospital. She died in the year 1964, and only a few associates attended her funeral.

*Quicksand* is both cross-cultural and interracial, as an epigraph from Langston Hughes’ poem *Cross* suggests: “My old man died in a fine big house, / My ma died in a shack, / I wonder where I’m going to die, / Being neither white nor black?” Thus, this novel is thematically about racially confused female ‘mulatto’ who struggles with her ‘biracial’ identities in America sharply divided by the color line. *Quicksand* is a semiautobiographical novel.

Helga Crane is the central figure in the novel *Quicksand*. Like the author, the protagonist, is also a biracial woman. She is a mulatto woman born to a white mother and a black father, who

is described as a figure split between two racial identities. Her split identity is emphasized by her extraordinary mobility as a traveler. The possibilities allowed Helga of being only Black or only White eventually ruins her life, who longs to celebrate her mixed heritage. In 1920s Nella Larsen cannot appeal to the American audience who understands ethnic multiculturalism as a normal mode of division, instead, she must directly confront the binary dividing line, based on race, that separates Americans into racial groups. Helga always reminds herself and others of the threat following beneath America's strict racial code. When her employers discover Helga's heritage, Larsen writes, "The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned – and therefore they do not exist" (Larsen, 72). Thus, later in the novel Helga is robbed by her true identity.

Numerous critics of the novel have pointed out that Helga's search for an identity and a home are central themes of the novel. Often the critics stress the ways in which Helga Crane's search for identity, home and love mirrors that of Nella Larsen. Hence, Thadious M. Davis asserts that Larsen's work replicates "the searches in her private and public interactions" (Davis, 3). Davis notes that Helga's experiences in Naxos parallel Larsen's experience at Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington. As Davis points out, "Nella Larsen was out of place at Tuskegee . . . the contained, self-conscious community allowed no space in which she could comfortably fit and no place in which she could develop her interests or her sense of self" (Davis, 109). Davis also believes that Larsen fabricated elements of her biography to make herself more interesting to literary circles of the Harlem Renaissance and kept herself apart from the dark masses to emphasize her racial difference and individuality. Thus Davis says Larsen's novel, especially *Quicksand* as her indirect uncovering of her permanent scar from her psycho-social history.

Another critic Nell Sullivan emphasizes the correlation between Larsen's life and her work. Sullivan thinks that Larsen's rejection by her family led to a desire on the part of the subject to disappear a fate Larsen shares with her protagonists: "Her hazy origins and almost traceless 'disappearance' differentiate Larsen from the other authors of the Harlem Renaissance, but not from the characters of her own novels" (Sullivan, 373). In analyzing biographies of Larsen that emphasize parallels between Larsen's life and her work, George Hutchinson indicates that such readings have the effect of "buttressing the American racial ideology that renders biracial subjectivity invisible, untenable, or fraudulent" (Hutchinson, 445).

This novel takes place in six distinct settings like Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, Harlem again, and finally in rural Alabama. Her hybrid position gives us important insight into the structure of black/white society. Helga's observations on Naxos and the black middle-class society in the South, bring to the lime light the important contradiction on which the black community stands. She is aware of the black community which is based on the racial uplift exists within the white hierarchy of races. Naxos is an anagram for "Saxon" reveals the institution program: to adopt white values and to create from the multiplicity of black persons as a "machine" of dull conformity. It constructs the human models just by imitating the white principles: "Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now, only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (Larsen, 4).

Although Naxos tries to instruct the model of African American, their strong racial perception is problematic, for hauling the white-made racial difference means carrying the white ideas of race. Since constructing race on the skin color is producing and giving privilege to 'whiteness' to build the school based on the race means the obedience to a 'white man's pattern'.

