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**The Politics of Racial Identity: A Critical Race  
Reading of Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half***

Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree in  
**Literature and Civilisation**

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## **Declaration**

We hereby declare that this thesis is our own work and that, it contains no material previously published or written by another person and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment.

Ms. Cheyma ALLAL & Ms. Amani KHODJA

Signature:

## **Dedication**

To my dear father, my safe haven and source of happiness.

To my beloved mother, may God bless her soul and grant her a place in Paradise.

To all my sisters, who filled my mother's place, when I needed them most. Without their support and affection, I would not be here today.

To my cherished brothers, forever my source of strength and support.

To the family's eldest granddaughter and my lifelong friend, Heba.

To the most gentle and loving spirit I love deeply, Nada

to the bright lights that fill our house with joy and happiness. Mohamed, Islam, Muneeb, Balsam, and Lina.

And To my precious friend and partner in this work Amani...

Cheyma.

## Dedication

To my father, Khodja Lakhdar—your quiet strength, steady support, and silent sacrifices were the backbone of this journey.

To my mother, Aissi S.—your love, prayers, and tireless devotion were the light that never faded.

To my grandmothers—sources of grace and whispered prayers that carried me forward.

To my brothers—your presence, though often silent, gave me the comfort and courage I needed.

To my entire family—thank you for always being there.

To those who stood behind me in silence—whose names were never spoken, but whose impact shaped every step—your unseen kindness lives in every word of this work.

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## Abstract

With a focus on racial passing and colorism as expressions of systemic racism, this dissertation examines how racial identity is developed and negotiated in Brit Bennett's 2020 novel *The Vanishing Half*. By choosing different identities, the characters—especially twin sisters Stella and Desiree Vignes—confront oppressive racial systems. Stella chooses to pass as a white woman and fit in with white society, whereas Desiree embraces her Black identity and maintains ties to her community. Through the seminal works of Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, this Critical Race Theory-based study investigates the ways in which race, identity, and power intersect in the story. Set against the socio-historical backdrop of twentieth-century America, the novel sheds light on the psychological and political effects of racial passing, emphasizing how whiteness is linked to privilege and exclusion is associated with whiteness. Racial identity in the novel is dynamic, as the analysis demonstrates. It varies according to the situation, is influenced by people's actions, and is closely linked to power and politics. In the end, this study hopes to contribute to African American literary criticism by demonstrating how Bennett uses the concept of racial passing to give Black women more control over their lives while also clearly criticizing the ongoing racism in society.

**Key Words:** Critical Race Theory, racial identity, colorism, racial passing, Black women, African Americans.

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# ***GENERAL INTRODUCTION***

### **General Introduction**

From the historical age of racial segregation to contemporary discussions about racial identity, literature has progressively examined the notions of colorism and racial passing shedding light on the psychological and emotional outcomes of these occurrences. Since enslavement, many African Americans in the United States have been affected by institutional racism and continue to suffer from trauma due to health inequities, economic hardships, and segregation. For nearly a century, the United States government legally classified African Americans as property. For nearly one hundred years after the end of slavery following the abolition of slavery, regulations were implemented with the stated intention of rendering social interaction between Whites and African Americans unlawful.

As a result of their experiences with oppression in this society, the idea of race has historically been significant in the lives of African Americans. In fact, race is a socially constructed idea that serves as the defining feature for membership in the African American group. This does not diminish the significance of both traditional African and African American cultures in shaping racial identity among African Americans. Nonetheless, the somewhat random classification of people into this racial category by American society has led to the psychological cohesion of numerous individuals who greatly differ in their experiences and cultural expressions.

The fact that the experiences of African Americans are heterogeneous has led to differences in the importance and qualitative interpretation they assign to their identity as members of the Black racial group. For instance, certain individuals regard race as having minimal importance in shaping their identity, whereas others might view their racial identity as the central aspect of their self-concept. Even when people assign similarly great importance to race in their self-definition, they can vary greatly in their interpretations of what being Black entails. One person might think that being Black involves associating with other

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Blacks, whereas another might feel that being Black entails mingling with Whites. The importance and interpretation that African Americans attach to race in shaping their self-identity is what we call racial identity.

Brit Bennett is considered one of the most significant voices in contemporary literature particularly the African-American works, who has gained extensive acknowledgement in recent years for her literary contributions. She was born in the southern California town of Oceanside, and was inspired to write at a young age. When she began brainstorming ideas for her future novels while still at high school, she was mainly engaged with the ongoing struggles of racial identity, familial legacies, and the challenges faced by black peoples within segregated communities.

In 2020, Brit Bennett published her second novel *The Vanishing Half*, which is both a holding piece of fiction and a powerful social commentary examining the choices of twin sisters Desiree and Stella, whose lives are determined by their differing perspectives of race. It is a deeply American story, engaged with a country's racist past and present, while interrogative of its foundational values, like choice and legacy.

Bennett's storytelling is deeply moving, as she has investigated the psychological burden of living in a racially segregated society. Unlike several other works, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) successfully captures the issues of identity, privilege, and belonging, winning both critical acclaim and public popularity. Bennett's outstanding ability to weave personal and societal challenges into her characters' stories, provides readers with compelling and often heart-breaking investigation of how race and skin tone continue to impact lives and identities in America. The novel offers not only a narrative but also a subtle reflection on the continuing reality of racial relations and the yearning for belonging, making it an important contributions to African American literature.

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Through the lives of the Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, Bennett captures the complexities of identity, race and the profound impact of personal choices. She carefully examines how societal expectations and systemic racism shape individuals' paths exploring themes of colorism, racial passing and their impact on black identity. More specifically, in Mallard, the fictional town in *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett writes, "was a strange town" (09) which symbolizes the deeply created colorism and fascination with lighter skin. It is a place where an individual's worth is determined by the lightness of their skin, continuing a cycle of internalized racism and exclusion. As a result, the dark-skinned twin sisters, Desiree and Stella, each with hopes and dreams, find the town's expectations and harsh environment unbearable, leading them to escape in search of freedom and a better life outside of Mallard.

