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Matrix of Domination and Ontological Struggle of the Black Woman in Nella Larsen's Quicksand

Nella Larsen'in Quicksand Romanında Tahakküm Matriksleri ve Siyahi Kadının Ontolojik Mücadelesi

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ABSTRACT

Through an intersectional theoretical framework, this paper examines how multiple, interlocking systems of oppression—what Patricia Hill Collins terms the ‘matrix of domination’—fundamentally shape Black women’s lived experiences in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. While African American women writers have long depicted the multilayered oppressions facing Black women, applying intersectionality as both analytical lens and praxis offers profound insights into protagonist Helga Crane’s navigation of overlapping societal constraints. This study shows how Crane’s experiences embody the complex interplay of racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity that simultaneously regulate her autonomy, social mobility, and sense of self. By analyzing how Crane’s intersecting identities influence her access to resources, interpersonal relationships, and resistance strategies, this paper demonstrates how Larsen’s narrative presciently articulates key concepts in contemporary intersectional theory. This intersectional reading reveals dimensions of the text that remain obscured by single-axis analyses, highlighting Larsen’s sophisticated portrayal of how power operates through interlocking systems rather than discrete categories of oppression

Keywords: black feminism, intersectionality, double consciousness, race

ÖZ

Kesişimselliği teorik çerçeve olarak kullanarak, bu makale, Patricia Hill Collins’in “tahakküm matriksi” olarak adlandırdığı çoklu, birbirine bağlı baskı sistemlerinin, Nella Larsen’in “Quicksand” adlı eserinde Siyahi kadınların yaşamış deneyimlerini nasıl temelde şekillendirdiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Afro-Amerikan kadın yazarlar uzun zamandır Siyahi kadınların karşı karşıya olduğu çok katmanlı baskıları tasvir ederken, kesişimselliği hem analitik mercek hem de pratik olarak uygulamak, başkahraman Helga Crane’in örtüşen toplumsal kısıtlamalar karşısındaki tutumu konusunda bize derin içgörüler sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, kesişimsel lens aracılığıyla Crane’in deneyimlerinin, aynı anda özerkliğini, sosyal hareketliliğini ve benlik duygusunu düzenleyen ırkçılık, cinsiyetçilik, sınıfcılık ve heteronormativitenin karmaşık etkileşimini nasıl somutlaştırdığını göstermektedir. Crane’in kesişen kimliklerinin kaynak erişimini, kişilerarası ilişkilerini ve direniş stratejilerini nasıl etkilediğini analiz ederek, bu makale Larsen’in anlatısının çağdaş kesişimsel teorideki temel kavramları nasıl öngörülü bir şekilde dile getirdiğini göstermektedir. Bu kesişimsel okuma, tek eksenli analizlerle belirsizliğini koruyan metnin boyutlarını ortaya koyarak, Larsen’in ayrı baskı kategorileri yerine birbirine geçen sistemler aracılığıyla gücün nasıl işlediğine dair karmaşık tasvirini vurgulamaktadır

Anahtar kelimeler: siyah feminizm, kesişimsellik, çifte bilinç, ırk



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Introduction

African American literature, a product of ontological and epistemological struggle, always left out and silenced under the complex matrices of oppression. Afro-American women writing and activism significantly shaped and continue shaping the content and form of individual, cultural, social, and political struggle. Black women writers, thinkers, and activists resisted hegemonic, and male dominated white supremacy to have their voice heard and gain authority, rewrite history, resist epistemic violence and erasure. They reclaim their own culture and address their struggles through themes of race, gender, and economy. In *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (2001), Dickson D. Bruce Jr. expresses the meaning of Black people's struggle to find their own voice and power as follows: *The authoritative voice not only gave African-American writers a role in shaping discussions on color, slave trade, and racial oppression, but also did much to focus American thought on more general issues of public discourse, including the process of democratization and the nature of the public sphere.* (2001: xii)

African American women writers challenged and problematized their marginalization and isolation from historical and social movements including white feminist movements and suffrage movement. Therefore, using the transformative power of literature and language on many topics such as race relations, color, identity, class, social status, and economic utilitarianism, black women activists and writers composed policies and works to influence mainstream American society. They set agendas and provided cognitive enlightenment to criticize the problems.

In addition to important social and sociological events in American history such as declaration of emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights movement, discursive practices of African American writers, myths, folklore and traditions originating from the African continent has become a distinguishing feature of their works. In this context, African American literature has created rhetorical and representational policies within the existing literary tradition. After the abolition of slavery, exclusion, humiliation and marginalization became the focus of black literary writing. In addition, the migration of millions of black people from the Southern states to the North and the new socioeconomic, political and cultural environments created literary and intellectual movements. Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement contributed to the creation of epistemic and ontological struggle that would deeply affect the culture of the country and lead to the emergence of liberatory politics.

The epistemic and ontological struggle of Black women started with slave narratives. A West Indian slave Mary Prince wrote her life in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*

(1831) and American slave Harriet Jacobs gave a detailed account of struggles of a slave woman and her journey to freedom in her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl* (1861). Influenced by these slave narratives and epistemic struggle of black women, women writers of African descent produced significant works towards the end of the nineteenth century such as "Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1857?), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), Martin R. Delany's *Blake, Or the Huts of America* (1859–62) and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *The Two Offers* (1859)" (Altındış, 2023: 49). These narratives different from male counterparts focused on how women slaves had to endure sexual exploitation, rape, chattel slavery, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. Their writing aimed to influence white reader, especially white women reader, to obtain their support in the fight against discriminatory politics of white supremacy.

