

Research Article

Open Access

ILLUMINATING RACE: LIGHT, DARK, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

Najwa Mohammed Saeed^{1*}

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Science and Arts, Taiz University-Turba, Yemen

*Corresponding author: najwa2016yemen@gmail.com

Received: January 25, 2026 Accepted: February 22, 2026 Published: April 23, 2026

Copyright: © 2026. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the creative common attribution license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited

Cite this article as: Najwa Mohammed Saeed, Illuminating Race: Light, Dark, and the Social Construction of Identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. Technological Applied Humanitarian Academic Journal (TAHAJ). 2026;1(1):16-36.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the symbolism of light and darkness in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett (2020) to idealize race and colorism. It applies the Critical Race Theory to explain how Bennett deploys the color imagery to criticize the racial hierarchies and explain that identity is fluid. This research shows how the novel uses the motifs of light and artificial light in revealing the social construction of race and the affective price of the passing of the race. It examines the influence of whiteness negotiation by Stella in brightness and performance, as well as those of Desiree and Jude in being Black and adopting Blackness in darkness, authenticity, and marginality through close reading of the novel. Such binary oppositions indicate that the racial categories are not definitive and how psychology breaks down in the face of people who are forced to deal with it. The paper concludes that Bennett derails binary conceptualizations of race, and she employs visual metaphors to dismantle the notion of stable racial identity. The figure of whiteness is symbolized as aspirational but hollow, whereas the figure of Blackness is presented as self-sustaining and assertive. This study suggests how the novel *The Vanishing Half* can be integrated into the pedagogy of critical race theory in order to analyze the concepts of race, identity, and colorism in literature. It also suggests further research into how gender, class, and signs of color interface in the modern accounts of racial passing.

Keywords: *The Vanishing Half*, Critical Race Theory, Racial Ambiguity, Racial Passing

استنارة العرق: الضوء والظلام وبناء الهوية الاجتماعية في رواية "النصف المتلاشي" للكاتبه بریت بينیت

نجوى محمد سعيد^{1*}

^{1*} قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، كلية التربية والعلوم والآداب، جامعة تعز - التربية، اليمن

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث تحليل رمزية الضوء والظلام في رواية النصف المتلاشي للكاتبه بریت بينیت وذلك كوسيلة لتجسيد مفهومي العرق وتحيز اللون (اللونية أو التمييز على أساس درجة لون البشرة). كما يستند البحث إلى نظرية العرق النقدية لتوضيح كيفية توظيف الكاتبه بينیت للصور اللونية في نقد الهرميات العرقية وبيان أن الهوية مفهوم مرن ومتغير غير ثابت. يسعى هذا البحث إلى إظهار كيف تستخدم الرواية موضوعات الضوء، والضوء المصطنع، لإظهار الطابع الاجتماعي المنشأ للعرق، والتمن العاطفي والنفسي المترتب على ممارسة "التظاهر العرقي". كما يتناول البحث أثر تأثير التفاوض مع "البياض" لدى شخصية ستيليا من خلال مفاهيم الإشراق، والأداء، مقابل تجربة من خلال شخصيات ديزيريه وابنتها جود في الانتماء إلى السواد وتبني "السوداوية" من خلال بوصفه الظلام، والأصالة، والهامشية، وذلك عبر قراءة دقيقة للنص الروائي. وتشير هذه الثنائية الضدية إلى أن التصنيفات العرقية ليست نهائية أو حاسمة، وتكشف في الوقت ذاته عن تفكك البناء النفسي الذي يواجهه الأفراد الذين يجبرون على التعامل مع هذه التصنيفات. وتخلص الورقة البحثية إلى أن بينیت تقوض التصورات الثنائية للعرق، وتوظف الاستعارات البصرية لتفكيك فكرة الهوية العرقية المستقرة. إذ يرمز إلى "البياض" بوصفه طموحاً مغريباً لكنه أجوف، في حين يقدم "السواد" قائماً بذاته، مكثفياً، وحازماً في حضوره. وتقتصر هذه الدراسة إمكانية دمج رواية النصف المتلاشي في تدريس نظرية العرق النقدية لتحليل مفاهيم العرق والهوية وتحيز اللون في الأدب، كما تدعو إلى مزيد من الأبحاث حول تداخل النوع الاجتماعي والطبقية ودلالات اللون في السرديات المعاصرة للتمييز العرقي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النصف المتلاشي، نظرية العرق النقدية، الغموض العرقي. التظاهر العرقي

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett (2020) is a thorough analysis of colorism, race, and identity in America. The plot is based on the two twins, Stella and Desiree Vignes, and their respective experiences of race, which offer different insights into the meaning of race to each. Desiree is a complete Black woman, and Stella decides to live the life of a white woman, thereby directing her life into an advantaged journey full of cowardice. Bennett presents race as a biological reality that also includes the historical development, psychological aspects, and political elements of human society. The story demonstrates how people create their racial identities through different methods, which society can force upon them or they can select themselves. People who choose their racial identity face different positive and negative aspects than those who get assigned a racial identity through social forces.

The imagery of light and dark is used by Bennett to examine race in the novel. Thus, such oppositions run counter to moldy ideas of race and hierarchy, showing how damage works to forge and sustain borders. The lives of the Vignes sisters are such that they are reduced by terrible social codes to meager appearances of racial identity, yet they show how people might wiggle or joke around such codes for the sake of survival and self-definition.