However, their decision to leave Mallard marks a watershed moment in their lives, as each twin takes a dramatically different course. On the one hand, Desiree reclaims her Black identity, embracing her roots and heritage. Stella, on the other hand, makes the contentious decision to pass as white in order to gain status and opportunity, even if it means cutting ties with her past. Finally, these diverse pathways demonstrate the long-term impact of Mallard's principles on their identities and relationships, emphasizing the town's role in creating their lives.

Therefore, this research will seek to demonstrate the prevalent perceptions of the darker-skinned twin sisters in society and the influence of racial passing and colorism as social constructs. The selection of Critical Race Theory as the theoretical lens will provide a framework for discussing related themes such as the formation of Black identity, the social and psychological consequences of colorism, and the impact of racial passing on the lives and relationships of Black individuals in *The Vanishing Half* (2020).

This intricate history of racial identity development has led to a profound psychological and social conflict, described by Du Bois in his groundbreaking work *The Souls of Black Folk*

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(1903) as “Double Consciousness”. It is a social notion that initially referred to an interior "twoness" that African-Americans allegedly experienced as a result of their racialized oppression and devaluation in a white-dominated society. Du Bois defines double consciousness as being forced to see oneself not just through one's own eyes, but also through whites' racially biased spectacles, resulting in a contradictory and fractured identity.

By emphasizing the presence of this second-sight in an ‘American world’ that offers black individuals ‘no genuine self-awareness’, Du Bois highlights a nation that has betrayed its pledges of freedom and refuge by relentlessly shutting the golden door in front of black people. By preventing African Americans from viewing themselves through their own unbiased perspectives, this American society deprives them of their ‘true-consciousness’ or identity, which ultimately leads to their inability to integrate successfully. Ultimately, the idea of double consciousness captures the ongoing conflict between how one sees oneself and how one is perceived racially by others, highlighting the continual intricacies of African American identity within a historical context influenced by systemic marginalization and cultural defiance.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) has earned significant scholarly attention because of its exploration of race, identity and the quest for belonging. For instance, Mónica Morgado's article "Colorism, Passing for White, and Intertextuality in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: Rewriting African American women's literary traditions" compared earlier works written by twentieth century African American women writers highlighting Bennett's intertextual influences which include: "*Nella Larsen's Passing (1929)*, *Zora Neal Hurston's Their Eyes were Watching God (1937)* , and *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970)* , *Sula (1937)* and *God Help the Child (2015)*".

The study explores the intersections of race, identity, and social expectations, focusing on Bennett's reworking of the passing narrative and her challenging of stereotypes about black

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women. As Bennett revises previous literary works, not only she recovers tragic female characters such as "Pecola Breedlove" and "Clare Kendry", but also emphasizes the destruction of colorism and white passing on contemporary world. Bennett explores complicated problems of racial identity by adopting the passing narrative, defying the stereotypes associated with black women that have previously dominated literary traditions. Finally, through intertextual connections and the exploration of colorism, García Morgado argues that *The Vanishing Half* proposes a fresh path for contemporary African American fiction while continuing the legacy of African American women's literary voices.

Another study on Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) conducted by Rachad Mohammed Moqbel Al Arqi, entitled "Race and Identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*", critically analyzes the themes of race and identity through the lives of identical twin sisters Stella and Desiree as well as their subsequent generations. It explores the twin's choices to embrace or dismiss their Black identity, analyzing the social, cultural, and individual factors that affect their decisions. The study investigates how racial hierarchies and societal expectations force the sisters to manage their identities in various ways, Stella passing as white to acquire advantage and Desiree embracing her Black identity despite challenges. Moreover, the article emphasizes the emotional and cultural longing for their roots that continues despite their divergent paths, demonstrating how their actions affect not just their own lives but also those of their daughters, Kennedy and Jude. It sheds light on how race and identity are transferred and modified between generations, focusing on the conflict between personal freedom and societal limits.

Racial identity has always been a complicated and intergenerational issue, shaped by changing social policies and cultural shifts. Brit Bennett highlights this complexity in her novel, *The Vanishing Half*, by exploring the concept of "racial passing" from a modern perspective, not just as a matter of deception or escape, but also as a profound psychological

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and social dimension of the act. While previous research has examined the novel through the lens of traditional racism and belonging, it has not sufficiently addressed how Bennett critiques modern racial identity politics through critical race theory (CRT), particularly in relation to the generational struggle over identity and belonging.

This study seeks to close this gap by analyzing the novel through the lens of Derek Bell's concepts, such as racial realism, which sees racism as a permanent, deeply rooted structure in American society rather than a flaw that can be fixed. The solution is to confront reality and devise strategies to mitigate its effects, rather than to eliminate it entirely. This is evident from Stella's experience. When she decides to live as a white woman, she is not motivated solely by a desire to deceive, but rather by the belief that it is the only way to secure a better life in a world that does not provide Black people with equal opportunities. Even after becoming "white," she never felt completely safe and was always concerned that her secret would be discovered. In contrast, her white-raised daughter, Kennedy, rejects any connection to her Black roots. Bennett demonstrates that racism is not simply an idea that can be avoided, but rather a reality that imposes itself on individuals no matter how hard they try to overcome it. It also reflects the generational divide in attitudes toward identity and belonging.

Regarding the concept of interest convergence, Bell explains that whites only support Black causes when they benefit their own personal interests. This is evident in the novel, where Loretta Walker's Black family is rejected by their white neighbors, highlighting how minorities can only achieve rights and equality by aligning with the interests of dominant groups. This is in contrast to Jude, Desiree's daughter, who grew up completely aware of her Black identity. When she meets her cousin Kennedy, who denies having any Black ancestry, she is confronted with different ideas about race and belonging. The generational conflict is clearly visible here, as the novel reflects how identity is not simply a personal choice, but

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rather the result of social and historical pressures that determine who is allowed to pass and who is forced to marginalize.

By highlighting Bennett's ability to combine literary narrative with incisive social critique, this analysis shows that generational conflict is a process by which each generation reinterprets its identity in light of the social and political contexts in which it is raised rather than just a matter of disparate experiences. The scholarly discussion surrounding the book will be broadened by this new analysis, which shows how Bennett shows that shifts in racial and identity politics result from a balance of power and interests among various groups rather than from a sincere desire for equality.