Aftermath the slavery, Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*; Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*; Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* were published establishing ground for the future of Black women's writing and struggles. In 1896, the organization of "The National Association of Colored Women" was founded. They politically and intellectually resisted to injustice, inequality, and discrimination such as the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" decision. With the turn of the century under the influence of philosophical arguments of W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, Black women writers of Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, wrote canonical fictions focusing on race, class, and identity problems of black women. Larsen with her novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) and Zora Neale Hurston with her *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936) became literary foremothers of Black women's writing tradition and influenced Black feminist discourses and literary production.

The primary thematic concern of African American women writing has been to save Black women from subjugation, exclusion from social, political, intellectual life, and from epistemic injustice. This injustice and exclusion are confronted in a more nuanced way in the twentieth century when Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, in legal doctrine, published her article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (1991) in which she coined and used the term *intersectionality* to challenge the injustice and systemic racism experienced by Black women. Her pioneering theoretical formulation of intersectionality constitutes a significant epistemological intervention that elucidates the multifaceted and frequently obscured lived experiences of Black women whose subject positions are constituted through multiple, concurrent systems of oppression. Crenshaw critically

interrogates the limitations of conventional feminist and anti-racist discursive frameworks, which have demonstrated inadequacy in theorizing the distinctive ontological status of Black women, who encounter discrimination not as a mere aggregation of racial and gender subordinations, but rather through an intricate, interrelated matrix of marginalization.

Following Crenshaw's concept, many scholars in social sciences including women's studies, sociology, literature, and political sciences used the term to complicate single axis approaches that aims to challenge discrimination and other forms of oppression that women had to endure. In the last decade, numerous scholarly publications about the topic applied the term different discussion around the academia (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Bilge, 2013; Carbado, 2013; Grazanka, 2014; Grzanka & Miles, 2016; May, 2015; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Carastathis, 2016; Hancock, 2016; Collins, 2019).

Several names play a significant role in developing the engagement with black feminist thought and intersectionality as a social critical theory. As Jennifer Nash notes, "While intersectional histories have long included Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah King, and Frances Beal, recent black feminist scholarship has centered Anna Julia Cooper's work as foundational to modern intersectionality theory" (2019: 6). Ange-Marie Hancock (2016), Patricia Hill Collins (2019), Vivian M. May (2015), Sirma Bilge (2013), and Anna Carastathis (2016) are among contemporary scholars who widely wrote about intersectionality. As a scholar and critique from Sociology and Women's Studies field, Patricia Hill Collins' contributions have indeed been foundational in transforming intersectionality from its origins in legal scholarship to a robust social theory with broad analytical applications. Her work, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990, 2000), established crucial groundwork by articulating how interlocking systems of oppression shape Black women's experiences and knowledge production.

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), Collins advances this theoretical framework significantly by providing a systematic examination of intersectionality's conceptual architecture. She meticulously explores its theoretical underpinnings, methodological implications, and capacity for social transformation. On her role in the development of intersectionality as a critical theory, Jennifer Nash explains: "While Crenshaw is citationally linked to intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins is also tethered to the intellectual and political labor of intersectionality theory, especially in the social sciences, where her conception of the "matrix of domination" has become canonized" (2019:10). What distinguishes Collins' approach is her insistence that intersectionality functions not

merely as an analytical lens but as a critical paradigm that fundamentally reconfigures how we understand complex social phenomena.

According to Collins black feminist epistemeology reflects concerns of other feminist organizations, yet it has distinctive qualities because "instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination" (2000:222). Collins' work carefully traces how different systems of power, including but not limited to race, gender, class, and sexuality, do not simply add together but rather co-constitute one another through complex processes. This mutual construction creates distinctive social locations and experiences that cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks. By positioning intersectionality as a critical social theory, Collins elevates it beyond a descriptive tool to a transformative framework capable of challenging dominant power structures while simultaneously providing methodological guidance for more nuanced social analysis. Her scholarship demonstrates how intersectionality can generate new knowledge about complex social relations while also informing practical strategies for social justice activism.

A prominent Women's Studies scholar Vivian M. May's scholarly contribution in *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (2015) represents a significant intervention in mapping the theory's intellectual lineage. Her work meticulously documents how this approach has deep historical antecedents in Black feminist scholarship and activism that predate Crenshaw's formal articulation of the term. May convincingly argues that Black women intellectuals and activists had developed sophisticated frameworks for understanding the complex interplay of power systems long before Crenshaw's term entered academic discourse as a named concept.

According to Julia Jordan-Zachery, intersectionality articulates survival politics for Black women and has existed within a liberation/freedom framework as its driving force since its emergence; it aims to eliminate all types of inequality, whether epistemic, ontological, or structural (Jordan-Zachery, 2007:256). For Bonnie Thornton Dill, intersectionality "forms the core of diversity studies" (2009: 229). In the introduction to a special issue of *Signs* journal on intersectionality, Sumi K. Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (2013) identify three overlapping "engagement clusters" in intersectionality studies: "the framework of intersectional practices; discursive debates about the scope of intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm; and political interventions applying an intersectionality lens" (785).

