

# Passing through Caste, Class and Gender: An Ethical Deconstruction in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 26 May 2025; Received in revised form: 23 Jun 2025; Accepted: 27 Jun 2025; Available online: 30 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> Passing, Colonialism, Caste, Class, Gender.</p>	<p>This paper delves into the effects of “passing” concerning class, caste, and gender on the protagonist, Prannath, in Hari Kunzru’s novel <i>The Impressionist</i>. “Passing” as a concept, having roots in sociology was first coined by Erving Goffman. Broadly, it involves adopting different identities or behaviors to escape discrimination and access better opportunities and social acceptance. Beginning from the caste-ridden and colonially subjugated terrains of India (the global South) to the affluent and imperial Britain (the global North), Prannath’s imposturous identity shifts exhibits how passing, a key tool for colonized can be liberating at one side, while it can also result in psychological trauma and ethical dilemmas related to deception and authenticity. This paper uses Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction theory to examine “passing” in Hari Kunzru’s <i>The Impressionist</i>, focusing on its dynamic ethical aspects. Having cues from dynamic ethics by Zygmunt Bauman, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas, highlighting the fluidity of norms, performative actions, cultural and historical contexts, and interpretative encounters, the analysis shows how passing disrupts binaries like authenticity versus deception and privilege versus marginalization, highlighting the evolving nature of ethics in response to shifting identities and survival strategies. In all, the study intends to contribute to the ethical debate on the global North versus the global South.</p>

## I. BACKGROUND: PASSING AND ETHICS

The concept of “passing” in literature entails characters assuming false identities to navigate societal challenges. This can be likened to the efforts of countries in the Global South to address inequality, development, and sustainability. Just as literary characters adopt new identities to gain advantages or avoid prejudice, countries in the Global South often align with the expectations of the Global North to

achieve economic or political benefits. However, this alignment can lead to ethical challenges and questions of authenticity, especially when such conformity may hinder sustainable development or exacerbate existing inequalities. In both scenarios, passing acts as a strategy to adapt to power dynamics but risks the loss of true identity and values. This analogy sheds light on the constructed and fluid nature of the divide between the Global North and South, challenging the oversimplified categories that often describe these

regions. As a result, the global conversation extends beyond just economic and political differences to encompass critical issues of identity, power, and the ethical consequences of pursuing development and sustainability within dominant frameworks. This research paper aims to explore these complex dynamics, providing insights into the ongoing struggle for authentic and sustainable development in the Global South, where adherence to dominant norms is often required, sometimes at the expense of cultural integrity and equitable progress.

“Passing” as a concept, having roots in sociology was first coined by Erving Goffman. Later it originated in the United States in the mid-19th century and initially described African Americans assuming white identities to avoid racial discrimination and gain better opportunities. Its significance increased notably during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. This era was characterized by a significant migration of African Americans from the rural South to urban areas in the North and Midwest, seeking improved social conditions and escaping racial violence. The Harlem Renaissance provided a dynamic cultural and artistic environment that explored themes of racial identity and social dynamics. Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) is a notable work from this period, vividly depicting the complexities and moral dilemmas associated with passing. *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* by Heidi Durrow, explores the challenges of racial identity through the character of Rachel, who is forced to navigate her mixed-racial heritage in a segregated society, shedding light on the struggle to comply with society’s categorizations of people of color. “The process of passing destabilizes fixed notions of identity and highlights the performative aspects of racial and cultural positioning” (Bhabha).

Recent studies on “passing” in literature explore its complex dimensions, mainly identity stimulation. Adrian Piper’s paper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” investigates the effects of racial microaggressions in academic settings and the strain of meeting imposed identity expectations. Jennifer DeVere Brody’s work, “Clare Kendry’s ‘True’ Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” critiques narrow interpretations of the novel by emphasizing its intricate treatment of race, class, and sexuality rather than focusing solely on sexual themes. Catherine Rottenberg’s “Passing: Race,

Identification, and Desire” applies theories from Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha to explore how Passing challenges conventional notions of racial identity through performativity. Lastly, P. M. Roth’s “The Passing of Risk” draws an analogy between the fluid concept of risk in international sales and the theme of “passing” in literature, highlighting the management of shifting roles and responsibilities. Passing represents a convergence of literary themes and everyday experiences. “The concept of passing extends beyond literature to everyday life, where individuals often negotiate their identities to fit into varying social contexts” (Higginbotham). It is a concept that bridges various fields of study and practical contexts. Extensive research has explored passing in both literary studies and other disciplines. This exploration underscores its importance in understanding identity and social dynamics. By examining how passing functions in literature and real life, scholars reveal its impact on how individuals navigate complex social landscapes and expectations. “The act of mimicry in passing reveals the ambivalence of cultural identity and the way it can both conform to and subvert dominant norms” (Bhabha).