This dissertation seeks to provide answers to the following main question: How does Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* address the politics of racial identity through the experiences of the Vignes twins, and what do their distinct paths reveal about race and identity in society? In order to answer this question, this study will attempt to answer to the following subquestions: How do Desiree and Stella's differing experiences show the impact of racial inheritance on personal identity and familial relationships? How does colorism influence the characters' lives and decisions, and how does it relate to societal expectations in the novel?

This study seeks to examine the politics surrounding racial identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, concentrating on the journeys of the Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, as they deal with issues of race, privilege, and power. The study aims to shed light on how their choices about racial passing and identity development influence their emotional and psychological well-being, especially in family and community settings. Through the application of Critical Race Theory, this study critiques the systemic structures that perpetuate colorism, racial inequality, and segregation. A key objective is to examine the influence of societal and cultural factors on identity formation and the fragmentation of communities. Furthermore, the

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study emphasizes the exploration of generational struggles with identity and belonging, showcasing how Bennett addresses the enduring effects of racism and systemic discrimination on individual and collective lives.

This research seeks to depict, examine and elucidate Bennett's representation of racial identity politics through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which is a framework that provides an innovative perspective to confront and understand racial inequity in contemporary society. CRT theorists aim to reveal the different methods through which racism and inequality are upheld as standard, while also providing insights on how to tackle the roots of racism in America.

An essential idea of Critical Race Theory is the "social construction" of race, contending that racial classifications are products of society rather than biological realities. These classifications do not represent any inherent or lasting characteristics and are influenced by social and political beliefs that change over time.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges the conventional civil rights discussions and Critical Legal Studies (CLS). The foundational figure often credited with launching CRT is Derrick Bell who emphasizes "racial realism" and advocates for racial equality, justice, and changes in U.S. civil rights legislation. Nonetheless, Bell argued that CRT did not provide a thorough examination of race. He suggested that racism is deeply rooted in American culture and that racial advancement only takes place when it coincides with white interests, leading CRT to expand its examination beyond merely legal factors.

In his book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), Bell asserts that racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of American society. He argues that racism is not a curable aberration, and that racial problems grow more intractable with time. Bell believes that black people will never gain full equality in the country and that racism lies at the center of American life.

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Bell has argued since at least 1980 that racial change occurs only as a matter of “interest convergence,” meaning that the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites. The interest-convergence thesis by Bell argues that the progress of blacks in the courts and society has not advanced but been stymied. This thesis suggests that whites at the economic bottom may have sought alliance with blacks in similar conditions, but this has not occurred. Instead, whites at the economic bottom identify with whites at the economic top and blame blacks of a class similar to their own as the source of their problem.

The power of whiteness as a property right is an essential element of American social stability. Barriers to moving beyond reliance on an out-group for social stability are monumental in a nation where whites of widely divergent stations are able to make common cause through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom. No other aspect of social functioning has retained its viability and value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day.

The study contributes to literary discussions about the representation of Black women by focusing on the twins’ experiences. Bennett presents “*The Vanishing Half*” as a counterpoint to the dominant racist discourse, demonstrating how literature can question social norms.

Critical race theory (CRT) is also applied to a contemporary novel in this study, which adds to the critique of African American literature. By doing this, it emphasizes how literature can be viewed through a lens to investigate social constructions of identity and systemic racism.

This study uses race-critical theory to examine *The Vanishing Half* and how literature can be used to combat racial injustice. Bennett’s novel not only tells the story of the twins, but it also exposes the artificial nature of race, criticizes the systemic barriers that Black people

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face, and reaffirms the power of storytelling in dismantling oppressive racial ideologies. In doing so, *The Vanishing Half* emerges as a powerful literary contribution that both reflects on and critiques America's ongoing racial struggles.

This dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical framework for this research, it focuses on exploring fundamental ideas and theoretical perspectives connected to racial identity, colorism, and racial passing. It starts by examining the history and meaning of racial identity, highlighting the concept of race as a social and political construct. Following that, the topic of colorism is addressed along with how it differs from racism and its effects on society and mental health. The chapter continues with an examination of racial passing, providing historical background and addressing the reasons behind it, like survival, social advancement, and the quest for liberty. In the concluding parts, the chapter presents Critical Race Theory as the main analytical framework for the research.

The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half*. It focuses on the experiences of the Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, and how their differing racial decisions influence their identities and destinies in life. In this chapter Critical Race Theory is applied, to examine how these issues are portrayed in the novel, specifically the ideas of race as a politically and social construct, the psychological and social consequences of colorism, and the intricacies of racial passing. The study also takes consideration of Bennett's critique of racial essentialism and emphasizes the long-term effects on individuals and generations of navigating a racially hierarchical society.

# ***CHAPTER ONE***

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

*“There is no mystery as to why after all these years of black resistance to white racism, skin-color politics continues to be a negative force in our lives. White-supremacist thinking about color is so embedded in every aspect of contemporary life that we are daily bombarded in the mass media with images that suggest blackness is not beautiful”* (Norwood 598).

Skin tone is a deeply rooted concern within the African American community. African Americans are evaluated by the shade of their skin and subsequently placed into categories relating to lighter skin or darker skin. Although skin tones differ among African Americans, they are generally classified into two groups: light-skinned and dark-skinned. Researchers have noted that colorism remains a source of division within the African American community, despite African Americans surmounting numerous racial obstacles.

As a result, this led them to turn to alternative approaches to eliminate limitations associated with their ethnicity and to escape the inequity of racial bias via racial passing. They resorted to this method because being part of a white community was viewed as an advancement towards belonging to the exclusive community. They realized that passing allows them to enjoy freedom that would otherwise be denied due to racial prejudice.

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the research, emphasizing the ideas of racial identity, colorism, and racial passing. It emphasizes the social construction of race, the impact of colorism on people and communities, and the complicated identity challenges that passing creates. These concepts are explored using the framework of Critical Race Theory in preparation for the analysis of *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett in the next chapter.

