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Structural and Political Intersectionality in *Passing* (2021): Race and Gender Oppression Experienced by Irene Redfield

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ABSTRACT

Black women in America have experienced racial discrimination and gender oppression simultaneously, with these systems interacting to shape marginalization that cannot be fully understood separately. This study examines intersectional oppression in Rebecca Hall's 2021 film *Passing* through the experiences of its main character, Irene Redfield. It addresses research question: what types of intersectional oppression does Irene experience in the film? The study employed a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected through viewing, transcription of dialogue, and selection of scenes depicting intersectional oppression. The analysis was guided by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, focusing on structural and political intersectionality. Nine scenes were identified and analyzed: five illustrating structural intersectionality and four illustrating political intersectionality. The findings indicate that structural intersectionality shapes Irene's experiences in public spaces, motherhood, and the household. Racial discrimination intersects with patriarchal expectations to constrain her responses to racist remarks, her authority in decisions concerning her children, and her position within domestic life. Political intersectionality is evident in the limited recognition of her experiences by anti-racist and feminist perspectives. Anti-racist discourse does not adequately address the gendered dimensions of her experiences, while feminist frameworks fail to account for the racial risks faced by Black women. Consequently, Irene has limited opportunities to express her experiences or obtain meaningful support within either framework. The study concludes that her oppression is systemic and multilayered, produced through the simultaneous interaction of race and gender. The findings demonstrate the value of an intersectional perspective for understanding the distinct marginalization experienced by Black women.

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1. Introduction

The social conditions faced by Black women in the United States have never been easy to capture through a single framework. Collins (2019) and Nash (2008) both point out that the experiences of African American women are shaped by too many overlapping forces to be explained by focusing on race or gender alone. What makes their position distinct is how these two systems interact, each making the effects of the other worse. Crenshaw (1991) gave this situation a name through the concept of intersectionality, arguing that Black women stand at the intersection of racial and gender discrimination in ways that create a unique and layered form of marginalization. Collins and Bilge (2020) describe intersectionality as a tool for showing who gets included, who gets left out, and who falls through the gaps of systems that were never built to address more than one form of inequality at a time.

Crenshaw (1989) first developed intersectionality in response to a legal system that could only recognize discrimination along one axis, which meant that Black women's experiences were consistently invisible. Collins (2019) later expanded the concept further, treating intersectionality not just as a way to describe oppression but as a critical tool for questioning the structures that produce it. Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery (2019) add that no social identity is ever formed in isolation because larger systems of power are always shaping who people are and what they can access.

The movie *Passing* (2021), directed by Rebecca Hall, brings this discussion into a specific story context. An adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, the movie follows Irene Redfield, a Black woman living in 1920s Harlem, as she moves through a world shaped by racial segregation and gender expectations. This study focuses on the movie rather than the novel because contemporary film adaptations serve a different cultural purpose, they bring historical conditions to new audiences and construct meaning through visual and narrative tools. The way *Passing* (2021) builds Irene's situation and positions her within her social world makes it a relevant object of analysis.

Despite the increasing number of studies on intersectionality, its application to contemporary film adaptations of historical narratives remains limited compared to literary studies (Baker et al., 2024; LaPan & Sadler, 2025). Studies that do focus on *Passing* (2021) tend to examine how discrimination and characterization function as narrative outcomes rather than asking what specific types of oppression structure the protagonist's experience (Nur, 2022). Barthold et al. (2022) demonstrated that film is a productive site for intersectional analysis, but their focus on migrant labor and colonial contexts leaves a gap in studies that examine the individual experience of a Black woman in an American historical setting. Donald (2021) showed how Black women in public life are consistently left without adequate representation when neither anti-racist nor feminist frameworks are equipped to address the combination of what they face. This study responds to that need by focusing specifically on identifying the types of intersectional oppression Irene Redfield experiences, using Crenshaw's (1991) theory as its main analytical framework.

The social relevance of this research also extends beyond the academic. Through recent data that Black women remain among the most underrepresented groups across major social institutions today (Lee & Han, 2023; Pinto et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024). Examining how *Passing* (2021) portrays the structural and political conditions that shaped a Black woman's life in the 1920s is not just a historical discussion, but also a contribution to understanding why intersectionality remains necessary as both a theory and a way to understand social issues.