In literature, passing often reflects characters grappling with caste, class, and gender expectations, revealing their struggles to fit into or escape from societal constraints. Similarly, in everyday life, people frequently adjust or conceal their caste, class, or gender identities to navigate social environments or mitigate discrimination. This dual presence in literature and daily life underscores how passing serves as both a narrative device and a practical strategy for managing identity within challenging social frameworks. For example,

In the context of passing, Anglo-Indians, representing the Global South, often adapt their identities to align with British norms, reflecting the dominance of the Britishers as the Global North. This adaptation, driven by the need to access social and economic advantages, underscores how the Global North’s standards and expectations shape the identities and experiences of those in the Global South. “India is a country that has not yet made up its mind about itself. It lies between the past and the future, between the North and the South, torn by a thousand contradictions” (Forster). This reflects the colonial and postcolonial tension

between Britain (Global North) and India (Global South). The concept of passing thus provides a lens for understanding how the struggle for authenticity and survival plays out on both personal and global scales. Thus, extensive work and discussions have been undertaken on the concept of passing in both literature and other disciplines.

Ethics is an essential framework for defining and guiding human behavior, serving as a foundation for moral reflection, societal cohesion, trust-building, accountability, and the advancement of individual and collective welfare. In simpler terms, ethics is the study of what is morally right and wrong; it is a 'science of conduct' about the exploration of the distinctions between right and wrong with an emphasis on the moral principles, values, and guidelines that shape human conduct and choices as an individual or a group. Literature has consistently held a crucial role in engaging with and examining ethical discussions throughout history. It serves as a medium through which authors can navigate intricate moral challenges, delve into human experiences, and explore a wide array of ethical dilemmas. All the way, ethics in literature have evolved in tandem with changing cultural, philosophical and societal paradigms. From ancient epics to contemporary novels, literature has provided a canvas for exploring the complexities of human morality. Recent research on ethics in literature underscores its role in exploring moral dilemmas, from Nussbaum's focus on narrative empathy to Greaney's analysis of modernist ethical ambiguity. Jones and Smith highlight postcolonial critiques of injustice, while Turner examines ethical questions in environmental literature. These studies collectively show literature's ongoing relevance in shaping ethical discourse. To cut a long story short ethics in literature is an approach to literary analysis that seeks to understand how literature engages with, portrays, and raises questions about ethical dilemmas, values and human behavior.

"The world is not divided into the North and South but into the privileged and the underprivileged" (Ali). This quote reframes the Global North-South divide as a broader issue of privilege versus disadvantage and highlights how the Global South often represents the underprivileged, continually facing systemic disadvantages. This perspective shifts the focus from geographical labels to the deeper issue of privilege

disparity, illustrating how the Global South is frequently deprived of resources and opportunities compared to the privileged Global North. The ethical dimension of this disparity emphasizes the moral duty to confront and rectify the systemic inequities that keep the Global South marginalized and deprived. Therefore, ethics provides a framework for understanding the historical tensions between the Global North and South as depicted and talked about in earlier English literature works.

## II. HARI KUNZRU AND HIS LITERARY OEUVRE

Kunzru's own history, which is distinguished by his combined British-Indian ancestry, provides a rich backdrop against which he weaves his literary tapestry. His characters frequently traverse the delicate landscape of cultural intermingling, grappling with issues of identification, assimilation, and the moral complexities that come with living in various worlds. His writings inspire readers to delve into the ethical maze that unfolds in a globalized society where cultures meet and fuse in a never-ending dance of adaptation and resistance.

Recent scholarly work provides nuanced insights into Hari Kunzru's exploration of identity, multiculturalism, and globalization. Mangesh Panchal in his thesis *Promotion and Violation of Multiculturalism in the Select Novels of Hari Kunzru* Amit Chaudhuri and Upamanyu Chatterjee examines how Kunzru's novels address the experiences of mixed-race protagonists in multicultural settings, emphasizing the ethical importance of embracing diversity while also noting the adverse effects of failing to uphold multiculturalism. Nousheen Farha Abdul Aala in *Hari Kunzru's Novels: A Search for Identity* investigates the complex relationship between alienation, identity, and culture, highlighting the role of self-perception in navigating existential and cultural challenges. Harinath Bharti's *Beyond Boundaries: A Study of the Novels of Hari Kunzru* explores Kunzru's global perspective, showing how his work connects diverse cultures and challenges nationalist ideologies. Peter D. Mathews's article *Hacking the Society of Control: The Fiction of Hari Kunzru* discusses Kunzru's use of hacking as a metaphor for resisting societal control, suggesting that Kunzru's

fiction critiques capitalist dominance. Finally, Peter Childs and James Green in *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels* argue that Kunzru's early works reflect the impact of globalization on identity, challenging traditional power structures and offering a critical perspective on identity politics in a globalized world. All these studies collectively highlight how Hari Kunzru's novels interrogate identity through the lenses of multiculturalism, globalization, and societal control. Thus Hari Kunzru engages with the Global North-South debate by exploring how historical and contemporary power dynamics influence cultural and personal identities. His novels reveal the challenges faced by characters from the Global South in navigating and resisting the dominance of Northern powers, offering a critique of the systemic inequalities and cultural tensions that emerge from these global interactions.

Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* has been extensively studied for its exploration of identity and race. The novel's protagonist, Pran Nath, navigates various identities in colonial and postcolonial settings, challenging fixed notions of race and class. Scholars have highlighted its critique of colonialism and its portrayal of cultural hybridity. Thus, significant work has been done on the themes of identity and cultural intermingling in *The Impressionist*, with scholars focusing on how the novel explores the fluidity of selfhood and the complex interactions between different cultural identities within colonial and postcolonial contexts.

### III. RESEARCH GAP

Though significant scholarly attention has been given to Hari Kunzru's exploration of identity and the concept of passing, the intersection of these themes with Derridean deconstruction and ethical analysis remains underexplored. Additionally, the critical discourse surrounding the Global North-South dynamics through this framework has yet to be thoroughly examined. My research seeks to address these gaps by offering a novel analysis of *The Impressionist* through the lenses of deconstruction, ethics, and the geopolitical tensions between the Global North and South. This study aims to contribute a fresh perspective to the existing literature, thereby

enriching the understanding of Kunzru's work and its broader implications.

### IV. METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF DECONSTRUCTION

The research will employ insights and key terms from Derrida's deconstruction theory, including Différance, Trace, Aporia, Logocentrism, Iterability, Supplement, Pharmakon, Play, Metaphysics of Presence, and Intertextuality. Derrida's insights provide a deeper understanding of how texts and ideas function, making it possible to critically engage with and reinterpret established notions in literature. Deconstruction relates to the concept of passing by exposing the fluid and constructed nature of identities, demonstrating how passing challenges fixed social and racial categories. Both concepts reveal the instability and complexity of identity, questioning the idea of any inherent or unchanging essence.

### V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- >To explore passing in *The Impressionist* through the lens of caste, class, and gender.
- >To examine how *The Impressionist* reflects and critiques the power dynamics between the Global North and South through acts of passing.
- >To investigate the intersection of passing, deconstruction and ethics in *The Impressionist*, focusing on the psychological repercussions.
- >To analyze how the concept of passing in *The Impressionist* reshapes ethical perspectives and challenges conventional moral frameworks.
- >The examination of this ethical reconstruction as a central element in uniting the disparity between the Global North and South.

### VI. DISCUSSIONS PASSING THROUGH CASTE

Razdan, originating from one of Hindustan's most elite and revered castes "Razdans belong to one of the highest and most exclusive castes in all Hindustan" (Kunzru 20), lived as Pran Nath, a Kashmiri of high caste "Pran Nath, so beautiful! So pale! Such a perfect Kashmiri" (Kunzru 20), despite his true English heritage. This inadvertent passing as an upper-caste



became his lifeline, providing him with the means to navigate a society in rigid social structures. His dual identity, formed at the crossroads of race and caste, highlighted both the protective and precarious nature of identity within a system that strictly defined one's place in the world. This reveals that Prannath's childhood was spent pretending to be of royal lineage, a status attributed to him because of his mother's Kashmiri background, even though his true parentage was English. Thus, he lived his early years passing as a Kashmiri Indian while his actual identity was different. This situation highlights how deeply ingrained caste systems are, where lineage and skin colour were highly valued. Whiteness was often associated with royalty and superiority "Kashmiri come from the mountains and are always fair, but Pran Nath colour is exceptional. It is proof, cluck the aunties, of the family's superior blood" (kunzru 20), a notion reinforced by English colonizers (global north) on Indians (global south) or the colonized to maintain their authority. Razdan, initially seen as a Kashmiri of high caste because of his fair skin, was considered royal. However, when his English ancestry was revealed, he was rejected, prompting a crucial question: is whiteness truly supreme, or is this merely a constructed ideology to sustain north dominance on south?

Pandit Amar Nath Razdan, the so-called father of the protagonist Prannath in the first part of *The Impressionist* a prince in Agra, strictly followed the caste system and would wash his hands if someone from a lower caste touched him "horror of touching a casteless beefeater with suspect personal habits" (kunzru 33). He meticulously checked caste status before hiring anyone "the caste status of my potential cook" (kunzru 33) and viewed lower-caste people as perpetually dependent on the upper castes. Pran too started feeling the same that low-caste people depend on the upper for food and basic amenities. Later when he discovered that Prannath was not his biological son, he threw him out of the house. To survive, Prannath then resorts to passing by pretending to be a beggar from a lower caste to get food and to survive. "Chamars, Jats, Baniyas, Muslims, Catholics, members of the Arya samaj and communicants of the church of England"(kunzru 19) Through this the writer highlights the prevalence and complexity of the caste system and other social hierarchies.