### **1.1. Definition and History of Racial Identity**

The history of racial identification started from the European colonization of North America and lasted to the twenty-first century. Racial identity and racial group membership

became important components of psychosocial identity because of the American culture's emphasis on individual identity and identity politics. The experience of living as a "racialized" human being in the United States, and the daily experience of seeing and being seen through the lens of race, connects the macro level of public policy to the micro level of individual identity. In psychological literature reviews, the concept of racial identity along with its theories and models emerged since the 1970s, and they were developed in response to the civil rights movement. The first racial identity models were centered on Black American racial identity. Clemmont Eyvind Vontress, for example, proposed three personality types for Black Americans: Colored, Negro, and Black. This model claims societal stereotypes and postulated that these people's personalities are fixed (Cited in Bettayeb 17-18).

Racial identity has been defined by a number of theorists and researchers. Janet E. Helms defined the construct as a sense of collective identity which is perceived from a common heritage with a racial group (Taub & McEwen 199 ). Helms' definition of racial identity incorporated perceptions of "self and others". As a dynamic sociopolitical construction, racial identity can be useful in understanding intra-group differences between people of different races. Hence, racial identity development is pertinent to all racial groups and includes a person's perspective on him or herself in reference to his or her own racial group and other racial groups. In combining the racial identity literature, it has been shown that racial identity is a multifaceted construct. It refers to four categories: the qualitative meaning one attributes to his or her racial group; meaning attributed to other racial groups; sense of group identification with one's own racial group; defining one's self-concept in the context of race salience, and perspectives regarding long-term race (Bettayeb 18).

### **1.1.1. Race as a Social and Political Construct**

Since the mid-1980s, race has emerged as a key category in social, political and cultural studies. Critical race theory encompasses examinations of race within literature and culture,

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ethnic studies, examinations of minority literatures and particular traditions in literature and philosophy (such as Chicano/a or African American theories). It is also a part of legal theory and directly tackles issues of racism and racial discrimination. The latter originated from and persists in examining civil rights discussions and relies on the contributions of social theorists like W. E. B. Du Bois.

Race has emerged as a key issue in literary and cultural theory for multiple reasons. Race and ethnicity represent types of shared, communal identity—ones that are collective and not exclusively individual. Therefore, the issue of racial or ethnic identity carries greater social and political importance. It encompasses concerns of belonging, entitlements, citizenship, empowerment, welfare, association, and may serve as a center of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. Through governmental, cultural, and historical processes, race has been socially and politically produced .

According to Smedley & Smedley, “race was a folk idea in the English language; it was a general categorizing term, similar to and interchangeable with such terms as type, kind, sort, breed, and even species.” (19). In contrast, “the term race was widely used as a reference for social categories of Indians, Blacks, and Whites” by the conclusion of the Revolutionary era (Castrellon11). Skin color and other physical characteristics were evolved into a system for categorizing human populations into groups, which were then arranged into a hierarchy of implied worth. By classifying European immigrants according to race, which was viewed as an innate and unchangeable distinction, rather than ethnicity, which was seen as changeable, immigration laws furthered racial differences (Cited in Smedley & Smedley 20).

According to the “social construction” idea, social ties and cognition shape race. Races are categories that society creates, manipulates, or retires when it suits it; they are not objective, inherent, nor fixed, and they do not correlate to any biological or genetic reality. Naturally, people from similar backgrounds have similar physical characteristics, including

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skin tone, body type, and hair type. However, these only make up a very small percentage of their genetic endowment, are outweighed by our shared characteristics, and have nothing to do with higher-order, uniquely human characteristics like moral behavior, intellect, and personality. Critical race theory is very interested in how society often chooses to reject these scientific realities, forms races, and gives them pseudo-permanent traits (Delgado & Stefancic 3).

Politically, the government institutionalized racism via legal and administrative actions. As Armacost noted, “when the U.S. Constitution instructed slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person, the census has been caught up in the nation’s racial dilemmas” (Vii). The U.S. Census reinforced racial categories by keeping a strict difference between “whites and others”. The categorizing procedure encouraged people with mixed racial origins to pick a single racial identity, strengthening the social construct of race. Furthermore, Jim Crow laws, which enforced tight separation between Black and white people in public areas, education, and work, institutionalized race even further. These regulations maintained African Americans’ inferior social and economic status, upholding the racial hierarchy established during slavery (Castrellon 13-14).

W. E. B. Du Bois opposed the notion that blacks were physiologically inferior. He stated that such a view has no scientific basis and is more social than scientific. In this argument, Du Bois was obviously leaning toward a social constructionist theory of race, in which race as a category cannot be scientifically shown but rather develops from social discourses and practices. Racial differences in biology, according to this social constructionist viewpoint, do not substantiate racial inferiority (Nayar 298). Du Bois wrote, “What is the true distinction between these nations [Europeans, Chinese, Americans]?” Physical differences are significant factors to consider. However, no mere physical contrasts could truly characterize or explain the fundamental differences – the unity and longevity of these

groupings” (299). The concept of “double consciousness” was one of Du Bois’ most significant breakthroughs. Du Bois contended that the black could never view himself as such: he saw himself through the eyes of the white. That is, the African American always viewed himself as the white man saw him. This “double consciousness” implied that the black guy was always “two”: a black man and an American. Du Bois signaled a significant advancement in the field of race studies with this turn toward the politics of literary and artistic expression. Based on these principles, the work promotes “race as a social and political construct” rather than a biological term (Nayar 300)

### **1.2. Definition and History of Colorism**

Alice Walker first coined the term *Colorism* in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, defining it as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on the color of their skin.” (257). However, for over a century, this phenomenon has been discussed under various labels, including Skin Tone Bias, Pigmentocracy, Shadeism, Color Struck, and Colorstruction. Walker described colorism as African Americans’ internalized preference for European physical characteristics such as pale complexion and straight hair, which eventually separates the Black community. Walker’s definition emphasized many significant aspects of the phenomenon. One crucial component is that the desire for lighter skin is profoundly ingrained, both in social group identification and in individual interpersonal relationships. This shows that physical traits that have historically been associated with authority impact how people see themselves and others in their environment. As a result, these cultural symbols promote prejudice within already marginalized minority populations by creating a privilege hierarchy based on skin color and other physical characteristics (Cited in Haris 03).