The theory continues to develop as an important analytical tool in women studies and social sciences. Catharine MacKinnon notes that, intersectionality awareness focuses on people and experiences, and therefore on social forces and dynamics that are overlooked in the monocular view (2013: 1020). Huseyin Altindis explains that, “as a descriptive term, it refers to the ways in which human identity is shaped and overlapped by multiple social vectors. Identity categories that do not readily appear on a single axis (such as gender, race, class) are considered integral to robustly capturing the multifaceted nature of human experience in intersectionality” (2023: 14). In their edited book *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice* (2009), Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana define intersectionality as an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytical lens to question race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender inequalities and to challenge current ways of looking at these structures of inequality (2009:1). In her article, “Home Truths` on Intersectionality” Jennifer C. Nash states that “by describing the experience of `multiple jeopardy` specific to black women, intersectionality became both a black feminist politics of survival and an analytic interested in how race, gender, class, and sexuality interact in complex ways that shape subjects and institutions alike” (2011: 446). Patricia H. Collins employs a similar logic when explaining the development process of intersectionality as a theory of social critique, positioning intersectionality as an intellectual juncture where multiple knowledge projects that develop various critical perspectives on established knowledge meet (Collins, 2019: 55).

Drawing from theoretical contributions of *Intersectionality as a Social Critical Theory*, this paper argues that Helga Crane’s experience in *Quicksand* (1928) can only be fully understood through a framework that considers the simultaneity of oppression, interconnected nature of oppressive systems, which provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding how racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity operate not as separate forces, but as interlocking systems that create unique conditions of marginalization.

Nella Larsen’S Quicksand

Born in Chicago as the mixed-race child of a Danish mother and a West Indian father, Larsen (1891-1964), a folklorist, novelist, and writer of novellas, occupies a special place in the literary tradition of black women, as she is one of the most important but historically underappreciated writers of the Harlem Renaissance. When the influence of the Harlem Renaissance diminished and the movement ended, Larsen and her limited number of works—particularly her novels “Quicksand” (1928) and “Passing” (1929)—which explore mixed-race identity, the social constraints of women, and the complex intersections of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality in early twentieth-

century America. Her literary works disappeared from the American literary scene until the 1970s-80s. After 1970, she was rediscovered by many Black feminist critics who described Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston as their literary mothers. Cheryl Wall and Barbara Christian, for example, hold the view that Larsen and Fauset, like many female poets of that period, eliminated the morally weak and negative image of Black women and instead portrayed Black female characters with proper, serious, and bourgeois characteristics similar to middle-class white women.

Larsen was born to a Danish mother and a father of Afro-Caribbean descent. Her personal experiences of racial ambiguity and liminality have strongly influenced her fiction. Her protagonists, Helga in “Quicksand” and Clare and Irene in “Passing,” are mixed-race women living in precarious social circumstances between the black and white worlds. They experience both privilege and exclusion in their search for an authentic self in a society structured by rigid racial and gender hierarchies. By illustrating the simultaneous effect of multiple forms of oppression on Black women’s lives, Larsen’s work anticipated contemporary intersectional feminist theory. She presents one of the most sophisticated literary examinations of the phenomenon of racial passing, which is the practice of light-skinned Black individuals presenting themselves as white, examining its psychological complexities as well as the fundamental instability of racial categories.

Larsen serves as a crucial transitional figure within the Black women’s literary tradition, bridging earlier writers like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Hopkins with the modernist innovations of the Harlem Renaissance, she anticipated themes later developed by writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Toni Morrison. Her work confronts the complex politics of respectability that constrained Black women’s social and sexual expression, challenging both white supremacist narratives and the sometimes-prescriptive expectations within Black communities.

Her fearless exploration of the social boundaries that limit black women’s self-definition, aspirations, and freedom of movement is the reason of Larsen’s lasting influence on African American women’s literature. Her literary significance is maintained through the portrayal of multidimensional female protagonists who confront with these social limitations, often encountering outcomes that are neither clearly triumphant nor completely defeated.

Matrix of Domination and Intersectionality

Larsen’s first novel, *Quicksand* (1928), focuses on themes such as mulatto (mixed-race), double consciousness, class, religion, universality, and identity from a black female perspective. Her protagonist Helga, born to a Danish mother and a West Indian

father, narrates her struggle to search for her sexuality and identity, fraught with social anxieties across multiple cultural settings and socio-spatial environments—the South, Chicago, Harlem, and Europe. Her mother's divorce and marriage to a white man, having more children, causes emotional pressure and alienation for Helga. Naturally, Helga distances herself from the family and remains outside of it, with her position as “the other” continuing throughout the novel. She feels like “the other” while working as a teacher at the Naxos educational institution, and she feels the “other and exotic” in Copenhagen when she visits her maternal aunt. Regarding Helga's exoticism, Kimberly Monda states, “*Helga channels her unacknowledged sexuality into the pleasure of purchasing and consumerism, and her wealthy aunt Katrina Dahl dresses her in flashy clothes to display her ‘exotic’ beauty to her friends*” (1997: 23). Larsen's attention to Helga's physical and psychological experiences—particularly her sensuality, her attraction to vibrant colors and fabrics, and her eventual physical deterioration through multiple pregnancies—shows how intersectionality is not merely theoretical but lived through the body. Carla Kaplan argues that Helga is one of the first truly intersectional characters in women's literature, where various factors such as race, gender, class, and sexuality can never be separated (2020: xxi).