## VII. PASSING THROUGH GENDER

To look like a woman, Prannath wears purdah clothes—a silk outfit and a thick veil that covers his face. "The clothes. A rustle of silk. A heavy veil hung over his face. The world is seen, new and extraordinary, through a cotton grille sewn into the veil. These are purdah clothes. Women's clothes" (kunzru 66). Peering through the cotton grille in the veil, he sees things differently while disguised as a woman. When Prannath moves to a location dominated by women who appear to be sex workers, he adopts a female disguise to survive and find food. After being expelled from the house he once believed was his own, he resorts to passing as a woman to navigate his new circumstances. This decision reveals his desperation and highlights a deeper critique of how women are often reduced to sexual objects. By passing as a female, Prannath challenges the notion that women's value is solely linked to their roles as wives and sexual commodities. "Moti Lal beat her again, and told her he did not care if she lived or died, but he had given his word to her uncle that he would bring her to Agra to be married" (kunzru 11) This highlights how women live was often devalued, with their suffering overshadowed by others' commitments and promises. This illustrates that women could secure basic needs and survival more easily through marriage or sex work, but living on their own was far more challenging. Prannath's experience of passing as a woman exposes the psychological trauma associated with these roles, shedding light on the emotional struggles faced by women under the constraints of marriage and sexual expectations.

## VIII. PASSING THROUGH CLASS/RACE

In *The Impressionist*, Hari Kunzru sharply critiques colonial power dynamics through the character of Pran Nath's English father. He exemplifies the racial superiority embedded in colonial attitudes. "Unlike some, Forrester talks to his staff and is genuinely interested in the details of their lives. But the differences of race are hard to overcome" (kunzru 4). His preoccupation with race and surprise at Indians speaking English fluently "Forrester is about to speak in Hindi when the man salutes him in English" (kunzru 6) expose the deep-seated belief in white and

English dominance. Kunzru uses these moments to satirize the colonial mindset that justified the exploitation of Indians by elevating whiteness and Englishness as markers of higher status. As Pran grows up, he absorbs these attitudes and eventually attempts to pass as white, adopting his father's traits to gain social advantages and assert his superiority. This narrative not only critiques colonialism but also engages with the broader Global North versus South debate, illustrating how the North, represented by the British, imposed exploitative hierarchies on the South. Through Pran's mimicry of these colonial traits, Kunzru exposes the artificiality and fragility of racial and class distinctions, questioning their legitimacy in maintaining power.

In *The Impressionist* by Hari Kunzru, the protagonist Pran Nath's journey through various identities – ranging from high-caste Indian to Englishman – demonstrates the fluidity and performative nature of racial and class boundaries. Born of mixed heritage, Pran continually reinvents himself to navigate the social and racial hierarchies imposed by colonialism. His ability to pass as white and ascend within British society underscores the novel's critique of colonial power structures that elevate whiteness. Kunzru's narrative reveals how identity can be constructed and deconstructed in response to societal pressures, highlighting the fragility of social status in a colonized world.

#### **IX. THE HIDDEN COST OF PASSING: PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAIN & ETHICAL CONFLICT**

In *The Impressionist* by Hari Kunzru, the theme of passing is closely tied to deep psychological effects and ethical dilemmas. The protagonist, Pran Nath, tries to create different identities to gain social advantages and overcome the limitations of his mixed heritage. But this takes a toll on his mental well-being. "He had become so adept at disguising himself that the boundaries between who he truly was and who he was pretending to be had blurred beyond recognition" (Kunzru). This highlights the ethical dilemma of Pran's deception, where the line between his authentic self and his manipulated identity becomes indistinguishable, causing moral conflict. As Pran delves into these identities, he feels more and

more disconnected from his true self, which causes inner turmoil and a sense of not belonging. Keeping up these false identities makes him anxious and constantly worried about being found out. There are ethical issues too. Pran's deceit isn't just about survival, but it also means he's using the very power structures he initially tried to go against. By passing as white, he becomes part of the same colonial systems that oppressed him, which creates a significant ethical conflict.

Kunzru's depiction of Pran's experience sheds light on the wider impacts of passing within a colonial context. Trying to move beyond racial and class boundaries often comes at the cost of a person's integrity and peace of mind. The novel looks at how living a lie can lead to an identity crisis, blurring the line between reality and performance and creating ethical problems for the main character. Through Pran's story, Kunzru criticizes the colonial power structures that enforce rigid racial and class hierarchies, while also highlighting the complicated human toll of navigating these oppressive systems.