Other Scholars have studied Colorism from several different perspectives, building on Walker’s ideas. colorism has been described as a behavioral interaction where lighter-skinned

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African Americans disdained those with darker skin, followed by the response of darker-skinned Blacks who reproached their lighter-skinned peers for lacking authenticity in their “blackness.” (NORWOOD 9). In continuing with this perspective, Margaret Hunter describes colorism as a process of social segregation that emphasizes on skin color, perpetuating current racial hierarchies by giving preference to lighter-skinned individuals in areas including education, money, housing, and marriage (Cited in Harris 02). This point of view represents that Colorism is more than just an individual bias; it is a systemic issue deeply embedded within societal structures. It has tangible implications affecting access to economic resources, social opportunities, and general quality of life. Colorism maintains spaces in wealth, education, employment, and societal standing by reinforcing skin-tone hierarchies.

Within the system of colorism, individuals and groups with lighter skin benefit from a variety of advantages, both obvious and subtle. These include explicit and implicit preferences for light skin, as well as compounding and generational benefits that perpetuate skin tone hierarchy. Furthermore, cultural norms and behaviors are frequently tailored to whiteness, resulting in institutions that favor lighter skin (Webb). Structures, whether in beauty standards, media portrayal, or institutional regulations, are usually predicated on ideals that prioritize whiteness, reinforcing color-based disparities. Conversely, individuals with darker skin are frequently subjected to negative perceptions and linked to behaviors such as criminality or violence, which can have an impact on their health, safety, and social mobility (Sander). These deeply established attitudes not only limit prospects, but also lead to a vicious cycle of marginalization and discrimination in both the personal and professional realms.

Colorism is prevalent in various cultures throughout the world and across several different continents. Colorism has its roots in the African American society of the United States, particularly in the 17th Century, when slavery established a rigorous racial hierarchy that dictated social and economic status based on skin tone. Being a slave meant one was

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legally a nonperson unable to engage into legal obligations such as marriage or property ownership, and not regarded a Citizen. Enslaved people were deprived of their independence and reduced to simple property, with those with lighter complexion enjoying preferential treatment. Often, lighter-skinned enslaved people were the offspring of White slave-owners and enslaved Black women, the outcome of nonconsensual sexual relationships, generated children, half black, half white, usually known as mulattoes (Cited in Norwood 592). Because slavery originates through the mother, these mixed-race offspring remained enslaved, yet their proximity to Whiteness granted them specific advantages. Unlike dark slaves, the lighter-skinned mulattoes were spared physically hard, outside work and instead held domestic interior professions like housekeeping in intimate contact with Whites. This status not only protected them from the from the most severe types of physical labor but also allowed better access to informal education, trade skills, and social mobility. Over time, the advantages gained in the Antebellum period helped lighter-skinned Blacks to become more educated and hold a greater amount of property (Uzogara et al. 2), resulting inequities that continued even after liberation. This racial separation was not a coincidence, but rather an intentional strategy created by slave owners.

During the Antebellum era, slave purchasers evaluated the usefulness of enslaved people based on their skin tone. Dark-skinned slaves, particularly men, were seen as physically powerful and capable of heavy labor, but they were also stigmatized as disorderly, prone to stealing, and dangerous. Light-skinned Blacks, on the other hand, were perceived to be more clever, loyal, and socially acceptable, making them more likely to be assigned domestic positions as servants and chauffeurs in or near the slave owner's home. This division of labor fueled animosity and mistrust among enslaved people. Dark-skinned slaves admired those with fairer skin for having a lighter workload and receiving better care, but lighter-skinned people frequently acquired a sense of superiority and looked down on their darker

counterparts (Davis 13). Colorism appears as a “ghost” of slavery that still shapes African American social structure “unnatural equation” combining characteristically Caucasian traits with beauty, knowledge, and authority a combination that continues relevant today (Fultz 09). As Turner states, “One of the more easily identifiable vestiges of the slavery era that has been incorporated into the socialization of many descendants of slaves in the Americas is color racism and a class hierarchy based on skin color.” (Davis 14). Thus, slavery not only established a system of color-based isolation, but it also instilled psychological distinctions that lasted long after freedom, forming social hierarchies and perpetuating colorism within Black Communities.

### **1.2.1. The Difference between Racism and Colorism**

Colorism, while distinct from racism, shares similar origins in white supremacy. Racism more generally targets the oppression of individuals outside the dominant ethnic-racial group of European ancestry. Racism is intricate. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the hierarchy established by racism relies on socially created perceptions of difference, rather than on significant or real biological distinctions. Conversely, Colorism is rooted in superficial distinctions, lacking any evidence that individuals with varying skin tones or other physical traits are fundamentally dissimilar. Colorism is a form of racism that establishes a hierarchy among different ethnic-racial groups, where individuals who resemble the dominant group are more accepted and perceived more favorably. Individuals with ethnic traits that significantly differ from European Americans are perceived more unfavorably, not only by outsiders but frequently by individuals within their own community as well. While Racism establishes a hierarchy among ethnicities, such as between White individuals and Black individuals, whereas colorism creates a hierarchy within ethnic groups, where those who resemble Europeans in their appearance are ranked higher than those who appear more African. As a probable outcome of this intraracial hierarchy, lighter-skinned Black individuals

indicate receiving better treatment from White individuals compared to those with darker skin tones. Consequently, colorism can prove to be more harmful and crippling than racism since it aims to foster division within oppressed and marginalized ethnic-racial communities (Major et al.7).

### **1.2.2. The Social and Psychological Impact of Colorism**

Colorism, the biased favoring of lighter skin shades, has been a widespread problem impacting the African American community, significantly shaping self-image and community relations. Historically grounded in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and sustained by systemic frameworks like Jim Crow Laws, colorism has endured even with legal progressions such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, in spite of these progressions, colorism, which had already seeped into society, continued to exert a substantial influence—not only on how African Americans are seen and treated by others but also on their own self-perception and perception of others within their community. It adversely impacts Africans across the diaspora (Spann and Nyutu 3) .

Ortega-Williams and associates suggest the colorist-historical trauma framework, which explores how colorism has played a significant role in sustaining historical trauma, especially for individuals with dark skin. They propose that even though the effects of colorism started centuries ago, the trauma has been transmitted through generations and is especially damaging to individuals with darker skin. Their theory posits that colorism's influence has been extensive, affecting people of color since the era of enslavement in various aspects, including physiology (lighter-skinned individuals are usually healthier), psychosocial well-being (due to divisions among varying skin tones), legally (Jim Crow laws varied based on skin tone), and environmentally (enslavement/imprisonment linked to skin color). Ortega-Williams and associates propose that individuals with lighter skin tones endure less of this historical trauma compared to those with darker skin tones (Major et al. 9).