Thus, Helga views black race consciousness as internalization of white ideology. Helga also has a problem with the dress code in Naxos:

Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. And trimmings – when Helga used at all – seemed to them odd. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades. Her faultless, slim shoes made them positively indecent. (Larsen, 18)

Like a white working woman, Helga too prefers and loves to wear fashionable, luxurious and stuffed clothes. Nan Enstad elucidates the inclination of display in working women's fashion saying "working women emphasized rather than denied the element of display that played a part in all clothes" (Enstad, 79). In *Righteous Discontent*, Higginbotham describes "conservatism" of the racial uplift movement, stating that middle class blacks often "attributed institutional racism to the 'negative' public behavior of their people – as if rejection of 'gaudy' colors in dress, snuff dipping, baseball games on Sunday, and other forms of 'improper' decorum could eradicate the pervasive racial barriers that surrounded black Americans" (Higginbotham, 15). Larsen brings out the trace of the black women's clothing, particularly the color of their clothes, in this novel. But the people who live in Naxos hate such colorful clothes and followed a strict dress code. Helga later realizes that the 'blackness' that the Naxos people stress is nothing but the structure formed on white middle-class morality.

Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts – 'Bright colors are vulgar' – 'Black, gray, brown and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people' – 'Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red.' – The dean was a woman from one of the 'first families' – a great 'race' woman; she, Helga Crane a despised mulatto; but some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green and red. Black, brown and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins . . . . Why, she wondered, didn't someone write *A Plea for Color*? (Larsen, 18)

Though Helga evaluates such behavior, she encourages the notion of racial essentialism through 'driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need' for beauty. Aspiration for beauty is not restricted to African American. When she was at Naxos she has inexorably inclined her racial ideas. She experiences the difficulty of the impoverished black masses, and thus in the end of the novel she changes her thinking about race and racial uplift.

Helga Crane has been an educated, middle-class, biracial woman, never considers passing, who never feels comfortable with the identities foisted upon her. Her fiancé James Vayle, a prominent member of the black bourgeois community, and her colleague had discomfited by her lack of family connections and her mixed-race. In thinking about breaking her engagement to James Vayle, she decides that his family will welcome the news:

They had never like the engagement, had never liked Helga Crane. Her own lack of family disconcerted them . No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. . . . Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid as in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If

you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong" (Larsen, 8).

She leaves Naxos and moves to Chicago; there she joins as Personal Assistant to Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a widow and a prominent race woman, whose husband left her with an economical comfort and prestige within the black community. Later she moves to Harlem, there she gets associated with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's niece Anne Grey, a brown woman. This novel represents double-consciousness through Anne Grey. Even her name conveys the color confusion, for gray is a diluted color that remains somewhere between black and white. She hated white people with a deep burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in sufficiently numerous groups was capable someday, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames. Helga is annoyed because Anne hates the white people, but apes their clothes, manners and their life style. This proves that the black elites have contradictory in their racial logic. Blacks claim the racial pride and uplift, but actually they try to ape the white middle-class ideals. Helga is viewed as a hazard to both black and white societies. Anne is more beautiful than Helga but still she is afraid of Helga's charm because she is a mulatto. Since mulatto body is the symbol of racial and sexual transgression, Helga's body suggests a great anxiety and unease in people's minds.

To prove herself as an American citizen, Anne displays outward, material signs of triumph. Her money, cloth and her things serve for the betterment of the African American race in the white society. Yet she tries to prove the equality of African American and she spends lots of her money and time for the racial uplift. In *Uplifting the Race*, Gaines argues that this "double-consciousness captures the traffic difficulty of racial uplift ideology: its continuing struggle against an intellectual dependence on dominant ideologies of whiteness and white constructions of blackness" (Gaines, 9). Within the socially constructed confines of race, Anne becomes a prey as well as a proponent of her racial society. In short, Gaines states that, "desperation, ambition and the imperatives of survival might produce an ostensibly positive black identity in simplistic, reductive terms that replicate the racist and sexist cultural codes of the oppressive society" (Gaines, 5).

Helga, neither belongs to white nor black community, therefore, she is constantly marginalized by the society. Larsen portrays Harlem as the place of hybridity in terms of race and nationality. Harlem, which includes people of various skin-color, hair and eyes, is depicted as the place of confusion of racial identity based on physical appearance.