Larsen portrays her protagonist as an emotional, sensitive, intelligent, and extraordinary mulatto character struggling with race and identity issues within the rising Black bourgeoisie and middle class. Larsen also adds psychological depth and a spirit of struggle to Helga. When viewed through an intersectional lens, we witness how racial identity is inevitably shaped by the modern political economy of capitalism in the figure of Helga. Intersectionality demands “knowing and naming” identity.” According to Grzanka, identity is an important issue because social identity categories are the product of systems such as racism, sexism, and capitalism, and are a particularly effective way of recognizing and measuring the inequalities produced by these systems (2014: 68). Therefore, in Helga's specific case, the definition of the Black woman identity alongside gender and race is a subject that needs to be read from intersectional lens.

Ann duCille defines Helga as “a powerful woman who struggles to define and declare herself against iconographies that objectify, exoticize, ‘lady-ize,’ and otherwise oppress” (1993: 94). Similarly, Hazel Carby characterizes Helga as “the first truly sexual female character in Afro-American fiction” (1987: 174). According to Carby, “to represent black female sexuality is to risk having the definition of sexuality in a racist society becoming one of appearing exotic and primitive” (1987: 174). Ann E. Hostetler notes that unlike her contemporaries who wrote about main characters who managed to gain a place in middle-class society, “Larsen had the courage to explore

her heroine's failures to adapt to middle-class black society. *Quicksand*, therefore, marks the beginning of a greater freedom in self-examination in Afro-American women's writing” (1990: 36).

From the intersectional lens we see that Helga negotiates multiple identities. As a biracial woman, Helga constantly navigates multiple social worlds while belonging fully to none. Her experiences demonstrate how race, gender, class, and nationality create unique forms of marginalization and isolation that cannot be understood through a single analytical lens. Larsen's deep reflection of the tragic mulatto character's inner world, unlike previous portrayals, reveals how race and gender act as intersecting forces in the formation of identity and consciousness. Helga evaluates racial and gender classifications from an aesthetic perspective by valuing the material world and aesthetic objects around her. This creates a realistic character because Helga is in a dilemma and indecision about both her racial identity, class, and status. Therefore, Helga's visit to Denmark is an important step in testing Du Bois's concepts of “twoness” or “Double consciousness” and in attaining her true racial and sexual identity. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept double consciousness of being “an American, a Negro; two warring ideals on one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1903: 38). Although Helga does not face racial degradation in Denmark, being valued as an exotic object disturbs her because this attitude marginalizes her and situates her outside the general environment.

Since symbolic violence and material inequalities stem from a chain of relationships determined by categories such as race, class, sexuality, and gender, and since dismantling the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to positive social change (McCall, 2013: 1777), Helga's departure from Naxos and her presence in five different locations can be evaluated as challenges to these normative structures or matrix of domination. Helga is seen as an object within both races and in America and Denmark. When she wants to leave Naxos where she works as a teacher, Margaret Creighton, a teacher at Naxos, reinforces Helga's position as “the other” by saying that she shouldn't leave teaching and Naxos because “we need objects (decorations) like Helga to colorize our lives” (Larsen, 1928: 23). Being characterized as not one of them but rather like an object that will bring them prestige and joy means failing to see the true identity and character of the Black woman as a soul with selfhood. This means facing the challenging and problematic life that comes with being mulatto and not belonging to any place or location. The mulatto must, therefore, be strong in character, knowledge, and politics, and must succeed in surviving. In Copenhagen, Helga encounters

a similar characterization. While evaluating Helga as an object, the narrative adds a rare and fragile beauty to her: “*a decoration, a trinket, a peacock*” (Larsen, 1928:79). However, Helga rejects this objectification. As Adam Nemmers notes “*Helga becomes sexualized, exoticized, and objectified and eventually succumbs to the faith of a worn-out, used-up thing as a wife and mother*” (Nemmers, 2024: 42). Thus, Helga becomes someone who attracts attention, is admired, and desired. In Copenhagen, her aunt, Fru Dahl, wants Helga get married to a prestigious and wealthy gentleman, a famous painter Axel Olsen. However, even in his proposal, Mr. Olsen puts a price on Helga by commodifying her and sees the Black woman as a commodity to be purchased, reflecting the practices of the institution of slavery.

“With his confident and despotic demeanor [Axel Olsen] continued to speak. ‘You know, Helga, you are a contradiction. I believe you have been spoiled by Fru Dahl...who knows? You possess the warm stimulating nature of an African woman, but, dear Helga, I’m afraid you have the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest bidder. Of course, I am pleased that this person is me.’” (Larsen, 1928: 93)

Olsen’s arrogant speech suggests that it may not be easy to free a mixed-race and Black woman from the historically assigned stereotypes and roles, even in a different culture and place: His direct association of Helga with Africa and to a slave sold at a market question and problematizes historical perceptions. Helga realizes that it is time to challenge historical misconceptions and Eurocentric perceptions of race and sexuality. Thus, she decides to teach a lesson to this white man who identifies her with the Jezebel stereotype, stating very clearly and sharply, “*But as you see, Mr. Olsen, I am not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t want to be owned by anyone. Even by you... I will not marry you under any circumstances*” (Larsen, 1928: 93). This approach brings Helga closer to her race, the Black race. At this point in the work, Helga’s discourse foreshadows that she will marry a black man. Her return to America under the pretext of her friend’s wedding resembles the mulatto character’s back-and-forth journey between blackness and whiteness, similar to her self-identity definition, her journey between Europe and America reminds the reader of her in-betweenness

While in Denmark, she realizes that she cannot escape from her racial identity and uncertainty. Although she does not fully understand how her expression of sexuality relates to her racial identity, she learns that such relationships are best understood by being in different places. If she had only been in Harlem, she would not have had such a perception. In fact, she did not only come from America to Europe, but also different cultures and physical places enabled her ideas and mind to travel and change.