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Furthermore, from the era of enslavement to the present, white supremacy has profoundly shaped Black culture. Consequently, it is common to observe messages and visuals spreading colorism showcased in the media, emphasized by politicians, or represented by celebrities in music and movies. As a result, these messages are probably absorbed by those who have faced colorism, resulting in a poor self-image, diminished self-worth, and challenges in forming connections (Spann and Nyutu 3).

Studies have consistently indicated that skin tone affects self-esteem, especially in African American women. Individuals with darker skin tones, regardless of gender, frequently express lower self-esteem associated with their skin color. Gendered colorism intensifies this issue, as lighter skin is more valued in society, with diminished attention to the perception of men's skin tone. A Study by Uzogara et al indicates that African American males, particularly those with darker complexions, face increased racial discrimination. This strengthens the idea that self-esteem, shaped by colorism, impacts African American women more distinctly than men, though there is still a lack of research on its effects on men. Although there is limited research focusing on men, studies indicate that darker skin is frequently perceived negatively, and the inclination towards lighter skin is a widespread impact in both personal and social context (Cited in Young 29-30).

Due to the stronger emphasis on physical attractiveness expectations for women in all cultures, stereotypes regarding beauty and color preference are particularly pronounced for Black women. This has resulted in an effect on general self-esteem in African American women influenced by how they perceive others' assessments. Thompson and Keith proceed to examine how restricted opportunities affect the self-efficacy of both dark-skinned African American males and females. The researchers discovered that skin tone better predicted perceived self-efficacy in men and self-esteem in women. The findings revealed that clinical groups of dark-skinned African American women often face issues related to self-esteem and

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self-confidence. The study additionally discovered that Black women anticipate being assessed based on their complexion, and those who classify as dark-skinned hold more unfavorable expectations regarding their perceptions (Cited in Spann and Nyutu 5).

Global beauty standards that prioritize lighter complexion portray women of color, particularly those with darker skin, as less feminine, less beautiful, and less socially acceptable. According to one participant in a Tanzanian research, those who bleach their skin seem “quite different from Black people... attractive... like Europeans,” which shows the impact of Eurocentric beauty ideals. Media portrayals of beauty frequently emphasize Eurocentric traits like blonde hair and blue eyes, marginalizing individuals with darker skin, fuller lips, and curly hair. These beauty standards are internalized not just by women but also by men, thereby strengthening the idea that Eurocentric definitions of beauty are crucial for social achievement. In order to align with these ideals, women of color often resort to beauty products such as skin lighteners, hair colorants, and straightening tools, leading to personal alterations to fit these entrenched norms (Ferguson 11).

The mental health effects of colorism have been likened to psychological and emotional mistreatment. Encountering colorism can heighten the likelihood of aggression, drug use, self-harm, and unsafe sexual practices. Moreover, depression, anxiety, and feelings of inferiority are closely linked to colorism, as reported by those who have faced it. A weak self-image and low self-worth increase the chances of experiencing depression, while ongoing criticism, bullying, and abuse lead to increased anxiety. Similar to how emotional and psychological abuse can result in enduring effects, colorism can also contribute to significant mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). People who face ongoing discrimination due to their skin color may exhibit PTSD symptoms, including feelings of detachment from others, trouble trusting or accepting affection, reliving traumatic incidents, profound guilt or shame related to the trauma, and a perpetual state of alertness against

additional emotional damage. This comparison between colorism and emotional abuse emphasizes the deep and lasting psychological effects of both internalized and externalized discrimination (TFBG team).

### **1.3. Definition and History of Racial Passing**

The occurrence of racial passing was often observed in the United States towards the conclusion of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century. The term “passing”, as noted by Werner Sollors, is employed more often as though it stands for “passing for white,” meaning of “transitioning across” the racial divide in the United States from the black to the white side. To explain the so-called passing in general and racial passing in particular, numerous definitions have been developed. One can observe that the more conventional viewpoints frequently link racial passing to dishonesty and fraud. For example, racial passing is the process by which a Negro moves from the lower caste to the higher caste, becoming a white man (Aguilar 2-3).

Racial passing is when a member of one group crosses the line that typically divides the dominant and marginal cultural, racial, and/or ethnic groups. As demonstrated by the way mulattoes were passing or posing as white people, this practice in the context of this study refers to the act of crossing racial boundaries in order to be in the dominant race (Fatmawati 97). According to Du Bois, who views this from a historical standpoint, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (Qtd in Fatmawati 97).

#### **1.3.1. Motivations for Passing: Survival, Opportunities, and Freedom**

Black people’s desire to survive, pursue better opportunities, and experience greater freedom—all of which were nearly impossible for them under apartheid—was the driving force behind their decision to embrace white identity as their true self. Some people continued to engage in racial passing as a means of surviving in a society that continuously discriminated against them during the Harlem Renaissance, even in the midst of the pride and

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celebration of African American identity. Jim Crow laws are a clear example of this. In daily life, these laws kept whites and blacks apart. Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation in all spheres of life and restricted Black people's access to economic, professional, and educational opportunities, were a clear example of racism. Some light-skinned people used racial passing as a tactic to obtain opportunities that they would not have otherwise been able to due to the continued segregation and inequality. Passing was a way for some people to break free from the restrictions of racial segregation and live without fear of persecution, in addition to being a means of pursuing economic opportunity.

Axelrod states that Jim Crow racial segregation occurred approximately from the 1880s to the 1960s (156). This means that the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century also experienced and was impacted by this period of segregation. Since segregation was still in place in every state in the union at the time, "passing" as white was a viable option. Racial passing, then, was not just a personal decision but rather a tactic enforced by social reality, motivated by the need to live, take advantage of opportunities, and attain freedom in a society that restricted Black people's options (Fatmawati 103-104).