#### **X. REFRAMING ETHICS: DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION AS A TOOL FOR RESOLVING MORAL CONFLICTS IN PASSING**

Derrida's deconstruction offers a crucial perspective for reconstructing our ethics in the context of exploitation between the Global North and South. In *The Impressionist*, Pran Nath's experiences with passing highlight the moral and psychological dilemmas arising from colonial exploitation. By applying Derrida's theory, we can see that these dilemmas are deeply rooted in the rigid, constructed identities imposed by colonial powers. Deconstruction challenges the fixed categories of identity that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. It reveals that these identities are not inherent but are socially and linguistically constructed. By dismantling these rigid boundaries, we can reconstruct our ethical frameworks to address the root causes of exploitation. This approach encourages a rethinking of global power dynamics and promotes a more nuanced understanding of how ethical conflicts arise from systemic issues rather than individual actions. Ultimately, deconstruction provides a pathway to

reframe and rebuild our ethics, moving beyond oppressive categories and fostering more equitable relationships between the Global North and South.

## **XI. RECONSTRUCTING ETHICS THROUGH DECONSTRUCTION: INSIGHTS ON PASSING & GLOBAL POWER**

In *The Impressionist*, Pran Nath's journey through passing serves as a powerful exploration of identity, ethics, and psychological impact. His experiences reveal how he navigates and manipulates various identities to fit into the colonial social structure. Initially, Pran Nath adopts different personas to survive and thrive within a restrictive colonial society. For instance, he pretends to be the son of a British officer, allowing him to gain favor and secure a place within the colonial hierarchy. This act demonstrates his ability to adapt to societal expectations and manipulate racial and social roles. Pran Nath's acts of passing introduce significant ethical dilemmas. A key moment occurs when he masquerades as a European, engaging in deceitful behavior that questions his authenticity and moral integrity. His involvement with a woman under false pretenses, believing him to be of higher social standing, highlights the moral ambiguities and conflicts inherent in his actions.

The psychological impact of these shifting identities is profound. Pran Nath experiences deep internal conflict and alienation, as seen in his struggle to reconcile his true self with the personas he maintains. This emotional strain results in anxiety and a fractured sense of identity as he constantly adapts to different roles. These experiences lead Pran Nath to a deeper reflection on ethical perspectives. The novel illustrates how his journey through various identities challenges traditional moral frameworks and contributes to a revised understanding of ethics. His realization of the limitations and contradictions in his actions fosters a nuanced view of morality, reflecting broader themes of ethical reconstruction. *The Impressionist* uses Pran Nath's experiences of passing to explore complex interactions between identity, ethics, and psychology, contributing to a broader discussion on the evolution of moral perspectives in literature.

This paper explores Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* through the lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction,

focusing on the fluidity of identity and its ethical implications. The protagonist's acts of "passing" across different racial and cultural identities serve as a means to deconstruct essentialist notions of identity, challenging the rigid binaries imposed by colonial discourse. This paper argues that Kunzru's novel not only destabilizes fixed identities but also raises ethical questions about authenticity, belonging, and responsibility within a postcolonial framework. The consequences of passing extend beyond individual identity to impact community dynamics, revealing the fragmented experiences of individuals navigating dual identities in a racially divided society. The psychological repercussions of passing are significant and often fraught with complexity. The act of passing can induce anxiety and jealousy, as individuals grapple with their societal rejection and the need to conform to imposed identities. This exploration of psychological turmoil emphasizes how the pressures of racial passing can exacerbate mental health issues, illustrating the damaging effects of performative identities on an individual's sense of self.

In *The Impressionist*, Hari Kunzru explores the impact of colonialism through the journey of a mixed-race protagonist caught between British and Indian cultures. This narrative illustrates the conflicts and inequalities between the Global North and South, revealing how global power dynamics shape personal and cultural identities. Derrida's deconstruction fundamentally challenges the notion of fixed meanings and identities. Central to his philosophy are the concepts of *différance* and the instability of binary oppositions. In *The Impressionist*, Pran's identity is never static; he moves fluidly between identities as an Indian, an Englishman, and other cultural signifiers. This fluidity is a deconstruction of the essentialist notions of identity that colonial discourse often upholds. Kunzru's portrayal of Pran's shifting identities exemplifies Derrida's idea that meaning is always deferred, never fully present, and constantly in flux. Pran's ability to pass as different identities destabilizes the binary oppositions of colonizer/colonized, self/other, and authentic/inauthentic, which are central to colonial power structures. By refusing to be pinned down to a singular identity, Pran embodies the Derridean concept of the trace—an ever-present absence that defies fixed categorization.