The light and dark used by Bennett challenge the idea of race as a bio-defining, monolithic conception but not as one permeated by power, privilege-soiled, and prejudiced. Racial passing is considered in the novel particularly strongly, and it examines the individual agency against social pressure. The aspect that Stella presents herself as white provides her with an economic position, protection, and status against losing herself and being alienated from her own heritage. The internal struggle of self-denial to become a part of society makes the psychic cost of this choice even stronger. The quest of her trying to overcome racial oppression results in a personal crisis, which is the line of trying to fit into a society where racial lines are strict and unbending. In contrast, the fact that Desiree comes back to her native place with her Black daughter, Jude, demonstrates the destructive impact of colorism and Blackness on white society and Black society. The fact that Desiree asserts she is Black, as painful as it may be, is a relief in comparison to the path taken by Stella, the different experience of being Black.

This paper will look at *The Vanishing Half* and how the use of light and dark imagery in the novel highlights the concept of colorism and how racial classifications are socially constructed and not predetermined. Based on the idea of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that race is a social construct, which is created by historical and systemic factors instead of natural biological distinctions, the study reveals that identity is not determined, but it is a result of historical circumstances, social factors, and personal preferences.

The racial identity presented by Bennett as a performative process interfering with and re-establishing social norms makes the reader think about the question of belonging and the cost of belonging to be accepted within the social categories received. Drawing on scholars like W.E.B., *The Vanishing Half* by Bennett is a narrative of the complex predicament of the questions of race, identity, and power. In the footsteps of other researchers like Du Bois and Fanon, the novel breaks the racial fixity and conveys the message that the readers must consider race a dynamic concept that has perception, personal will, and social forces.

It is a stimulating story of the Vignes twins, which discusses the conflict between personal free will and social and natural forces that influence human behavior. The novel presents a detailed and rigorous description of how racial segregation, together with established racial discrimination systems, affects people throughout their entire lives while it studies their personal development. The story presents its message through strong and active methods that show how people develop their identities by combining different identity elements and how they control their personal transformation through both their own power and outside social systems.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Vanishing Half (2020) critically interrogates race, identity, and colorism by presenting race as a social construct shaped by power, privilege, and cultural expectations rather than a fixed biological category. Through the contrasting lives of the twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, the novel explores racial passing, Black identity, and the performative nature of race, revealing how assimilation may offer social mobility while producing psychological conflict and identity fragmentation. Bennett further employs symbolic light/dark imagery to critique binary racial classifications and expose how colorism sustains hierarchies of beauty, privilege, and exclusion. Despite growing scholarship on race in the novel, insufficient attention has been paid to how racial passing and color symbolism function together to challenge essentialist notions of race and illuminate the psychological and social consequences of racial boundaries. This study, therefore, addresses how Bennett uses these interconnected strategies to deconstruct racial binaries and contribute to contemporary debates on identity, visibility, and the social construction of race, drawing on critical race theory as a theoretical framework.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does the light/dark symbolism in *The Vanishing Half* critique colorism and racial rigidity?
2. To what extent does Stella's act of passing for white function as both empowerment and constraint?

3. How does the novel address internalized colorism through the experiences of Desiree and Jude?

1.3 Research Objectives

- To analyze how the light/dark symbolism in *The Vanishing Half* critiques colorism and challenges rigid racial categories.
- To examine how Stella's decision to pass for white operates simultaneously as a form of empowerment and a source of confinement.
- To explore how the novel portrays internalized colorism, particularly in the narratives of Desiree and Jude.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion concerning race, identity, and colorism in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is largely influenced by the novel as the primary critical text to radically reread the racial identity and colorism in the Black and white societies. The novel by Brit Bennett is a complex plot concerning twins: the very unlike Desiree and Stella Vignes. The author relies upon their lives as a contrasting background to put emphasis on the problem of racial identity. The author, however, highlights that race is a creation and a phenomenon that is handled in social, historical, and psychological factors. Therefore, the literature review tries to unify provocative academic concepts of seemingly dissimilar areas such as race theory, colorism, racial passing, and performative identity, which are combined into a single consistent conversation on the significant topics of *The Vanishing Half* and its connection to the existing racial discourse.

2.1 Racial Passing and the Illusion of Stability

The concept of racial passing lies at the center of *The Vanishing Half*, particularly through Stella Vignes, whose decision to pass as white reveals both the possibilities and contradictions embedded in racial identity. Bennett presents passing not simply as personal deception or social mobility but as a complex negotiation between agency, survival, and self-erasure. In this sense, the novel aligns with longstanding scholarship that treats passing as an ambivalent practice—one that may grant access to privilege while producing profound psychological and ethical costs.

Earlier discussions of racial passing, such as *Passing* by Nella Larsen, foregrounded passing as less an act of betrayal than a strategy shaped by racial oppression. Similarly, Alondra Nelson describes passing as a “mechanism for social mobility,” while also emphasizing that it entails the denial of a fundamental dimension of identity and often results in inner conflict and loss. This tension is central to Stella's

trajectory. Through passing, she gains access to white privilege, safety, and class mobility, yet these benefits are inseparable from secrecy, estrangement, and the suppression of Black identity.

This interpretation is further illuminated by *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, where Elaine K. Ginsberg conceptualizes passing not as unrestricted freedom, but as a performance disciplined by hegemonic norms. Her argument that passing requires the continual enactment of a socially approved racial identity resonates strongly with Stella's experience. Bennett similarly portrays passing as sustained performance rather than liberation, where privilege is obtained only through continuous self-regulation and the risk of exposure. In this way, racial passing in the novel does not transcend racial hierarchy but reveals its contradictions, showing how escape from one form of subordination may entail submission to another.