In a segregated society, being white as the dominant racial group signifies freedom and superiority compared to being black as the inferior racial group, which faces numerous restrictions. This is due to whites, as the dominant groups, having access to the best, most impressive, and respectable locations overall. In the meantime, blacks as the marginalized groups must be content with whatever the whites have provided (Fatmawati 105). The level of individual freedom, availability of opportunities, and feeling of safety is frequently determined by racial and social hierarchies present in society. An instance of this is shown in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, where Clare Kendry tells Irene early in the story that being white was easier than being Black. "You might be astonished, Rene, at how much simpler that is with white individuals compared to us." (Qtd in Larsen 37). Clare stated that it was significantly

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simpler to reside with white individuals and be white, rather than living with blacks and facing all the racial discrimination against them, "... or perhaps it's because they [whites] feel safe and thus don't have to worry. "I've never really made up my mind" (Qtd in Larsen 38).

White people had greater employment opportunities than Black people during this segregation. Jim Crow laws restricted the options for employment available to Black people. Thus, it was challenging for Black people to succeed as individuals (Fauset 74). In a segregated society, whether or not a person belonged to the dominant race was more important than their unique qualities. Light-skinned mulattoes are frequently mistaken for white in day-to-day interactions. As long as they were perceived as white, they would receive favorable treatment; however, when their African ancestry was revealed, they faced discrimination. According to Angela, "letting it be known, not being colored, makes the difference" (Fauset 78). Therefore, for those light-skinned mulattoes who want better treatment and the freedom to select better opportunities, concealing their African heritage is a better option. According to this perspective, it is not surprising that many light-skinned mulattoes concealed their African ancestry in order to pass as whites both temporarily and permanently during the Harlem Renaissance and during the period of segregation. They left their hometown, hid their history, and now live in a new world where being white is a promise (Fatmawati 107).

As shown, whites uphold their dominance and control over blacks through this Jim Crow segregation. The manner in which Jim Crow laws established racial divisions. The division between whites as the superior group and blacks as the subordinate group positioned blacks unfavorably. Consequently, the practice of racial passing can be viewed as a response from blacks to the laws. Additionally, the presence of the one-drop rule during the Harlem Renaissance increased the desire among mulattoes to pass. Numerous light-skinned mulattoes

who passed during that time realized there was no reason to reject the chance of attaining freedom and a better life through their light skin any longer (Fatmawati 111-112).

### **1.4. Identity in Racial Passing**

African American identities are frequently oversimplified, generalized, and minimized to a shorthand or an assumed notion, like “the black experience,” “the black voice,” “the black family,” and “the black community.” However, there is never a fixed, unchanging, or authentic “identity” lurking just beneath the surface. Instead, as Stuart Hall has argued, identities are conditional, contingent, elusive, and “always in process.” (Hobbs 19).

The intricacy of the issue has made African American identity a subject of scholarly debate for an extended period. A prominent figure in the discussion of African American identity is W.E.B. DuBois highlighted the dual aspects of African American identity: “[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Qtd in Łapińska 68). It is an unusual feeling, this double-consciousness, this awareness of perpetually perceiving oneself through the viewpoints of others, of evaluating one’s spirit by the standards of a world that observes with amused disdain and sympathy. One continually senses his duality—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two conflicting aspirations; two opposing ideals within one dark body, whose persistent strength alone prevents it from being ripped apart. While DuBois discusses the internal conflict faced by black Americans, this conflict also possesses an external dimension. This duality positions African Americans between two cultural identities, presenting them with the option to choose which cultural traditions to embrace and identify with, or the difficulty of managing the two aspects of their identity. Although the notion of identity is flexible and various forms of identity are present (Łapińska 68).

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In former times, the identity of black Americans was somewhat predetermined by their ancestry and community. If an individual had African ancestry, no matter how far back, they were automatically designated as African American, regardless of whether they identified that way. This categorization, this allocation of identity, had significant implications that differed by era: ranging from coerced servitude, to legally-mandated usage of inferior separate facilities, to outright discrimination and aggression (Łapińska 68).

It is not surprising that some African Americans decided to conceal their backgrounds when a chance presented itself, to be labeled as a white American and adopt the identity that accompanied this classification. Consequently, light-skinned African Americans appeared to be situated on the color line that separates American society, never fully fitting in on either side, constantly crossing the racial boundary wherever they went. Passing, for white individuals, has historically been a component of American society. Allyson Hobbs describes how the concept of passing evolved in different historical contexts, altering both its meaning and importance over time. At times, passing served as an act of defiance against the racial system; at other times, it posed a challenge to African Americans' efforts to form and cultivate group Identities and Communities (Łapińska 69).

Passing functions like a prism: it disperses various elements of what we typically perceive as racial identity and uncovers what remains after the facade of assigned status is removed. Behind that veil, what we refer to as "race" is merely the lived experiences of a group, perhaps manifesting as a yearning for family bonds and connections or occasionally as a desire for music, laughter, and cuisine. Consequently, passing exposes race as it is typically perceived, uncovering the private and individual significance of an assumed racial identity (Hobbs 14).

### 1.4.1. The Duality of Belonging and Alienation

Racial identity is a complex idea with both social and biological components. According to Alicia Fedelina Chávez and Florence Guido-DiBrito, biological identity is based on inherited physical characteristics, whereas social identity is related to shared heritage and community ties associated with one's race. Racial identity tends to be more socially constructed than biologically constructed. People frequently struggle to reconcile the conflict between how they perceive their genetic composition and how society views them, which makes it difficult to understand who they are. Examining racial identity requires an understanding of the interplay between biological and social factors, which is echoed in the writings of philosophers such as Fanon and Du Bois (Cited in Lewis10).

Melvin Seeman lists five main meanings of the term alienation in his article "On the Meaning of Alienation: self-estrangement, isolation, normlessness, meaninglessness, and powerlessness". Seeman admits that these various applications can be combined to offer a more accurate evaluation of a social circumstance, illustrating the dichotomy of alienation and belonging in personal experience. Therefore, the basis for the application and comprehension of alienation in this essay is the blending of Seeman's concepts of normlessness and powerlessness. Normlessness is defined as a strong expectation that socially unacceptable actions are necessary to accomplish specific goals (Cited in Seeman 788), whereas powerlessness is defined as a person's belief that their actions cannot influence the occurrence of the outcomes they desire (Seeman 784).