There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eye in brown faces and blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here. (Larsen, 59-60)

The above passage denotes that the opposite traits such as ugliness and beauty, barbarism and sophistication are present in the people who live in Harlem region. Alain Locke describes about the place Harlem as a mixture of varied people in *The New Negro*:

It has attracted the African, the west Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the

student, the business man and the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. (Locke, 6)

Harlem splits Helga's identity. She has a problem with her double consciousness. After seeing the night life in Harlem, she defines the place as "jungle" and labeled as a noisy, exotic and sexual place. She also says to herself: "she wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature" (Larsen, 59). Harlem is a contradictory place because, in spite of diversity, it has pierced by the racial thoughts.

Since Harlem was the center of black ideology, and learning from Mrs. Hayes-Rore that Anne Grey has aversion on white people, Helga conceals her white relatives from her. Therefore, Helga passes as black by concealing her white relatives. Usually, passing refers to blacks passing as whites to enjoy the elite status, but she reverses it and passes as black. Her skin color does not make her as a 'black' woman. She also understands that race is not on the skin: "She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper that made folk kin" (Larsen, 55). Though she is successful in passing as black she wasn't able to assimilate the race into her subjectivity. Her conflict is identified and thus she plans to move to Denmark.

Helga receives economical help of \$ 5,000 from her Uncle in Chicago, along with the suggestion to visit her Aunt in Denmark. She also decides to follow his advice. Helga planned a dinner party for her friend Anne Grey. There she sees Robert Anderson, with Audrey Denny, whom Anne Grey scorns for her eagerness to mingle with both black and white society. Anne says that "I've nothing but contempt for her, as has every other self-respecting Negro," but Helga thinks there is no use of arguing with her, "She gave it up. She felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial boundaries and give her attention to people, was not contempt, but envious admiration" (Larsen, 62). Anderson and the cabaret join with the combination of race and sexuality that makes Helga to feel as entrapped. In the Harlem nightclub, she is described as "a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying black and gold dress" (Larsen, 62). Here, Larsen stresses the ironical nature of biracial identity by describing Helga as both 'fragile' and 'flying'. Such identity is fragile because it is always endangered by forces that would sort out and trap it, but in its fluidity and hybridity it is astonishingly resistant to entrapment.

Copenhagen, Denmark is depicted as a white capitalistic world. When she moves to her Aunt's house in Copenhagen and lives a materialistic life which she always desired. She hopes that Europe will offer her liberation from the coercion of the American society. In her maternal Aunt and Uncle's home, she wishes to obtain contentment and pleasure that have continually eluded her. She also aspires to fulfill her dream: "Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surrounding. Things. Things. Things" (Larsen, 67). She enjoys and feels excited to get many dresses which helps to pass as white in the white world.

Obviously, Helga has a passion for fashionable clothes. However, the Dahls, her Danish aunt and uncle, want to dress her in a ways that highlight her difference and make her into an exotic other. In Denmark, the dilemma of black female self-representation becomes clearer as the reader sees Helga struggle with her desire for beautiful, exotic dress on one hand and the negative stereotypes that such images suggest for her on the other. Helga's experience in Copenhagen brings out her conflict towards the white which try to determine her identity. She attains the social power over her identity from the dresses she required to wear. She loves to

wear exotic dresses such as “the Chinese red dressing-gown” (Larsen, 68) and “the shining black taffeta with its bizarre trimmings of purple and cerise” (Larsen, 69). In Denmark she meets Axel Olsen, an artist. He admires her a lot and he is the one who constructs her in the exotic image. The dresses Olsen chooses for Helga are “batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood red, sulphur-yellow, sea green; and one black and white thing in striking combination” (Larsen, 74). All the dresses show voluptuous and exotic picture. They are mostly screaming colors which are connected with body (blood red), and with nature (sulphur-yellow and sea green) and also sends her a coat of “leopard-skin” which confirms that he relates her with an African figure. He also gifts her “turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jeweler, enameled or set with odd semi-precious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels” (Larsen, 74) which demonstrates that Olsen connects her with the Eastern image. Stavney says that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the black woman was “connected with the heat, fertility, and luxury of the voluptuous East, an implicit contrast to the colder, urban, modern landscape” (Stavney, 549). Olsen’s chooses such dresses for Helga in order to Africanize, Orientalize, and exoticize her. Here, he uses white colonist policy to suppress the colonial other. To prove his power over her, he plans to confine her mulatto body into non-western.