Several studies provide an important foundation for this research. Nur (2022) examined *Passing* (2021) with Irene Redfield as its subject using Boggs and Petrie's characterization

theory alongside Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, finding that racial and gender stereotypes intensified Irene's discrimination regardless of her middle-class status. However, the study focuses on discrimination and characterization as general narrative outcomes without clearly distinguishing the specific types of intersectional oppression that structure Irene's experience. Barthold et al. (2022) demonstrated through their analysis of *Fatima* (2015) and *Bread and Roses* (2000) that movie is an effective medium for intersectional analysis, though their focus on migrant labor and colonial contexts differs from the individual experience of a Black woman in an American historical setting. Donald (2021) investigated how race and gender intersected in media coverage of Kamala Harris, showing that Black women are consistently left without adequate representation when neither anti-racist nor feminist frameworks are able to address their overlapping experiences, a dynamic that is similar to the political intersectionality Irene experiences in *Passing* (2021). Previous studies have not focused specifically on identifying and distinguishing the specific types of intersectional oppression Irene experiences in *Passing* (2021) using Crenshaw's (1991) framework as its main analytical lens. The main contribution of this study lies in applying structural and political intersectionality as two distinct analytical categories to selected scenes in the movie, providing a focused and theoretical analysis of how intersectional oppression shapes Irene Redfield's life across multiple social spheres.

2. Theoretical Framework

Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality to address the limitations of legal and social frameworks that treated race and gender as entirely separate bases for discrimination. Her argument was that when a Black woman experiences discrimination, it is rarely possible to separate what comes from race and what comes from gender, because both systems operate simultaneously and shape each other's effects. Crenshaw (1991) illustrated this through the *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* case, where a court dismissed the claims of Black women workers because it could not accommodate discrimination that crossed racial and gender lines at the same time. Single axis frameworks, she argued, do not just fail to explain Black women's experiences, they make them invisible.

In *Mapping the Margins* (1991), Crenshaw identifies three aspects of intersectionality. This study focuses on two. Structural intersectionality examines how institutional systems, including law, economic policy, and cultural norms, work together to create overlapping disadvantages for those marginalized along more than one identity axis. These disadvantages often emerge not from deliberate exclusion but from systems built around a single dominant identity that repeatedly harm those who do not fit that structure. Political intersectionality looks at how political movements, including anti-racism and feminism, tend to focus on the main group in each movement (Butler, 2002). Because anti-racist movements have historically centered Black men and feminist movements have historically centered white women, Black women repeatedly find that their specific concerns are minimized in the interest of group solidarity. This study does not include representational intersectionality because the study focuses on the types of oppression Irene faces within social structures and political frameworks, not on how she is stereotyped or indirectly represented in cultural representations.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to identify the types of intersectional oppression experienced by Irene Redfield in *Passing* (2021). A qualitative research is

appropriate for studies that explore meaning and social phenomena within cultural texts, making it suitable for this type of movie study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Descriptive research focuses on giving a clear and factual account of the subject being studied. The data source is the 2021 movie *Passing*, directed by Rebecca Hall and released on Netflix in November 2021, with a runtime of approximately 99 minutes.

The film adapts Nella Larsen's 1929 novel of the same title. The subject of analysis is Irene Redfield. Data were collected through repeated viewing and note taking. The movie was watched multiple times to build a clear understanding of the narrative. Scenes showing racial and gender oppression were identified and the dialogues were transcribed. The transcribed data were then categorized as either structural or political intersectionality based on Crenshaw's (1991) framework. The findings are presented through a descriptive informal method, meaning the analysis is explained in written form rather than numerical data (Krug & Schlüter, 2013; Mayring, 2015; Neuendorf, 2019).

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis identifies two types of intersectional oppression experienced by Irene Redfield in *Passing* (2021): structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. Five scenes demonstrate how structural intersectionality operates throughout Irene's public life, her experience as a mother, and her household, while four scenes show how political intersectionality leaves her without adequate representation from either anti-racist or feminist frameworks of her time. Across all nine scenes, race and gender function as systems that work together to produce a layered form of disadvantage that neither system could produce alone.

a. Structural Intersectionality

Data 1

Women 6: Look at that precious little pickaninny one.
Women 7: She's never even met a colored who didn't work for us. Thank heavens. (00.02.29 – 00.02.46)

Two white women speak openly using racial slurs while Irene stands right next to them. What matters here is not only what is said but what Irene cannot do in response. The racial system of 1920s America normalized this kind of public dehumanization, and speaking up would require Irene to reveal her racial identity in a situation where doing so could put her at risk. At the same time, gender norms expected women to stay quiet and avoid public confrontation. Irene's silence is the result of both systems operating together, one denying her safety and the other giving her no space to respond. This is what structural intersectionality looks like in everyday public life.