Bennett complicates conventional understandings of passing further by linking it to racial violence and inherited trauma. This is evident in the passage:

"You were supposed to be safe in Mallard... hidden amongst your own. But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored, and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die..."
(Bennett, 2020, p. 32)

This passage powerfully reinforces that race in the novel operates as a structure of power rather than a biological fact. Mallard, imagined as a protected Black enclave organized around color hierarchy, cannot shield its residents from white supremacist violence. The phrase *"you were still colored"* underscores that racial identity is socially imposed and policed through domination, regardless of community or belonging. The murder of the twins' father reveals race as historically produced through violence, reinforcing a central critical race theory premise that racial categories are sustained through power, surveillance, and exclusion.

Importantly, the quotation also exposes how colorism and racism intersect. The reference to a town *"where nobody married dark"* reveals internal hierarchies shaped by proximity to whiteness, while the intrusion of white violence demonstrates the fragility of such distinctions. Bennett thus shows that colorism operates within Black communities yet remains inseparable from broader structures of racial oppression. Moreover, the image of the Vignes twins as *"tiny girls in funeral dresses"* transforms racial history into inherited trauma, suggesting that identity is shaped not only through performance or choice but also through collective memory and historical violence.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal passing in *The Vanishing Half* as neither simple liberation nor pure deception but as a deeply unstable negotiation shaped by power, performance, and psychic cost. Bennett uses Stella's passing to dismantle the illusion of racial stability, showing race to be not a fixed

essence but a contested social construction—fluid in performance, yet constrained by the enduring structures that produce it.

2.2 Light/Dark Symbolism and Colorism

In addition to addressing the problem of racial passing, *The Vanishing Half* reveals how colorism is used to organize intra-racial discrimination that favors lighter skin in the Black communities and the disempowering of the racial hierarchy. Colorism has become the main issue in the contemporary study of race, as it demonstrates how even minority groups would internalize and prolong systems of racial inequality. A lot of scholars, for instance, Ruth Frankenburg (2016) and Alice Walker (2004), have talked about the fact that colorism is a means to keep social orders that are similar to the racial hierarchies set by white supremacy. Frankenburg would therefore argue that “colorism serves as a reinforcement of the racial order, giving more benefits to lighter-skinned individuals and making those with darker complexions, even within the same racial group, face more challenges” (p. 139).

This understanding of colorism explains how Bennett evaluates Desiree and her daughter Jude. Colorist attitudes that infect their community were revealed when Desiree went back to her hometown, in a totally different way from Stella’s decision to pass. Jude faces social exclusion and discrimination because she arrived into the world with dark skin, which causes people with lighter skin to discriminate against her, and the Black community maintains colorist attitudes that create harmful effects on individual self-perception.

Bennett uses light and dark imagery to show skin tones while she studies how colorism creates major effects that affect social interactions, cultural beliefs, and individual psychological states. The entire book concentrates its narrative on Jude’s personal experiences, which unfold throughout the story. Jude experiences discrimination because people treat her differently due to her skin color. If we take the standard of beauty as a lens, then the fatal spotlight that colorism uses to not only determine the value of the individual but also the value of society is the main cause of Jude’s life.

In *The Vanishing Half*, colorism is depicted as one of the means by which beauty standards are raised to further devalue the already marginalized communities and establish that systemic racism runs deep and is not confined to the Black and White divide. To engage with colorism through Bennett is therefore not just to critique white spaces; her work is an exploration, in many ways, of how race, privilege, and beauty standards intersect within Black communities themselves. Bennett requests that we analyze how these automatic color-based prejudices affect people and their social groups while he starts with a question about Desiree’s connection to Jude. The novel adds important value to modern discussions about color discrimination because it shows how people use their skin color to identify themselves while others use it to discriminate against them in a society that uses race as a social structure.

2.3 Race as a Fluid Construct: Performance and Identity

A key issue that *The Vanishing Half* repeatedly explores is how racial identity is not only something that can be altered but also something that is imposed on individuals through social interaction. Nowadays, race is commonly understood as a social construct rather than a biologically determined reality. This idea of race being both fluid and performative has been deeply examined by critical race theory and feminist theory, the very disciplines that have brought to light scholars like Judith Butler and W. E. B. Du Bois. Butler (1990) presents a view that identity formation for gender and race does not emerge from natural core qualities but develops through social performance patterns that people use to meet society's norms (p. 25). Identity exists as a fluid entity that develops through time because people continuously engage with social systems while they use their personal power to shape their identity.

Bennett bases her theory of performativity to examine racial identity through her analysis of Stella and Desiree, who perform racial roles that oppose yet maintain social conventions. Stella's choice to appear white demonstrates how racial identity functions as an ongoing performance that requires continuous effort to stay within specific social limits. The way Desiree returns to her Black identity after spending time away from her hometown shows that race exists as a performance because she must rediscover the racial identity that she abandoned for her transitional life. Both women agree that society should understand race exists as a changing social construct that people actively shape through their ongoing battle between personal identity and social norms.

The term "double consciousness" is most closely related to the "performative" aspect of racial identity in *The Vanishing Half*. With this addition to the available understanding, it can be seen that Du Bois (1903) defined double consciousness as "the feeling of always seeing oneself through the eyes of others, judging one's inner self by the standard of a world that looks at one with scornful contempt and pity" (p. 2). The concept of the internalized external gaze helps Desiree and Stella understand their life experiences because they constantly think about how others view their racial background. Through her depiction of race as a passing act, Bennett reveals how people understand themselves while dealing with social demands that force them to follow racial expectations.