As her aunt adorns Helga with clothes and jewelry to introduce her to the Copenhagen society, Helga sees herself as “*a strange breed of dog proudly parading*” (Larsen, 1928:75). Her aunt told her to wear something lighter and brightly colored and states, “*you are a foreigner, and you are different, you should wear bright things that will bring out your beautiful cute brown skin, striking things, exotic things*” (Larsen, 1928: 73). She marginalizes Helga in the context of race and sexuality by saying “*You have to make an impact*” (Larsen, 1928: 74). Helga allows her aunt and uncle to exhibit her as a sexual object. In terms of clothing, touches such as short dresses, pendulum earrings and sexy shoes are used that will make her look very sexy. Charles Scruggs interprets Helga as “*a personality who uses her sexuality as a form of power,*” but Helga also blinds her own desires. Although Axel Olsen’s painting reflects Olsen’s own sexual fantasies, it also depicts what Helga does not see in herself, “*a product of her desires*” (2007: 87). Anthony Dawahare notes that Axel’s painting “*underlines how she replicates the racist fantasy of black women as jezebel*” (2006: 27). For Helga, the image in the painting is “*a disgusting sexual creature*” (Larsen, 1928: 89).

In Denmark, people are friendly and polite towards her, but Helga gets bored of the attention and says, “*It’s like I have horns.*” By thinking “*I have three legs,*” (Larsen, 1928: 88) she shows her discomfort with the environment and that she does not belong to there. She tries to analyze the concepts of twoness (in betweenness) or double consciousness and her hybrid character in two different environments, two different countries, two different societies, and two different moods. Her conceptualization of the problems and solutions replicates the way the economies of slavery and capitalism produced racial ideologies that took physical attributes (genital organs, hair texture, skin color, skull size) as indicators economic function and market value of human beings (Dawahare, 2006; 28).

From an intersectionality perspective, Helga’s questioning “*highlights the inherently political nature of knowledge production and reception*” of blackness and black women (May, 2015: 35). Therefore, intersectionality requires us to approach the production of knowledge, and its ownership located in multiple interpretive locations and horizons. Helga’s attempt to access information through multiple venues and tools is important in terms of intersectionality. Because it shows how social order, knowledge production and ontological meaning are distorted by single-axis logic. These are initiatives that should be located in different places and should also be in the sense of social justice, democracy and flexible solidarity. Intersectional approach requires reconceptualizing the concepts of citizen subject. It also allows us to understand that Helga’s journey is ontologically pluralistic, not only in the sense of multiple identities but also in a spatial and relational sense. Crenshaw’s

and CRC's spatial metaphors, the idea that social power and hierarchy can be thought of as spatial, Helga's visits to different spaces (she is found in five different places throughout the novel) are the result of her effort to define, question, make sense of intersectional forces and reach a conclusion. It is possible to explain this with James A. Tyner's statement that "*geographic necessity lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice*" (2007: 219).

Her journey from the Southern Black college Naxos to Chicago, then Harlem, and finally Denmark before returning to the American South illustrates how different geographical and social contexts reshape the expression and reception of her identities. Each location reconfigures how her intersecting identities are perceived and valued. In Denmark, portraying her as exotic and overly sexualizing her black body or race both objectifies her and emphasizes her identity as a human. Because of the troubled and exploited past of the black race, Helga desires a world outside the definition of history, but she learns the truth that it is impossible to escape history. However, Helga can perceive the world as more than simply plural: different elements, ideas, identities, belongings can be in conflict.

Quicksand begins with a very carefully written and designed scene, "*a young girl in her twenties, with narrow, sagging shoulders and slender, but shapely, arms and legs*" (Larsen 1928:2) and "*sitting alone in the room, which was softly dim at that time of day, eight in the evening,*" (Larsen, 1928: 1) which seems to fit the light and the frame perfectly, but not the environment in which it is located. The novel, which begins with a colorful and visual depiction of the dormitory room in which Helga stays at the Naxos educational institution, adds different colors and exotic elements such as the Chinese carpet and Marmaduke Pickhtall's novel "Said the Fisherman" to the character of the room. This depiction presents an approach to Helga's search for identity and her position of otherness, where the economic and political elements that oppress her, combined with race and sexuality, produce a universal oppression. To support this, she offers a general-to-specific descriptive approach. The description of the room continues with the description of Helga's physical beauty. Helga is the embodiment of the "black is beautiful" philosophy in *Quicksand*, which was the focus of the Harlem Renaissance poets, under the influence of the naturalism movement:

"A sharply beautiful countenance, her skin like yellow satin distinctly evident, she (Helga) was, to use a common word, attractive. Her black very wide eyebrows, her soft but piercing black eyes and her delicate and sensitive lips slightly bent down and her beautiful mouth would immediately attract the attention of an observer; Although his nose was beautiful, his ears were very elegantly made by a master, and his curly coal-black hair was thick and always swept to the sides." (Larsen, 1928: 11-12)

Larsen skillfully uses the character of woman's nature and spontaneity of poetry in prose and aims to highlight her character with her beauty and femininity within a political consciousness. In order to make peace with herself and find her true self, Helga had to interact with both races and the values they represent. For this reason, when she comes to Naxos with the aim of improving her own race, she concludes that she must move away from the values system and places that the black race and the history of the South are intertwined with her character and identity. First, she must help herself and solve her own individual problem, thus the problem of race, women and identity. There were many reasons why she left Naxos and felt the "other," but James Vayle was one of the important ones.