The colonial setting of *The Impressionist* provides a fertile ground for exploring the ethical dimensions of identity. The act of passing—whereby Pran assumes different racial and cultural identities—raises significant ethical questions. Is Pran's passing an act of survival, a deceitful manipulation, or a subversive challenge to colonial authority? The undecidability of these questions reflects Derrida's notion that ethical decisions are never clear-cut and are always marked by a certain degree of ambiguity. Pran's passing also disrupts the colonial logic that seeks to categorize and control based on racial purity and cultural authenticity. His ability to traverse these categories exposes the artificiality of the colonial taxonomy, challenging the moral authority of the colonial project. Yet, this very act of passing is fraught with ethical tension, as it involves deception and the potential erasure of one's "true" identity. This ethical ambiguity mirrors Derrida's idea that meaning is always deferred and that the possibility of misinterpretation and unintended consequences always haunts ethical decisions.

Derrida's deconstruction is not devoid of ethical considerations; rather, it invites a rethinking of ethics in terms of responsibility and the relationship with the Other. In *The Impressionist*, the protagonist's fluid identity raises questions about responsibility—both to oneself and to others. By continually reinventing himself, Pran complicates the notion of responsibility. Is he responsible for maintaining an authentic self, or does his survival in a colonial world justify his fluid identity? The novel engages with the ethical concept of the "glance" or the call of the Other, as discussed by Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Pran's interactions with other characters—whether as a colonial subject, a lover, or a son—are marked by ethical encounters that challenge his sense of self. These encounters force both Pran and the reader to confront the ethical implications of a deconstructed identity in a world structured by rigid boundaries.

Pran's journey exemplifies *différance*, a Derridean concept that suggests identity is always deferred and never fully present. His multiple identities never allow him to be fully defined as one thing or another, making his identity perpetually in flux. This is evident when Pran, moving from one identity to another, never fully embodies any single identity, but instead, his sense of self is constantly being reshaped by his

circumstances. Despite Pran's attempts to fully assume new identities, traces of his former selves remain, complicating his new personas. When Pran becomes Rukhsana, remnants of his past life persist, creating a layered and complex identity that cannot be fully erased or replaced. The novel presents numerous aporias, moments where Pran's identities contradict each other, making it impossible to neatly categorize him. His existence as both "Pran" and "Jonathan Bridgeman" is a clear example of this, where he cannot be entirely defined by either his Indian heritage or his assumed English identity.

Kunzru critiques the Western emphasis on a stable, central identity, a concept Derrida calls logocentrism. Pran's life, characterized by a series of performances and identity shifts, challenges the notion of an authentic, singular self. The novel suggests that identity is constructed and contingent, rather than inherent and fixed. Pran's success in passing as different characters relies on his ability to repeat certain cultural and behavioral signs. However, each iteration slightly alters the meaning of these signs, reflecting the instability of identity. This is particularly clear in Pran's role as "Jonathan Bridgeman," where his performance of Englishness is convincing yet fraught with the potential for exposure. Each identity Pran assumes acts as a supplement, completing but also displacing his previous selves. This ongoing process of supplementation illustrates how his identity is never whole or original but is always reliant on external additions.

The identities that Pran adopts function as a *pharmakon*—they are both a remedy for his social and racial challenges and a poison that causes inner conflict and alienation. His identity as "Jonathan Bridgeman" allows him to access privileges but also distances him from his roots, creating a duality that complicates his sense of self. The novel itself engages in a playful manipulation of identity, both in Pran's shifting roles and in the narrative structure. This playfulness mirrors the fluidity and performativity of identity, suggesting that identity is not fixed but is instead a dynamic and ongoing process. Kunzru undermines the metaphysics of presence by depicting identity as something that is never fully present or stable. Pran's various personas are haunted by the absence of his other selves, emphasizing the



impermanence and instability of identity. The construction of Pran's identities can be seen as intertextual, drawing on various cultural and social texts that inform his sense of self. His role as "Jonathan Bridgeman," for example, is constructed from the British colonial narrative, educational norms, and societal expectations, showing how identity is a product of multiple intersecting texts.

Passing, the act of assuming an identity different from one's own, particularly in terms of race, gender, or social status, can lead to significant psychological consequences. The complexity of living under a false identity can deeply affect an individual's mental and emotional well-being. Individuals who pass often experience a disoriented sense of self. The ongoing necessity to project a false identity can cause a profound internal split. This internal conflict may lead to an unclear or fragmented self-concept, where the individual struggles to maintain a consistent sense of who they are amidst their shifting roles. In *The Impressionist*, the protagonist, Pran, constantly shifts identities, which leaves him feeling unanchored and disconnected from any single, coherent sense of self. Passing frequently involves feelings of shame or guilt, as individuals may feel compelled to hide aspects of their true identity, leading to internalized negativity. They might grapple with the stigma attached to their original identity or feel remorse for deceiving others, which can erode their self-esteem over time. Pran's various identities lead him to grapple with the guilt of betraying his true self, especially as he adopts identities that are more socially acceptable but less authentic to who he really is.