The Vanishing Half belongs to the ongoing discussion about racial identity complexities, which Du Bois and Butler and modern racial identity scholars' study through their theoretical frameworks and practical applications. The text presents identity as a space where people engage in ongoing battles that history shapes while individuals actively reshape their personal identities. The story follows Bennett as she develops a vital transformation that affects how people discuss racial identity and color discrimination through her literary work, *The Vanishing Half*. The book challenges how people pass as different races while it uses light and dark symbols to show that racial identity remains unchangeable. The research

shows that racial classifications exist as human-made systems that society can reshape because these categories do not exist as natural elements. People develop their understanding of race through their personal experiences, which lead them to various methods of racial expression and self-awareness.

Therefore, this investigation of the novel leads us to consider *The Vanishing Half* not only as a literary work but also as a part of bigger racial and identity discourses and historical and theoretical conversations by recognizing the issues raised by the contemporary scholarship in relation to colorism, racial passing, and the racial construct as something performative. In the end, Bennett's writing takes from its audience the reassuring insight of racial stability: identity is not an inherent one that can be found but rather a complex, disputed area that can be characterized by individual decision and societal forces.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative method to analyze the themes of racial identity, colorism, and the performative nature of race in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. It aimed to examine how Bennett's light/dark imagery, racial passing, and fluidity of racial identity act as novel commentaries upon race as a social construct rather than as a fixed, biological category. In terms of research methodology, following Critical Race Theory (CRT), the research used CRT as a lens for analysis to elicit the socially constructed and performative nature of race and its intersection with power, privilege, and identity.

3.1 Research Design

The paper is a thematic critique of *The Vanishing Half* because it uses CRT to examine how the novel addresses the subject of race, identity, colorism, and racial passing. This paper looks at the symbolic themes of light and dark, the lived experiences of the Vignes sisters, and how they construct, perform, and challenge their racial identities in certain socio-cultural conditions. The primary goal of the present research is to unveil the way in which the novel undermines certain traditional conceptions and assumptions about myth: race as an inherently fixed and biological construct, not to mention the analysis of the psychological, social, and historical dynamics of establishing racial identity. The paper also encompasses an examination of the functionality of colorism within the Black communities as well as a crossover between the Black and the white communities.

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory provides the primary theoretical framework for this study, as it conceptualizes race not as a biological fact but as a socially constructed system embedded in legal, cultural, and institutional power relations. Through this lens, *The Vanishing Half* is analyzed in terms of four interconnected principles: race as a social construct, through which racial identity is assigned,

performed, and negotiated; intersectionality, which reveals how race interacts with class and gender in shaping the experiences of Stella and Desiree; counter-narratives, through which the novel challenges dominant racial discourses by foregrounding marginalized experiences; and colorism as an internalized racial hierarchy that reproduces inequality within and beyond Black communities. Together, these principles provide a critical framework for examining how Bennett represents race as fluid, performative, and shaped by power, privilege, and resistance.

3.3 Data Collection and Textual Analysis

The process of data collection is carried out by the close reading of the novel *The Vanishing Half*, on the basis of which the primary textual analysis will be built around imagery of light/dark, racial passing, and the acting of racial identity as a construction. The research will encompass some passages advocating the arguments on colorism, the mental state of racial passing, and the fluidity of racial identity. As an example, light/dark imagery analysis will comprise the identification of instances or scenes where light/dark imagery is employed to reach the racial identity of the characters and racial privileges and constructs in the society and how the imagery is used to reflect the inner struggles of the characters, the way they interact with each other, and the way they adapt to the societal expectations. This discussion can be extended to the psychological, emotional, and sociological consequences of racial passing, as demonstrated by Stella passing as white and Desiree going back to her Blackness, which is an essential field that CRT helps explain about race as a social construct and discusses the psychological cost of passing.

Additionally, the research will discuss colorism as applied in the novel with special reference to the relationship between Desiree and her daughter Jude and how the dark color of the latter is viewed by both the Black community and society as a whole to emphasize the prevalence of both race and colorism. Lastly, the development of racial identity in a performative form will be analyzed, as well as how the Vignes sisters negotiate their various racial identities and actualize the performative aspect of race in their lives, which is a combination of the performativity theory of Butler and the approach of race as a contested space offered by the Critical Race Theory.

3.4 Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process applies thematic analysis, in which researchers identify and interpret recurring themes in research texts. The research process starts with a complete reading of *The Vanishing Half*, which helps the researcher understand the entire story and its main themes about race and identity and color discrimination. The text receives systematic textual coding after the first exposure because researchers mark some passages, which they then group into categories about light and dark symbolism, racial disguise, skin tone discrimination, and self-presentation of identity. The coded passages show essential recurring themes that match Critical Race Theory (CRT) concepts about racial identity

changes and multiple social identities and skin tone discrimination effects. The novel's fundamental story receives its link to essential theoretical concepts through the study of race creation and the necessity for opposing stories and the way people express their identities. These chosen passages are then synthesized to call out key recurring themes, particularly those aligning with CRT concerning the fluidity of race, intersectionality, and the impact of colorism. The analysis requires additional depth because every discovered theme needs to undergo evaluation against the complete racial history of the United States. The novel presents historical racial issues through its narrative while simultaneously delivering critical evaluations about these enduring social problems. The researcher supports this analysis through secondary sources that study colorism, racial passing, and critical race theory. The research applies CRT to analyze the selected themes by using its fundamental concepts, which include race as a social construct, the need for alternative historical narratives, and the way people demonstrate their sense of self. The novel's main story develops links to essential theoretical perspectives through this analytical method.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Vanishing Half can be analyzed through the prism of Critical Race Theory (CRT) because the gripping novel by Brit Bennett challenges the classical immutable history notion of race as a biological group. In the case of Bennett, however, colorism, racial passing, and activism in conjunction with the performance in question criticize and advocate the dynamically correlated power, privilege, and expectation of race and society. This elaborate part further explores all these thematic areas and how they are represented in the novel to an extent to demonstrate how far they play their part in making up the wider criticism of race as being an identity that is fluid and socially constructed.