Data 2

Clare: I went through hell those nine months for fear Margery might come out dark. Irene: Mine are dark.
Clare: Oh. And your husband, he.
Irene: He… couldn't exactly "pass" if that's what you mean. (00.11.38 – 00.11.46)

Clare's fear about her child's skin color during pregnancy shows how far the racial classification system of the 1920s extended into Black women's private lives. Irene's reply, "Mine are dark," is brief and flat. Unlike Clare, who has the option to distance herself from racial consequences through passing, Irene does not. Her husband cannot pass, and her children cannot either, which means she carries the full weight of the racial system in her domestic life. This scene shows how racial structure and the gender expectations of

motherhood press on Irene simultaneously, creating a double burden that neither system alone can explain.

Data 3

Irene: We can visit Brazil. Brian: Visit?
Irene: Or I was thinking of one of them European schools for Junior.
Brian: You are going to make a mollycoddle out of that boy. Ted is the one who needs your attention, not Junior. And you needn't think I'll let you send Junior to some nice kindergarten school 'cause he's getting a much needed education.
Brian: Sooner he learns about sex, the better. Certainly, if he learns it's a grand joke. The greatest in the world.
Irene: What's that supposed to mean?
Brian: Nothing. I'm just getting a little tired of playing second fiddle to your precious Negro League, that's all. (00.26.37 – 00.27.09)

Brian dismisses Irene's ideas about their children's education through language that suggests Irene is making a mistake as a mother. The word "mollycoddle" treats her parenting as not good enough based on male expectations, and the phrase "you needn't think I'll let you" makes clear that Irene does not hold equal decision-making authority over her own children. His complaint about the Negro Welfare League adds another layer. Irene's community involvement is important community participation for a Black woman in the 1920s, yet the patriarchal domestic order treats it as a distraction from her role as a wife. Irene is pulled in two directions at once. The racial system pushes her to stay involved in her community, while the expectations placed on her as a wife push her to put her family first. Neither system gives her room to do both.

Data 4

Junior: But why, Papa?
Brian: Because they hate us, son. Irene: I said
Brian, not now.
Brian: Seems as though we can't discuss these things without distressing the ladies of our family. (00.59.11 – 00.59.27)

When Irene objects to Brian discussing racial violence with their children, his response does not treat her as a parent with a reasonable position. Instead, he speaks about her to the children, presenting her concern as emotional weakness rather than a considered parental view. The phrase "the ladies of our family" puts Irene's reasoned objection with a general assumption about women being too sensitive for difficult realities. This simultaneously dismisses her role as a mother and reinforces a patriarchal view of women. Irene faces racial discrimination in public life and gender subordination within her household, and both systems reinforce each other.

Data 5

Irene: Don't use those words in my house. You're not to talk about the race problem. I won't have it.
Brian: It is my house too. They need to know these things. Irene: They
don't! They do not.
Brian: I don't understand how someone as intelligent as you can be so stupid. (01.09.04 – 01.09.20)

Brian's correction, "It is my house too," is reinforced by the legal and social reality of 1920s America, where household authority resided in men. His final line uses Irene's intelligence as a standard used to judge her position, which is seen as not good enough,

reducing her concern as a mother to being unreasonable. Irene is trying to do two things at once. She wants to protect her children from a racial system that puts them at risk, and at the same time she has to deal with a household where Brian holds the final say. Structural intersectionality is visible here because both the racial system and the gendered domestic order work together to limit Irene's safety in public and her authority at home.

b. Political Intersectionality

Data 6

John: But as the years go by, she seems to be getting darker and darker. So I told her, "If you don't look out, you'll wake up one morning and find you've turned into a nigger." Irene: (laughs hysterically)
John: Yeah. She's been Nig ever since. Irene: That's
good!
John: Well it's silly.
Irene: No, that's..that's…that's good.
John: Well, you can turn as black as you please, as far as I'm concerned. I know you're not colored.
Irene: So, you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew? John: No,
no, no, not at all. I hate them.
Irene: Have you ever known any Negroes?
John: No, no, but I do know people who know them. And I read about them in the papers, of course. Terrible mess. Robbing, killing. [sighs] It's sad, really. (00.16.18 – 00.17.41)