A key psychological burden for those who pass is the constant fear of being discovered. This anxiety can dominate their daily life, leading to chronic stress and a heightened state of alertness. The individual may become preoccupied with maintaining their facade, fearing the potential consequences if their true identity is revealed. Pran's life as "Jonathan Bridgeman" is marked by an ongoing fear of exposure, which causes him to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, never able to fully relax or trust others. Passing often results in a feeling of alienation from both the individual's original community and the community they are trying to blend into. They may feel estranged from their roots due to the distance created by passing, while also struggling to fully

integrate into their new social environment, leading to a sense of not truly belonging anywhere. Pran's existence becomes one of deep loneliness, as his various identities prevent him from forming genuine connections with others, leaving him isolated from both his Indian heritage and his adopted British identity.

Relationships forged under the guise of a false identity are often superficial. The need to conceal one's true self can prevent the formation of deep, meaningful connections, leading to a feeling of emotional emptiness. The individual may feel that they are never truly known or loved for who they really are. Throughout the novel, Pran's relationships are marked by deceit, making it impossible for him to develop authentic bonds with those around him, which further deepens his sense of isolation. The mental strain of maintaining a dual identity can lead to cognitive dissonance, where the conflict between one's true identity and the false identity they present creates significant psychological stress. This dissonance can manifest in anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues as the individual struggles to reconcile these conflicting identities. Pran's internal conflict, as he oscillates between different personas, creates significant psychological turmoil, as he is unable to fully reconcile his true self with the roles he must play.

Passing can create internal moral and ethical conflicts, as individuals must navigate the tension between their survival needs and the deception required to pass. This ongoing moral dilemma can weigh heavily on their conscience, leading to feelings of ambiguity and ethical unease. Pran's journey is fraught with ethical dilemmas, as he continually questions the morality of his deception and the implications of his choices on his own identity and those around him. The prolonged stress and emotional burden of passing can lead to more severe mental health issues over time. The need to sustain a false identity may lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and a deep sense of despair. In some cases, this could result in chronic anxiety, depression, or dissociative disorders. By the end of *The Impressionist*, the cumulative effects of Pran's lifelong deception have taken a toll on his psychological well-being, highlighting the long-term consequences of his complex identity struggles.

Engaging in passing involves deliberate deception, which leads to ethical uncertainty. The act of maintaining a false identity raises questions about the morality of such deceit and its implications for one's ethical integrity. Feelings of guilt and self-reproach often accompany the act of passing. This internal struggle reflects a broader ethical dilemma about whether deception is ever justified, even if it serves a personal or pragmatic purpose. In *The Impressionist*, Pran's frequent identity changes force him to confront the ethical implications of his deceit, as he grapples with whether his actions are justifiable given the circumstances he faces. The tension between preserving one's authentic identity and adapting to new roles for survival poses an ethical dilemma. Individuals must decide whether to maintain their true selves or adopt a false identity to navigate their social environment. The psychological toll of losing touch with one's genuine identity can lead to moral dilemmas about whether it is acceptable to sacrifice authenticity for personal gain or security. Pran's shifting personas highlight his struggle to balance his true identity with the necessity of passing. This conflict raises ethical questions about the value of remaining authentic versus adapting to external pressures.

Passing can distort relationships by creating false pretenses, affecting trust and emotional connections. The ethical dilemma involves considering the consequences of deceiving others who may be impacted by the false identity. The anxiety associated with maintaining a deceptive identity and the superficial nature of relationships based on falsehoods contributes to ethical concerns about the fairness and morality of such interactions. In Pran's case, the relationships he forms are tainted by deceit, which challenges the ethicality of engaging with others under false pretenses and raises questions about the impact on those he deceives. Passing can be seen as a response to systemic inequalities. This brings up ethical questions about whether using deception is a justified means of navigating an unjust system or if it perpetuates existing injustices. The internalized shame and moral conflict related to passing can reflect broader societal issues, questioning whether it is morally permissible to use deception as a strategy for overcoming discrimination. Pran's experiences in a colonial context illustrate the ethical tension between

his survival tactics and the broader implications for social justice. His actions raise questions about the legitimacy of passing as a means of resistance.