4.1 Light/Dark Symbolism as a Reflection of Racial Hierarchies

On the one hand, this symbolic duality of light and dark created by Bennett is meant to refer to the real skin color of characters. On the other hand, the symbolism offers grounds on which the issues of racial hierarchies and the idolization of whiteness may be discussed. The difference between light color and dark color in the novel is used to enhance the criticism of the classification of the degree of race and its importance in the social stratification of America.

4.2 Desiree and Stella's Contrasting Choices

The twin sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes chose completely different paths for their lives, which serves as the most apparent bright side/dark side symbolism in *The Vanishing Half*. Stella demonstrates through her white woman identity how American society grants automatic benefits to people who appear white. Light skin functions as a social marker that allows people to access material wealth and personal safety while opening various other life opportunities. Stella uses a white identity to break free

from the racial limits that Black people face, but she must carry heavy mental and emotional weight because she needs to maintain her fake identity and hide her true heritage while she remains hidden from others. Stella's ability to pass requires her to accept a complete set of beliefs, which forces her to forget her Black heritage while she separates herself from her family members and denies all relations to her racial background.

The desire to pass here is not flattering for Stella but rather a prison. She moves through life with ease because she avoids the institutionalized oppression that Black people face in their daily lives. The person faces an ongoing severe fear that controls their entire existence because they worry about their identity exposure, they dread losing their bond with their origin, and they fear the mental damage that would result from their ongoing deception. She can pass as a white woman with her lighter skin, but the act of doing so requires Stella to put aside any semblance of her true self, engendering a false and fragile identity dependent on endless acts of performance.

On the other hand, Desiree's skin is significantly darker than that of a typical Black person, and this makes her most definitely not one of those people who get all the benefits of being white. The way she proves herself as a Black woman through her decision to return to her hometown with Jude, who has dark skin, makes her completely different from Stella's character. Desiree's Blackness is one she could never hide or change; hence, she experiences the social consequences of it in ways Stella never has to. And Desiree's darker skin veers too deeply into a grounded sense of connection to her community, history, and heritage. This, while more tenuous in a racial hierarchy, allows her to maintain her ground in the eyes of a world that frowns upon individuals who dare to deviate from conformity.

4.3 Colorism as Internalized Racial Hierarchy

Bennett presents colorism in *The Vanishing Half* as an internalized racial hierarchy through which ideas of beauty, value, and social mobility become structured around proximity to whiteness. Rather than treating colorism as separate from racism, the novel reveals it as one of its internal extensions, operating both within Black communities and through broader systems of power. Through the experiences of Desiree and Jude, Bennett demonstrates how skin tone functions not merely as physical difference but as a social marker shaping belonging, exclusion, and access.

This critique emerges early in the novel through the observation that “Maybe she would have been able to endure all this if it weren't for everyone's obsession with lightness...” (Bennett, 2020, p. 11). The phrase “obsession with lightness” exposes colorism as rooted in internalized white supremacist values, where lighter skin is associated with desirability, safety, and social worth. Bennett further critiques the irrational myths surrounding skin tone—beliefs that ordinary acts such as drinking coffee during

pregnancy might darken a child's complexion—to reveal how racial ideology penetrates everyday thought and bodily perception.

Yet the quotation also complicates colorism by situating it within the larger violence of racism. The turning point—“none of that mattered when the white men came for him”—suggests that distinctions of shade ultimately collapse before the realities of white racial violence. In this sense, Bennett demonstrates that colorism may structure intraracial relations, but it remains inseparable from the broader racial order that produces it. “Lightness” therefore functions not only as a marker of complexion but also as a metaphor for privilege, aspiration, and social value, even as the novel exposes the fragility of those associations.

This internalized hierarchy is further reflected in social and economic structures where lightness becomes linked to opportunity and acceptance. Bennett captures this in the passage: “An office like that would never hire a colored girl...” (Bennett, 2020, p. 52), where racial passing is framed as a response to exclusion embedded within labor and class relations. Here, color becomes a condition of employability and mobility, reinforcing how racial hierarchy operates through both structural discrimination and internalized ideals.

These dynamics are also embodied in Jude's experiences. As a dark-skinned Black girl, Jude encounters exclusion not only from dominant racial structures but also through colorist attitudes within her own community. Her marginalization reveals how colorism reproduces unequal distributions of affection, recognition, and social legitimacy, where darker skin is associated with diminished value. Through Jude, Bennett exposes colorism as both a symptom of systemic racism and a mechanism through which racial inequality is reproduced.

Taken together, these representations show that colorism in *The Vanishing Half* is not merely a secondary theme but a critical mode through which the novel interrogates racial hierarchy itself. By linking interracial prejudice, structural inequality, and symbolic light/dark imagery, Bennett challenges the assumption of race as a stable or natural category and instead reveals how hierarchies of color are socially produced, historically sustained, and psychologically internalized.