Sitting across from a man who openly declares he hates Black people, Irene cannot speak as herself or rely on any available political framework for protection. Anti-racist movements of the 1920s had no mechanism to protect a Black woman who was passing in a private social setting, since revealing her identity would expose her to immediate danger. Feminist movements of the era centered white women's experiences and did not recognize how hiding identity increases the risk faced by Black women in situations like this. The only thing Irene can do is ask a quiet question, "Have you ever known any Negroes?" It is a small and careful way of pushing back without revealing who she really is. That quiet question is all the situation leaves room for.

Data 7

John: What line of works is your husband in? Irene: He's a
doctor.
John: That's an interesting life. Irene: Yes.
Hard. Nerve-racking too.
John: Wife's nerves, too, I bet. All those lady patients. Irene: I've taken
up too much of your time already.
Irene: Thank you for the drink. (00.18.00 – 0.18.19)

When Irene describes her husband's work as "hard and "nerve-racking", she is pointing toward the real weight of being a Black doctor in 1920s Harlem. John ignores that entirely and turns her words into a joke about a jealous wife. Irene cannot respond openly from any position. Responding as a woman risks confirming the common assumption that women are too emotional. Responding as someone aware of the racial dimensions of her husband's work risks exposing who she is. Feminist and anti-racist frameworks cannot fully support her at the same time, one focuses only on racial issues, while the other focuses only on gender issues, which means neither can fully understand Irene's experience as a Black woman. Leaving politely is not a free choice but the only exit a situation without political representation allows.

Data 8

Irene: No, I won't. It's not funny, it's revolting.
Brian: Irene, leave it, huh? It's normal. They always come back.
Irene: They have to work so hard at getting there, why would they want to come back? Brian: (falling asleep) If I knew that, I'd know what race is. (00.29.45 – 00.29.58)

After experiencing John Bellew's racial hatred, Irene tells Brian it was revolting. His response, telling her to "leave it, huh, it's normal", shows how political intersectionality operates not only in public movements but in private relationships. Brian himself understands racial oppression, yet his response focuses on the shared experience of the Black community rather than acknowledging what Irene personally faced as a woman in that room. This kind of silencing happens within anti-racist movements when the individual experiences of Black women are seen as less important. Brian does not dismiss Irene out of hatred but because the framework he operates within simply does not have room for how her experience as a woman differs from his own.

Data 9

Hugh: And in a way, if you can, why wouldn't you? Hugh: I'm
asking, why wouldn't you?
Irene: Who's to say I'm not?
Hugh: You're being unusually cryptic this evening.
Irene: And you are being an ass. I just mean we're all of us passing for something or other. Aren't we? (00.50.34 – 00.50.56)

Hugh's question treats racial passing as a straightforward individual decision without considering its gender related consequences. What this way of thinking overlooks is everything that makes Irene's situation impossible to explain by race alone, her role as a wife within a male dominated marriage, her responsibilities as a mother to children who cannot pass, and her ties to the Black community that cannot be left without losing something important to her identity. None of these aspects are recognized within the racial discourse Hugh is using, nor are they addressed by the feminist frameworks of the era. Irene's general response, "We're all of us passing for something or other," is not simply avoiding the question, but an inability to answer fully within terms that are too narrow for her experience. This is what political intersectionality looks like in practice, not a dramatic confrontation, but a quiet moment where no available framework is wide enough to hold everything Irene is carrying.

Through the analysis of nine selected scenes, the findings reveal that race and gender are interconnected systems of power that reinforce one another, restricting Irene's agency, personal expression, and ability to exercise authority in both public and private spaces. This finding supports Crenshaw's (1991) argument that the experiences of Black women cannot be adequately understood through single-axis approaches that examine racial and gender discrimination separately. Instead, their marginalization emerges from the interaction of these systems, producing experiences that are distinct from those of Black men and White women.