Olsen is a passionate lover and almost has a theatrical behavior. He loves Helga and not troubled about race, but it is a big problem for her. Therefore, Helga rejects Axel Olsen’s proposal of marriage. She feels ashamed when she sees Olsen’s portrait of her because she is portrayed as a disgusting sensual creature. He too thinks her as a sexual commodity available for white men, which brings out the hegemonic force of whites on the black women. Although, she reads the mind of Olsen and his thought on black woman and rejects his proposal by saying “But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man” (Larsen, 87).

Olsen is extremely shocked of her rejection because he never expected that a colored woman refusing a white man’s marriage proposal, which would allow a colored women access to white privilege: “The man’s full upper lip trembled. He wiped his forehead, where the gold hair was now lying flat and pale and lusterless. His eyes still avoided the girl in the high-backed chair before him” (Larsen, 88).

Olsen’s physical reaction is exactly the reaction for abjection: “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now, harries me as radically separate, loathsome” (Kristeva, 2). When he abjects, he overwhelmed by loathsome feelings and his body tried to spit them out. Olsen avoids looking at Helga, because she, who rejects his significations, is the epitome of abjection for him. Olsen is put into confusion because his symbolic space is trespassed by Helga’s semiotic power.

Therefore, Helga thrives in disturbing not only the racial hierarchy system but also sexual system by engaging herself into the “active/choice/ negation” (Ghosh and Bose xxi) of the politicized identity. She later realizes that one cannot escape from the politicized unity of the race when she refuses Olsen. She says “You see, I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you, not just personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial” (Larsen, 88). Helga then realizes that she is bound by “race” in spite of her belonging to neither black nor white society.

After rejecting her marriage proposal she resolves in her mind about her black father. She supports and justifies the action of her father. She gets compassionate and empathetic feelings with her father’s “yearning, his intolerable need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of his own kind, his need for those things not material, indigenous to all Negro

environments” (Larsen, 92). The moment when Helga reconciles her father, she enters into the stage of Father/Law/Language and identifies herself as a ‘black’ woman. She is robbed of her true identity. Because she threatens the strict ‘color line’ that guides all of American life, the mixed race Helga – cannot exist. According to Martha J. Cutter, “Helga Crane attempts to use ‘passing’ as a way of finding a unitary sense of identity – a sense of identity structured around one role, a role that somehow corresponds to her ‘essential self’” (Cutter, 75). She finds solace in finding her identity. The life in Copenhagen transforms not only Helga’s opinion on self, but also on fashion. There she learns the theatrical nature of dressing:

She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired . . . She grew used to the extravagant things with which Aunt Katrina chose to dress her. (Larsen, 74)

She wears an exotic dress in order to please her relatives and associates. She knows that fashion is a dangerous one which traps and confines her as the exotic female, but still she feels she can gain new existence through fashionable dressing. Therefore, she chooses fashion as a tool for expressing her subjectivity. She also thinks that fashionable dressing helps her to perform and provides enough confidence and power to control her body.

She again goes to Harlem, and becomes popular among the people for her daring clothes. Through such clothing she gains the pleasure of controlling her sexuality. She meets James Vayle, her ex-fiancé, but she is not a poor young woman to feel ashamed of her parentage. James Vayle, represents “the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift” (Larsen, 40). Helga is confident enough to refuse his marriage proposal by saying that she doesn’t want to give birth to unwanted and tortured Negroes to America. James reveals his own class and racial prejudice. He exclaims:

Don’t you see that if we – I mean people like us – don’t have children, the other will still have. That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to struggle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones, lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere. (Larsen, 40)