4.4 Racial Passing: Agency and Entrapment

One of the central themes in *The Vanishing Half* is the complex relationship between racial passing, identity, and class privilege, particularly as embodied in Stella Vignes. Through Stella's decision to pass as white, Bennett reveals racial passing as both a strategy of agency and a condition of entrapment. On one level, passing offers access to the material and social privileges associated with whiteness—economic security, social mobility, and protection from racial discrimination—privileges historically

denied to Black women. In this sense, Stella’s passing can be read as an act of agency shaped by survival within a racially stratified society.

Yet Bennett simultaneously exposes the psychological and existential costs of this apparent empowerment. Stella’s constructed white identity depends upon concealment, self-erasure, and the continuous performance of an imposed social role, transforming privilege into a form of confinement. Her experience illustrates a key Critical Race Theory premise: race is not a fixed biological essence but a socially produced category sustained through power relations and performative norms. Stella’s “shadow life,” therefore, demonstrates how racial identity is negotiated within structures of domination, where the pursuit of privilege may also produce alienation, fragmentation, and loss of self.

To synthesize these tensions, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model, developed in Microsoft Excel, that maps the study’s theoretical lens, thematic concerns, and character dynamics. Positioned at the center, Critical Race Theory (CRT) functions as the analytical framework through which race is examined as socially constructed and embedded in hierarchies of power. The model visualizes two interconnected dynamics. First, it captures the duality of racial passing through Stella’s experience, where agency and social privilege coexist with entrapment and psychological dislocation. Second, it represents colorism and racial hierarchy as intersecting mechanisms through which color operates as both a social marker and a structure of inequality, particularly shaping the experiences of Desiree and Jude. Together, these interrelated dynamics reinforce the novel’s critique of race as fluid, performative, and inseparable from broader structures of privilege and exclusion.

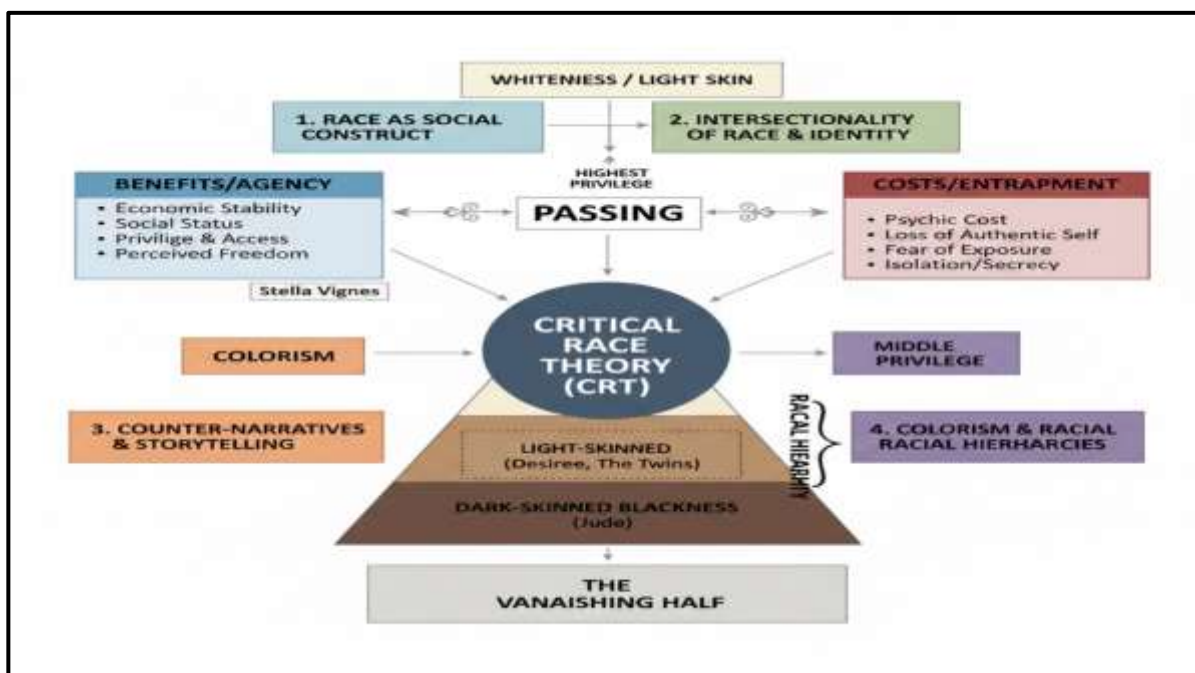


Figure 1: The Dual Dynamics of Racial Passing (Stella Vignes)

The model is a powerful visual image that supports the main finding of the study: *The Vanishing Half* disenchant the idea of the race as a fixed biological category and instead shows it as a fluid, performative, and socially constructed identity. How the characters in the novel experience the transition between the central CRT lens and their various experiences (which are the light-skin privilege of Stella and the dark-skin experiences of Desiree and Jude) is one of the methods of demonstrating how power and social perception impact the individual's identity and the conditions of their lives. Ultimately, the character acts as a reminder of the instrumental use of light and darkness and symbols as the core of the criticism of these fixed racial depositions and the uncovering of the emotional upkeep of wayfinding in a highly racialized world.

4.5 Stella's Performance of Whiteness

Bennett presents Stella's passing as white not merely as an individual act of concealment but as an extended performance through which race itself is exposed as socially constructed and performative. Stella's movement into whiteness grants her access to privilege, security, and social mobility, yet this transformation depends not on any essential change in identity but on the successful enactment of socially recognizable codes of whiteness. As the novel pointedly states, "All there was to being white was acting like you were" (Bennett, 2020, p. 63). This deceptively simple statement is central to understanding Bennett's critique of race, as it destabilizes whiteness as a natural category and instead frames it as a rehearsed social performance.