Helga and Vayle both start teaching at Naxos and later get engaged, but the relationship, which lacks true love and passion, is disrupted by the importance given to family by the black bourgeoisie, Vayle's family: Helga's parents separated and left Helga with her uncle. Vayle's parents want a bride-to-be whose family history, tradition, and culture are similar to their own. Moreover, as much as Helga hates the South and Naxos, Vayle loves it as much. He regards himself as one of the Naxos family. James Vayle represents "*trivial hypocrisies and, perhaps unintentionally, careless cruelties committed as part of Naxos' wealth-raising policies*" (Larsen, 1928: 40). According to Anthony Dawahare, Naxos "*is not the center of liberal humanism or social reform, but a capitalist industrial enterprise*" (Larsen, 2006: 25). In Dawahare's definition, it is possible to see that economic policies are more effective than race, social class and gender in the Naxos educational institution. The novel describes Naxos as an industrial machine:

"The teachers and students here are produced according to the mold set by the white man. Teachers and students at Naxos were subjected to a dual process, because it did not tolerate any innovation and individuality. Ideas were rejected and open hostility was shown to any person or people who dared to suggest any idea. Exuberance and punctuality, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly excluded as inappropriate traits of ladies or gentlemen." (Larsen, 1928: 4)

The school and the economic production policy it undertakes can be read as the application of the ideology of Taylorism. Just like Taylorism, the educational institution Naxos will produce uniform fabricated products. Under maintained pressure, Helga feels alienated from her commodified teaching role.

Helga critiques limitations of various social movements—particularly how racial uplift philosophies often neglect gender concerns, while feminist spaces frequently ignore racial dynamics. Her dissatisfaction with the assimilationist approach of Naxos to racial advancement demonstrates her understanding that addressing one aspect of identity without considering others is insufficient. Her boyfriend James Vayle represents

traditionalism, with his family, who embrace Naxos and the values of the South, but when the subject of getting married and having children comes up, Helga objects, saying “*why should we bring more unwanted and tortured black people to America*” (Larsen, 1928: 35). Vayle, on the other hand, expresses the idea of patriarchy and eugenics as a natural consequence of racial upgrading policies in the African American political patriarchy-oriented world of thought in the twentieth century:

“Don’t you see that if we—that is, people like us—don’t have children, others will continue to have them? Representatives of the upper-class race are infertile. Few upper-class blacks have children, and each generation lives with the obstacles brought by the previous generation: lack of money, lack of education, and their past. I have very strong feelings about this. If our race is to go anywhere, it is us educated people who should have children.” ((Larsen, 1928: 6)

She will eventually break up with Vayle and leave Naxos. Thanks to Vayle and her family, Helga constantly experiences the state of “double consciousness” suggested by W.E.B. Du Bois because Helga always looks at herself through the eyes of others and, as in the definition, “*wants to measure her own soul (and self) using the tape measure of the world that looks at her with pity and mercy*” (Du Bois 1903: 3). Her relationship with Vayle also reminds us of the fact that male and female black writers had different ideological and political goals in the Harlem Renaissance.

Helga like her best friend Anne Grey who leaves in New York becomes one of the female characters that best represents the idea of double consciousness. In *Uplifting the Race* (1996), Kevin Gaines demonstrates the tragic difficulty of the double consciousness “ideology of elevating the race; *“the ongoing struggle against dominant white ideologies and the intellectual commitment to white people’s definition and construction of blackness”* (1996: 9). Helga is the embodiment of this struggle. Mulatto, as a character, experiences duality and even multiplicity at every moment, and wants to escape from this situation and struggle to exist with the choice of self and identity she herself defines. In doing so, it emphasizes multiple elements of intersectionality such as race, gender, economy, and class. In this context, intersectional theory requires the creation of structural changes in order to make sense of Helga Crane’s epistemic and ontological existence because, as May emphasizes, epistemic and ontological ties are not only ties with individual solutions, but also structural (2015: 46).

In *Quicksand*, “double consciousness” includes two different personality forms in the individual who sees oneself through the eyes of society. African Americans’ complex feelings toward whites—such as opposing everything the white man stands for while paradoxically imitating him—are frequently expressed

in African American literature. The same paradox manifests itself in Helga because she has white blood and paradoxically approaches the characteristics of both races. However, for Helga, a situation that we can call “passing” occurs because it is easier for her to be identified as black. The narrator says of Helga, who went to Chicago by train, that “*she sat next to her own race, which seemed to increase her discomfort*” (Larsen, 1928: 98). Because Helga has not yet decided whether she belongs to this race or not. Sometimes she feels black and sometimes white. While in Copenhagen, she displays complete black racial pride and says, “*I miss home, not America, but black people*” (Larsen, 1928: 98). When she states that “That’s the problem,” she expresses her longing for her black side. *Quicksand* consistently engages with Helga’s economic precarity and how her financial situation interacts with her racial and gender identity. Her temporary financial security in Denmark comes at the cost of being exoticized, demonstrating how class privilege cannot erase racial marginalization. This emphasizes the need for multiple axes approach to analyze the situation of black women in their fight for justice and equality.