Structural intersectionality is evident in Irene's exposure to racial discrimination in public, her unequal position within marriage, and the limitations imposed on her maternal and domestic responsibilities. Her experiences demonstrate that racial oppression extends beyond public discrimination into private and domestic relationships, where gender-based expectations further restrict women's autonomy. This interpretation is consistent with Haynes et al. (2020), who explain that structural intersectionality concerns the overlapping systems of

oppression that shape Black women's everyday experiences and social positions. Similarly, Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes that social structures frequently fail to recognize the specific circumstances of Black women because their experiences do not fit conventional understandings of racial or gender discrimination. Therefore, Irene's struggles as a mother, wife, and Black woman illustrate how intersecting structures of power simultaneously influence her personal and social life.

Meanwhile, political intersectionality emerges through the inadequate representation of Black women's experiences within anti-racist and feminist frameworks. The analysis reveals that Irene cannot fully express or negotiate her experiences because racial justice discourse tends to prioritize racial oppression without sufficiently addressing gender inequality, while feminist perspectives often overlook the specific racial conditions affecting Black women. This finding reinforces Crenshaw's (1991) argument that Black women are frequently marginalized within both political movements because neither framework adequately accommodates their intersecting identities. Furthermore, Keuchenius (2021) highlights the historical significance of Black feminist knowledge in challenging the marginalization of Black women's perspectives within broader intellectual and political traditions. Muñoz-Puig (2024) similarly demonstrates that power relations within feminist movements can reproduce inequalities between dominant and marginalized groups of women, even within movements intended to promote gender equality.

Overall, the findings establish that Irene's experiences cannot be adequately explained through race or gender independently. Rather, her marginalization results from the simultaneous operation of racial discrimination, patriarchal authority, and the limited political recognition of Black women's experiences. Consistent with the contemporary development of Black feminist scholarship discussed by Luna et al. (2024), this study emphasizes the importance of recognizing Black women's knowledge, agency, and lived experiences when examining intersecting systems of oppression. Accordingly, applying Crenshaw's concepts of structural and political intersectionality to Passing demonstrates how literary representation can reveal the complex relationship between individual experiences and broader systems of social power. The study ultimately affirms that an intersectional perspective is essential for understanding the distinctive forms of oppression experienced by Black women and for challenging analytical approaches that treat race and gender as separate categories.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion of this study, it can be concluded that Irene Redfield in *Passing* (2021) experiences two types of intersectional oppression, structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. In terms of structural intersectionality, the findings show that this oppression appears in several parts of Irene's life and continues across three different spheres. In public spaces, the racial system of 1920s America and gender norms operate together to limit her ability to speak up or claim her identity without putting herself at risk. In her role as a mother, racial classification and the expectations placed on mothers put pressure on her at the same time, creating a burden that cannot be understood by looking at race or gender separately. Within her household, patriarchal authority and the racial system reinforce each other in ways that deny her both the protection she needs from outside and the authority she should have at home. These three spheres are not disconnected from one another. They are different expressions of the same condition, where race and gender work together to create a disadvantage that is greater than what either system would produce on its own.

In relation to political intersectionality, the findings reveal that Irene's oppression goes beyond social structures and extends into the political movements that should have been able to support her. Anti-racist movements focused primarily on the experiences of Black men, which meant the specific concerns of Black women like Irene were treated as less important. Feminist movements of the same period centered the experiences of white women, placing the racial dimension of Irene's life entirely outside their frame of concern. Because of this, Irene is repeatedly placed in situations where she has to manage overlapping burdens from two directions at once, with no political movement fully able to recognize or respond to what she is going through.

It is concluded that the oppression Irene faces throughout *Passing* (2021) is not separate issue caused by only one factor, but is formed through the intersection of race and gender operating simultaneously across different parts of her life. This study also shows that *Passing* (2021) is more than a story about racial passing, because the movie reflects the complicated reality of living between racial and gender oppression without full support from the social and political systems surrounding Irene's life. The movie presents how these two systems work together and continuously affect Irene's position as a Black woman in both public and private spaces. However, this study is limited to the discussion of structural and political intersectionality experienced by Irene in selected scenes from the movie. Other aspects of the movie, including representational intersectionality, visual symbolism, and cinematography, are not discussed in this research. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to explore those aspects in order to provide a broader understanding of how intersectional oppression is represented in movies and other visual narratives.

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Authors' contribution

Linda Linda: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodolog, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Ketut Santi Indriani: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing
Ni Luh Putu Krisnawati: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision.

Statement of the use of AI

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