The quotation underscores a key argument of this study: whiteness in the novel functions less as an ontological condition than as a role sustained through repetition, behavior, and social legibility. Stella's passing therefore reveals the fragility of racial categories themselves. If whiteness can be performed, then racial boundaries are neither fixed nor inherent but maintained through social recognition and power. In this sense, Stella's passing becomes more than personal deception; it exposes the fiction through which racial identity is constructed.

Yet Bennett complicates this apparent fluidity by showing that performance comes at profound psychological cost. Stella's white identity is not a single act of transformation but a continuous process of self-regulation, requiring constant attention to speech, behavior, relationships, and social positioning. She must repeatedly reproduce the codes of whiteness in order to sustain her place within it. This performance is therefore deeply exhausting, suspending her between a Black past she suppresses and a white identity she can never fully inhabit without anxiety. The result is a profound psychological division that intensifies her internal conflict.

In this respect, Stella's passing cannot be read simply as empowerment. Although it appears to offer agency, that agency is constrained by the very racial order it seeks to navigate. Her access to privilege depends upon ongoing self-erasure and remains vulnerable to exposure, making whiteness less a stable achievement than a precarious condition of survival. Bennett thus presents passing as adaptation rather than liberation, revealing both the possibilities and limits of mobility across racial boundaries.

Moreover, the irony of the statement "acting like you were" lies in its apparent simplicity. While it implies that whiteness may be performed with ease, Stella's experience reveals the immense psychological labor such performance demands. This paradox captures one of the novel's central insights: racial passing may offer agency, but it also produces entrapment. Through Stella, Bennett demonstrates that race operates through performance, yet that performance remains governed by structures of surveillance, privilege, and exclusion.

Ultimately, Stella's performance of whiteness reinforces the novel's broader critique of race as fluid, socially coded, and sustained through repetition rather than biology. By exposing whiteness as performative while revealing the emotional cost of inhabiting it, Bennett challenges essentialist understandings of racial identity and foregrounds race as a contested social construction.

4.6 Agency and the Costs of Assimilation

Although Stella's passing grants access to privilege, mobility, and social protection, Bennett makes clear that these gains come at profound psychological and emotional cost. The most significant consequence of assimilation is the fragmentation of identity produced through the suppression of Stella's Blackness. Her chosen whiteness requires continual concealment, distancing her from family, cultural memory, and communal belonging, while subjecting her to the persistent fear of exposure. What appears outwardly as social advancement is therefore marked internally by alienation, anxiety, and the gradual erosion of selfhood.

Through Stella's experience, the novel complicates any reading of passing as uncomplicated empowerment. Assimilation may provide temporary access to dominant structures of privilege, yet it simultaneously demands self-denial and generates emotional disintegration. Bennett thus portrays passing not as liberation, but as a precarious negotiation in which acceptance is purchased at the cost of authenticity.

This tension aligns with critical race theory's argument that race is not a fixed biological fact but a socially constructed category shaped through power, ideology, and performance. While racial identity may appear mutable or strategically negotiable, *The Vanishing Half* demonstrates that such negotiation carries profound consequences. Stella's experience reveals that movement across racial boundaries does not transcend racial structures; rather, it often reinscribes them by forcing the subject into continual

performance and psychic division. In this sense, the novel exposes the paradox of assimilation: what promises agency may simultaneously produce entrapment, revealing the emotional and ethical costs of seeking belonging through the denial of one's own identity.

4.7 Identity as a Performative Act: The Fluidity of Race

Bennett presents race in *The Vanishing Half* not as a fixed biological essence but as a performative and socially mediated construct shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological forces. This perspective aligns closely with critical race theory, which conceptualizes race as dynamic rather than natural, produced through discourse, power relations, and social practice. Within the novel, identity emerges as fluid and continually negotiated, as characters reshape and contest their sense of self in response to racial boundaries imposed by society.

This performative dimension of identity is most clearly embodied in Stella and Desiree, whose divergent life choices reveal different negotiations with racial identity. Stella performs whiteness as a strategic social identity, adopting the behaviors, codes, and privileges associated with white society while suppressing her Black heritage. Her passing demonstrates that race operates not simply as inherited status but as a socially legible performance sustained through repetition and surveillance. Yet this performance also exposes the instability of racial categories, since Stella's ability to cross those boundaries undermines the assumption of race as fixed or essential.

By contrast, Desiree's return to her Black identity represents another mode of negotiating racial performance—one rooted not in passing, but in affirming identity within structures of exclusion. Her Blackness is not portrayed as a static essence but as a lived and continually asserted position shaped by resistance, memory, and belonging. Together, Stella and Desiree illustrate that racial identity is neither singular nor immutable; rather, it is produced through ongoing interaction between personal agency and social constraint.

This fluidity of identity also resonates with the concept of double consciousness, as both sisters navigate the tension between self-perception and the racial meanings imposed upon them by others. Their experiences reveal race as a contested field in which identity is enacted, monitored, and renegotiated across time and circumstance. Whether through Stella's assimilation into whiteness or Desiree's insistence on Black self-definition, Bennett demonstrates that race is constituted through performance rather than determined by biological fact.

Ultimately, the novel destabilizes essentialist understandings of race by showing that racial categories are sustained through social norms yet remain open to challenge and reconfiguration. Through the contrasting trajectories of Stella and Desiree, *The Vanishing Half* presents identity as fluid, relational, and performative, reinforcing the study's broader argument that race is a social construct continually shaped through power, perception, and lived experience.