When Helga’s experience is read from an intersectional perspective, we can see how epistemic power and violence of capitalism and modernism are intertwined with historical facts. We also notice how it manifests itself in today’s world as exploitation, assimilation and even genocide, shown by markers such as race, gender, sexuality, class and ability. Helga has internalized the transformation of the economic category - black labor value - into the metaphysical concept of black value. Sometimes she says that she is different from black people and that this difference is more than color. She expresses that she feels where she belongs when she returns to Harlem for Anne Grey’s wedding:

“These were her people. Now she understands very well that nothing could change this... How foolish she had been to think that another country, other people, would free her from her ties to these mysterious, terrible, magnificent and lovable black crowds. These bonds were spiritual bonds. The bonds were not simply summed up by the color of her skin. It was deeper. It’s deeper than any of these.” (Larsen, 1928: 101)

In this passage where she describes her people, when viewed from the perspective of intersectionality theory and praxis, we witness that Helga objectively embraces all the good and bad characteristics of her race. She emphasizes that these different characteristics are indispensable elements that constitute to be the individual’s self and personality. A person can be both awful and lovable.

Both/and, one of the principles of intersectionality, is embodied in Helga throughout the novel. She questions black people, the South, and racial issues in both positive and negative ways. At

first, Helga has a hatred for the South and the values the South represents, because she sees herself as white, or feels that she does not fully belong to this society and place:

"She has been teaching in Naxos for almost two years, at first she had the keen joy and pleasure of immature people who dream of doing good to people of their own race. But this taste gradually disappeared and was replaced by a deep hatred for the petty hypocrisies and careless cruelties that were, perhaps unintentionally, part of Naxos' policy of uplifting the black race." (Larsen, 1928: 5)

According to Helga, Naxos was an assimilatory institution, which she sees as *"a great knife with cruelly sharp edges that cut all students mercilessly according to a mold, the white man's mold"* (Larsen, 1928:4). Her thoughts and feelings about Naxos reflect an ideology. Helga makes value judgments about the black race politically, as well as issues such as race, sexuality, and religion, and problematizes wrong value judgments and practices. For Helga, Naxos is no longer a school, but a monster turned into a machine. In this institution, *"teachers and students are subject to a very serious monitoring process, and it is a place where innovation and individuality are not tolerated"* (Larsen, 1928:14). Black people growing up in Naxos know what is expected of them and act accordingly. This type of behavior eliminates *"fun and difference"* (Larsen, 1928:15).

The headmaster Robert Anderson introduces Helga as someone who *"enjoys the rare things in life, has values, proportion, and discretion"* (Larsen, 1928:21), but her subconscious leads her to articulate the educational doctrine of Naxos, a symbolic reflection of the Saxon college, *"you are a lady, you have honor, and you have lineage"* (Larsen, 1928:21). Anderson's behavior can be explained by the fact that intersectionality attends to and questions normativity, the invisible effects and workings of privilege, and transparent zones of power and subjectivity, while at the same time emphasizing implicit, unarticulated and unspoken yet functional and formative logics.

The word lineage causes great anxiety and pain in Helga. Anderson's reference to genetics formulates biology as destiny and reflects the ideal of creating an institution in which blacks can create themselves (Hostetler, 1990: 38). Leaving Naxos as if she is escaping from there, Helga first goes to Chicago to borrow money from her white uncle, Uncle Peter, but her uncle does not meet her. She manages with the money she has for a while and finds a job after various efforts. From there she goes to Harlem. At first, Harlem seems like heaven to her, but later she feels claustrophobic there and wants to escape from that environment.

For this reason, she decides to go to Denmark, where she learns that the restrictions and perspectives on the black race are disturbing, albeit in different forms. When she returns to

Harlem after rejecting Mr. Olsen's marriage proposal, she meets the former school principal Dr. Anderson. Dr. Anderson kisses Helga under the influence of alcohol; This event leads to the fact that Helga must release her hitherto suppressed desires and confess her feelings to herself. But when Anderson apologizes the next day and expresses that he does not want to do this, Helga seduces the Baptist minister Pleasant Green and marries him, returns to the South that she hates and once she said *"God forbid. I would never want to work anywhere in the South again!"* She returns to the South, where she says, *"I hate the South"* (Larsen, 1928:23). Marrying Green does not help her escape the racism she has internalized.

Her marriage to Pleasant Green frees her from the Jezebel stereotype. In her new role and position, Helga embraces the policies of raising her race and advises the women who come to her husband's church to get rid of oppression by teaching them about middle-class values, "beauty" and "hygiene." Her purpose in doing this is that her subconscious urge to escape from being a working-class black individual. However, the rural poor black woman, who is crushed under the grip of poverty and ignorance, does not pay much attention to these ideas as a result of having many children and having an oppressive man. In fact, the analysis of intersectionality embodied in Helga is *"an epistemological practice and an ontological framework, as well as a political orientation based on solidarity and collective struggle"* (May, 2015: 48). When Helga's behavior is read through the lens of intersectional theory, it emphasizes how black women have to face indifference, ignorance and silence due to their social position. Clearly asymmetrical patterns of opportunity experienced by black women in relation to their social position and dominant gaze resulted in material and epistemological inequality.

Towards the end of the work, Helga's settlement in the South after various journeys and searches emphasizes that geography is also destiny. In the South she *"becomes a person of some importance, as a priest's wife. partly"* (Larsen, 1928: 123). At first, this marriage for Helga was *"a purely spiritual union" that "compensated for all her previous humiliations and disappointments"* (Larsen, 1928:123). Feeling at peace spiritually brought her *"back to her youthful desire and enthusiasm to uplift her people"* (Larsen, 1928:123). At the end of the novel, Helga is physically and biologically trapped and pregnant with her fifth child. Her poor health turns her into a tragic woman rather than a tragic mulatto, and emphasizes that many values are actually illusions, because she no longer loves her husband, whom she thought she loved and valued, and he does not seem very "pleasant" to her. Not only the priest, but also the white man's religion he represents no longer satisfies Helga.