In the above passage, James reverberates the patriarchy and eugenics which came to dominate racial uplift ideology. Larsen mocks the idea of racial uplift ideas in her novel and James Vayle is not exempted. James’ prejudiced speech shocks the readers, but not to convince them of the benefits of eugenics. W. E. B. Du Bois claimed that African American must not breed for an object but they must begin to “train and breed for brains, for efficiency, for beauty” (Du Bois, 293). Racial passing certainly endangered this ideal of the educated, middle-class African American family. To pass as white individuals must have light skin and whiter features. The light skinned African Americans usually fell within a higher economic status and they also come closer to the white standard of beauty. Passing thus resulted in a loss of valuable genetic material to the white race, a devastating blow to those who saw eugenics as a way to uplift black Americans.

*Quicksand* can be compared to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in the novel *Beloved* the protagonist Seth kills her own daughter because she doesn’t want her daughter to suffer under



the hands of the white community. But here, in *Quicksand* Helga Crane goes ahead by refusing the marriage proposal of James Vayle just because she doesn't want to give birth to the black children and make them suffer under the hands of white community. She rejects the idea of motherhood the race assigns to her. Therefore, she has reached the control over both her body and self.

Helga's fashionable dressing and courage trapped her soon. She comes back to Harlem to attend the marriage function of her friend Anne Grey and Dr. Anderson. Anne Grey shows no interest on her friend Helga for concealing about her white family and for living with her white relatives for a long time. Anderson, whom Helga secretly admires, suddenly holds her closely and gives her a long kiss before his marriage. With this long kiss her desire and longing are awakened and she is thrown in a 'mental quagmire': "All night, all day, she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror" (Larsen, 107). She takes the kiss as a serious one and meets him out of love. But he hurts her just by saying that he was out of control because of the rotten cocktails. Helga starts to feel lonely and keeps herself isolated from others because of the unrequited love and passion. The long kiss has awakened her desire and that burns her flesh with unmanageable violence. She destroys herself because of the unreciprocated love. She made up her mind to escape from the shameful feeling by dressing herself well. In one scene, Helga's journey for self-definition and sense of belonging ends desolately when, rain-soaked and frantic, she stumbles into a storefront mission church. She removes her coat and reveals her red dress, and immediately labeled as a prostitute.

At the sight of the bare arms and neck growing out of the clinging red dress, a shudder shook the swaying man at right. On the dancing woman before her a disapproving frown gathered. She shrieked: "A scarlet 'Oman'. Come to Jesus, you por los' Jezebel!" At this the short brown man on the platform raised a placating hand and sanctimoniously delivered himself of the words: "Remembah de words of our Mastah: 'Let him that is without sin cast de first stome.' Let us pray for our errin' sistah". (Larsen, 112)

Driven by her sexual desire, Helga seduces Reverend Green whom she met in the gospel church. She understands his desire for her and says "That man! Was it possible? As easy as that?" (Larsen, 115). In the church, both her religious passion and her sexual desire become one, which marks the climactic moment of *Quicksand*. Thus, her sexual desire finds a place in the Christian institution of marriage, which ultimately causes damage to her body.

Helga initially satisfied by marrying Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. But what he gives her is not a pleasant pastoral life, but full of miseries and miserable murky rural life as a preacher's wife. Helga gives birth to three children in twenty months and lives a life that completely contradicts with her earlier ambition for identity. As she is always pregnant, she lost all her health. Life in the Southern rural village not only separates her from the cities, clothes and books, but also from sophisticated life. She denies her hybridity and chooses the fixed identity and struggles a lot. She scuffles with the constant child birth.

In the final examine, Larsen does not provide any solution for the protagonist. Race was very important for the Harlem Renaissance writers, but Larsen was aware of the danger of racial politics, which does not allow freedom to float in between without being categorized. Larsen also obvious that the racial ideology was dangerous to women, for it tries to control female sexuality on the pretext of racial unity and uplift. Helga steps into the road of self-destruction by fixing her

identity in the black race and by rooting herself in the rural Southern village as a black preacher's wife. When she ceases to struggle between two races, Helga's racial identity is determined.

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