4.8 Jude's Struggle with Identity

The life of Jude in *The Vanishing Half* is a good illustration of how race, like other ideas, is enacted (according to a particular stance) with its attendant (sub)hierarchies in the larger hierarchy of the racial one. Specifically, the fact that Jude is of dark skin makes her an exotic Black beauty, which, in its turn, makes her vulnerable to exclusion and rejection by society. The performance of race functions as a narrative through which, in the course of her struggle, she is able to create a sense of belonging in both Black and white spaces. Jude must, as a matter of necessity, address the issue of her identity in contrast to the perceptions of the outside world and societal pressures on her. She has to act out her Blackness in a world that frowns upon her and internalize her value in a society that continues placing the light-skinned at the forefront.

The road of Jude is about going around in a world where race is the defining factor in most of its aspects. The issue of race has not been a pure category in her life but the norms in the dynamics of oneself in an atomized society. Lacking self-acceptance, strongly pointed out in the vain attempt at escaping reality by Jude, is now somewhere she fits and therefore creates the impression of how race functions, a socially constructed identity that cannot be merely attached or reduced to physical characteristics.

4.9 Race as a Fluid, Socially Constructed Identity

The analysis demonstrates that *The Vanishing Half* fundamentally challenges essentialist understandings of race by representing racial identity not as a fixed biological fact but as a fluid and socially constructed phenomenon shaped by power, perception, and historical conditions. Through the contrasting experiences of Stella, Desiree, and Jude, Bennett reveals race as a contested and performative process, continuously negotiated within structures of privilege, exclusion, and social expectation.

A major finding of this study is that the novel critiques racial hierarchy through interconnected representations of racial passing, colorism, and light/dark symbolism. Stella's passing exposes the paradox of race as both socially enforced and performatively unstable: while racial categories appear rigid, her movement across them reveals their constructed nature. At the same time, her experience demonstrates that such mobility is constrained by psychological fragmentation and the pressures of continual self-performance. Similarly, the experiences of Desiree and Jude reveal how colorism

operates within and beyond Black communities as a mechanism through which racial hierarchies are reproduced and internalized.

The findings further show that Bennett presents race as inseparable from broader systems of power. Rather than treating identity as innate or singular, the novel portrays it as relational and dynamic, shaped through negotiation between personal agency and social structures. In this respect, the narrative aligns with critical race theory by exposing race as a product of historical and institutional forces rather than biological determinism.

Overall, the study finds that *The Vanishing Half* destabilizes binary conceptions of race and reimagines identity as fluid, performative, and socially mediated. Through its engagement with passing, colorism, and symbolic imagery, the novel critiques the illusion of racial fixity and invites a more complex understanding of race as lived experience, social construction, and contested terrain.

5. CONCLUSION

The Vanishing Half critically examines race, identity, and colorism by challenging the notion of race as a fixed biological category and presenting it instead as a socially constructed, performative, and contested phenomenon. Through the contrasting experiences of Stella, Desiree, and Jude, the novel explores racial passing, interracial color hierarchies, and the psychological tensions produced by assimilation, privilege, and self-erasure. Bennett's use of light/dark symbolism further exposes how colorism reinforces social hierarchies and shapes perceptions of beauty, belonging, and exclusion.

Although existing scholarship on *The Vanishing Half* has examined racial passing, colorism, and identity, limited attention has been paid to how these dimensions operate together through light/dark symbolism and performative identity within a unified Critical Race Theory framework. Addressing this gap, this study contributes an integrated reading of the novel by showing how racial passing, colorism, and symbolic imagery function as interconnected mechanisms through which race is socially constructed, negotiated, and contested. Through this lens, the analysis demonstrates that racial identity is shaped through the interaction of individual agency, historical violence, and institutional power, while Bennett's treatment of light and darkness operates not merely as aesthetic imagery but as an ideological system that critiques racial hierarchy and destabilizes essentialist notions of identity. In doing so, this study extends current scholarship by arguing that *The Vanishing Half* reimagines race as fluid, performative, and socially mediated, offering a broader contribution to contemporary debates on race, visibility, and resistance in literary studies.

DISCLAIMER

The article has not been previously presented or published, and is not part of a thesis project.

Conflict of Interest

There are no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript

REFERENCES

- Bennett, (B). (2020). *The vanishing half*. Riverhead Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1994) *The souls of Black folk*. Dover Publications. (Originally published in 1952)
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press. (Originally published in 1952)
- Ferguson, R. A. (2004). *Aberrations in black: Toward a queer of color critique*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Frankenburg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ginsberg, E. K. (Ed.). (1996). *Passing and the fictions of identity*. Duke University Press.
- Larsen, N. (1929). *Passing*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Nelson, A. (2015). The social Life of DNA: Race, reparations, and reconciliation after the genome. *Social Text*, 33(4),221–234.
- Saeed, N. M., & Shamsan, B. T. (2025). Portrayal of Postcolonial Afghanistan and Postcolonial Themes of Identity, Displacement, and Cultural Conflict in *The Kite Runner*. *مجلة العلوم التربوية و الدراسات الإنسانية*, (46), 905-931
- Shamsan, B. T., & Saeed, N. M. (2025). Exploring the Role of symbolism in Reflecting the Social and Culture Values in M. Moustadraf's *Blood Feast*. *Journal of Social Studies*, 31(1).
- Walker, A. (2004). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.