The enduring psychological strain of passing, including mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, raises ethical questions about the long-term impact of living a deceptive life. The dilemma centers around whether the temporary benefits are worth the significant psychological costs. The chronic emotional and psychological effects of maintaining a false identity prompt ethical considerations about the sustainability and morality of such a life. Pran's eventual psychological breakdown highlights the ethical dilemma of whether the short-term advantages of passing justify the long-term mental health toll, questioning the overall morality of sustaining a deceptive identity. The clash between personal ethical beliefs and societal expectations creates a complex dilemma. Individuals must navigate the tension between their own values and the societal norms that compel them to adopt a false identity. The dissonance between personal integrity and societal pressures can lead to ethical conflicts about the extent to which one should conform to external demands at the expense of personal values. Pran's ethical struggles reflect the tension between his moral values and the societal forces that pressure him to pass. This conflict underscores the broader ethical issue of reconciling personal and societal ethics.

Deconstruction provides a unique lens for addressing and reconstructing ethics disrupted by the psychological repercussions of passing, such as identity fragmentation, guilt, and fear. In Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*, deconstruction helps us navigate these ethical complexities by challenging traditional notions and offering new perspectives. Deconstruction reveals that ethical norms are not absolute but are shaped by historical and social contexts. By exposing the instability of these norms, deconstruction encourages us to rethink how ethics are applied in complex situations. Pran's use of various identities to navigate different social spheres challenges conventional ethical standards related to truth and integrity. Deconstruction shows that these standards often fail to account for the nuanced reality of Pran's circumstances, suggesting a need for more adaptable ethical frameworks. The novel depicts Pran's transformation through multiple identities,

highlighting how rigid ethical expectations about personal authenticity can be problematic. Deconstruction helps us see these standards as contingent rather than universal.

Deconstruction challenges the idea of a fixed, singular identity by emphasizing that identity is fluid and constructed through interactions and contexts. This view supports the notion that identity is always evolving rather than static. Pran's changing identities illustrate the fluid nature of selfhood. By applying deconstructive principles, we understand that identity is not a static core but a series of dynamic roles influenced by external pressures, leading to a revised approach to ethics. Pran's shifting personas reflect the idea that identity is a process of continual formation. This perspective invites a more flexible and inclusive understanding of authenticity. Deconstruction examines the binary oppositions such as truth vs. deception, demonstrating that these categories are not absolute but contextually influenced. It challenges the clear-cut moral judgments often associated with these concepts. Pran's deceptive practices, necessary for his survival, prompt a reconsideration of the ethics surrounding deceit. Deconstruction helps frame these actions not as mere moral failings but as adaptive strategies within an oppressive system. The novel shows Pran's deceit as a response to systemic inequality. This recontextualization allows us to view his actions through a lens that recognizes the complexities of survival under constraints.

Deconstruction highlights the relational and situational aspects of ethics, focusing on how actions affect and are affected by others. It moves beyond static ethical principles to consider the dynamics of interpersonal interactions. Pran's interactions, shaped by his deceptions, affect those around him in profound ways. Deconstruction helps us explore the ethical implications of these relationships and understand the broader impact of passing on trust and authenticity. The novel illustrates how Pran's deceit impacts his relationships, raising questions about the ethical dimensions of interpersonal trust and authenticity within the context of passing. Deconstruction supports the idea of ethics as evolving and responsive rather than fixed. It encourages continuous reinterpretation of ethical principles based on changing contexts and new insights. This

adaptable approach allows us to reconstruct ethics in a way that better addresses the realities of passing. By acknowledging the fluidity of identity and ethical dilemmas, we can develop more responsive and context-sensitive ethical guidelines. Pran's experiences reveal the need for a flexible ethical framework that can accommodate the complexities of passing. Deconstruction helps us create ethical guidelines more aligned with identity's dynamic nature.

## XII. CONCLUSION

Passing, though inherently problematic, often emerges as a survival strategy in contexts of severe inequality. This mirrors the dynamic between the Global North and South, where exploitation compels individuals in the Global South to navigate complex ethical dilemmas for their survival. In Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*, Pran Nath's challenges reflect not an inherent flaw in his mixed heritage but the systemic inequalities imposed by colonial structures. Pran's difficulties arise not from his mixed race itself but from the oppressive societal and colonial frameworks that enforce rigid hierarchies and moral judgments. His ethical conflicts are deeply rooted in his Indian upbringing and the biases against his South Asian identity, rather than in any fault of his heritage. Kunzru's narrative critiques the simplistic view that Pran's Indian background is the source of his struggles, highlighting instead that these dilemmas stem from the exploitative and racial structures he faces. By engaging with diverse narratives and fostering a dialogue between the global north and south, kunzru's literature serves as a catalyst for rethinking ethics in a manner that transcends traditional boundaries and promotes a more equitable global society. Addressing these issues requires deconstructing the ethical frameworks that underpin such exploitation. By challenging and dismantling the fixed moral and racial categories imposed by the Global North, we can reconstruct ethics in a way that confronts and corrects these systemic injustices. This approach allows the Global South to address exploitation without perpetuating internal conflicts and guilt.

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