“Everything in her mind was hot and cold, crashing and spinning. There were dreams in her weakened, fragile body. Chaotic noise. She saw what religion had done to her with its blinding curtain, with her eyes that could look around and were shocked. Ironically, she thought, she couldn’t blame God, now that she knew she wasn’t there anymore... That’s what Helga had decided. Who led the entire black race in America to foolishly believe in the white man’s god?” (Larsen, 1928: 134-7)

However, her happiness here is short-lived and the South absorbs her like a swamp. When Helga’s ontological journey is evaluated in terms of intersectionality, it leads to the idea that the issue is not just race, or in Du Bois’s term, double consciousness, but that components of the events such as status, economy, and oppressive power should be used in questioning. Intersectionality has shown that a kind of struggle for belonging, and existence must be understood and that the problem must be viewed from a multiple-axis perspective. Helga’s tragic ending in the rural South, trapped in cycles of pregnancy and religious fundamentalism, serves as Larsen’s critique of any single “solution” to the complex problems created by intersecting oppressions. The novel suggests that without addressing systemic inequalities across multiple dimensions, individual escape routes prove temporary or illusory.

Conclusion

An intersectional analysis of “Quicksand” reveals how Helga’s journey fundamentally challenges singular, essentialist conceptions of Black identity through her continuous processes of questioning, recognizing, confronting, and seeking remedies to the multilayered forces of oppression that constrain her life. Her narrative trajectory embodies what W.E.B. Du Bois termed double consciousness. Her narrative trajectory disrupts politically constructed notions of monolithic Blackness and instead articulates what we might understand as a form of flexible solidarity—one that acknowledges internal differences while maintaining political cohesion against systemic inequities. Larsen extends Du Bois’s framework by demonstrating how Helga experiences not merely a “twoness” but a multiplicity of contested identities at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography.

The intersectional lens proves particularly illuminating when examining the complex interplay between religion and sexuality in Helga’s life. Her seemingly contradictory decision to marry a rural Southern preacher after navigating five distinct sociocultural environments—ultimately facing likely death through repeated childbearing—represents not simply personal defeat but a profound illustration of how religious institutions and sexual politics function as interlocking domains of power within Collins’ matrix of domination. This final chapter of

Helga’s life demonstrates how the boundaries of Blackness remain fluid and contested, shaped by geographic location, social class, gender expectations, and religious structures that simultaneously offer community while imposing new constraints.

Larsen’s nuanced portrayal of sexual politics merits special attention within this intersectional framework. Published during the height of the Harlem Renaissance—a movement that simultaneously celebrated Black artistic expression while wrestling with questions of authentic representation—“Quicksand” confronts the particular challenges facing Black women whose bodies were historically hypersexualized under the white gaze while simultaneously subjected to respectability politics within their own communities. Alain Locke’s vision of the “New Negro” as articulated during this cultural renaissance often centered masculine expressions of racial uplift and artistic freedom, while figures like Helga found themselves navigating more complex terrain where sexual expression could represent both liberation and potential exploitation.

By applying intersectional theory to Larsen’s work, we gain several critical insights: First, we recognize how the novel anticipates contemporary understanding that oppression operates not through separate, distinct systems but through mutually reinforcing structures that cannot be disentangled from one another. Second, we see how Helga’s shifting geographical and social positions generate different epistemological standpoints that reveal particular aspects of power structures often invisible to those with more privileged positions. This ontological and epistemic struggle against dominant ideologies—both white supremacist structures and patriarchal forces within Black communities—positions Helga’s journey as a profound critique of essentialist identity politics emerging during the Harlem Renaissance period.

Following intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper, who decades earlier had insisted on Black women’s unique standpoint and the necessity of their voices in racial uplift discourse, Larsen’s novel illustrates how potential for solidarity emerges not from essentialist identity categories but through recognition of common political interests across difference. The text engages critically with contemporaries like Marcus Garvey and his Black nationalist politics, offering through Helga’s experiences in Denmark a nuanced exploration of how internationalist perspectives might both illuminate and complicate racial solidarity movements.

This intersectional reading thus enriches our understanding of Larsen’s artistic achievement, revealing “Quicksand” as a text that presciently articulates how identity categories are not fixed biological essences but socially constructed positions within complex power relations. By situating the novel within

its Harlem Renaissance context alongside luminaries like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay, we can appreciate how Larsen's focus on a female protagonist negotiating multiple, overlapping oppressions represented a distinctive contribution to the period's cultural production. The novel's seemingly pessimistic conclusion actually offers profound commentary on how collective liberation requires addressing multiple, interlocking systems of domination simultaneously—a theoretical insight that would not be formally articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins until decades after Larsen's groundbreaking work, establishing “Quicksand” as not merely a significant literary achievement but a pioneering theoretical intervention in its own right.

Ethical Declaration

In this study, all the rules stated in the “Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research (Türkiye) and Publication Ethics Directive” were followed.

Ethics Committee Approval

The author declare that the research is one of the studies that does not require ethical committee approval.

Conflict of Interest and Financial Contribution

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