This dichotomy draws attention to the ongoing conflict between a person's wish to fit in and their awareness of the obstacles standing in the way, which can leave them feeling alienated even in a social structure they are trying to fit into. Furthermore, Seeman distinguishes between ostracism—which merely characterizes the external act of exclusion—and alienation, which refers to an internal psychological state brought on by a person's sense

of disconnection from society. Lastly, Seeman offers a perceptive definition of self-alienation, defining it as the loss of pride in one's work or intrinsic meaning, which causes one to distance oneself from both society and oneself. The person recognizes that they are "something less than one might ideally be if the circumstances in society were otherwise," which is a clear expression of the duality of belonging and alienation (Qtd in Seeman 790). This illustrates the constant conflict between the need to fit in and the feeling of alienation: inferiority pushes people away from a society they want to be a part of (Lewis 11).

### **1.5. Critical Race Theory and Literature**

Critical race theory originated in the mid-1970s when various lawyers, activists, and legal scholars nationwide recognized that the remarkable progress made during the civil rights movement of the 1960s had stagnated and, in several ways, was being reversed (Delgado and Stefancic 3-4). Furthermore, it arose as a response to the critical legal studies (CLS) movement because CLS failed to recognize race as a fundamental element within the legal systems being disputed. It is also influenced by civil rights studies and feminist ideas. CRT initially emerged in US law schools, combining concerns of power, race, and racism to tackle power disparities, especially those that are racialized. In 1989, following ongoing discontent with CLS's shortcomings, several attorneys departed from this group and established Critical Race Theory (Martinez 17).

Recognizing the necessity for new theories and approaches to address the more subtle forms of racism that were emerging, early scholars like Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado focused their efforts on this challenge. Before long, others joined them, and the group conducted its inaugural conference at a convent located outside Madison, Wisconsin, during the summer of 1989. Additional conferences and meetings were held it (Delgado and Stefancic 4).

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The oeuvre produced by Critical Race Theory experts Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw critiques the liberal idea of color blindness, arguing that neglecting racial distinctions upholds and sustains the “status quo along with its entrenched injustices toward racial minorities” and emphasizes that “overlooking the significance of race ensures that institutionalized and systemic racism endures and even thrives (Martinez 17).

Racism is a key, enduring, and “typical” aspect of American society. As noted by Delgado and Stefancic, “Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture”. Ironically, the consequence is that white individuals struggle to perceive or comprehend the world they have created and often quickly dismiss or reject the inherited advantages linked to being white. Bell highlights the enduring nature of racism alongside its significance by stating that “racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of [...] [people of color] and white people”. However, individuals of color possess experiential wisdom from enduring systemic racism and oppression, leading them to create approaches that function as coping strategies and as means to highlight issues impacting people of color that are frequently ignored, dismissed, or otherwise unseen by whites (Qtd in Martinez 19-20).

Another premise of CRT is its dedication to the importance of experiential knowledge as expressed through storytelling. Since whites frequently fail to recognize the experiences of people of color, CRT acknowledges and has created the counter story approach to express the racial realities faced by people of color, while also offering marginalized individuals a way to contest “the myths, assumptions, and accepted beliefs that constitute the mainstream culture about race and that inevitably place [minoritized people] at a disadvantage.” Nonetheless, individuals of color can and do perpetuate structures, systems, and practices of racism as well, yet by articulating and voicing opposition to the frequently biased narratives present in a white supremacist society, CRT scholars reveal that the social realm is not fixed, but is shaped

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by people through words, stories, and even silences. The CRT narrative acknowledges the experiential insights of the non-dominant as “valid, significant, and essential for comprehending and examining racial subordination,” and a CRT scholar weaves counter stories with a strong dedication to social justice and the eradication of racial oppression, aiming to end all types of oppression (Cited in Martinez 20).

In the pursuit of eliminating all types of oppression, a third principle of CRT questions prevailing assertions of race neutrality, equal opportunity, objectivity, color blindness, and merit. This challenge addresses the difficult critical race Theory task of questioning prevalent ideology, and as Solórzano and Delgado Bernal contend, racialized ideological “paradigms serve as a disguise for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society.” Derrick Bell has notably explored this self-interest with his creation of interest convergence theory. Bell’s idea asserts that “white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for [people of color] only when such advances also promote white self-interest”. however, as Bell has noted, concerns related to foreign policy were probably the main motivation behind this ruling (Cited in Martinez 20-21).

Given that confronting dominant ideology is a massive endeavor, CRT scholars have addressed this issue using an interdisciplinary approach. A fourth premise of CRT emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary approach as academics confront “ahistoricism and the singular disciplinary focus of most analyses,” insisting “on examining race and racism [...] by situating both in a historical and modern context through interdisciplinary methods.” Given CRT’s roots in law, education, and sociology, and its evolution from civil rights and feminist perspectives, numerous scholars from diverse fields share the responsibility for both theory and methodology, offering viewpoints that both contest and endorse, ultimately fortifying the overarching objectives of Critical Race Theory (Martinez 20).

### 1.6. Literary Representations of Racial Injustices

The Jim Crow Law should have put an end to issues like mass incarceration, police brutality, economic inequality, and even racial injustice within the African American community, but the reality is entirely different. Many things have not changed over the years, and African Americans still suffer today. In their novels, poems, books, essays, short stories, and other works, African American writers would perpetuate these issues from their respective eras across several decades (Rahat 9).

First and foremost, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* must be discussed because the author does a fantastic job of highlighting the inequities of the 1930s racial system, which can be used to address the systemic racism of today. Atticus, the main character, was dubbed a white knight for the black residents of Maycomb, Alabama, who were suffering. Harper Lee based the Atticus character on his father, and the black character was merely used to improve Atticus's image. We observe how Tom Robinson was wrongfully charged with sexual assault. But Robinson's defendant, Atticus Finch, would demonstrate that he was incapable of doing so because, as a child, Robinson's left hand became trapped in a cotton gin, preventing him from using it. Furthermore, because Tom was black, he was unable to simply push away the forceful kiss from Mayella, the victim. Despite Atticus's demonstration that there was insufficient evidence to convict Robinson, the court still found him guilty. A prison guard later shot him when he attempted to flee his cell. Many people would assume that we have moved past the fact that this does not occur in the modern era because it happened in Alabama in the 1930s, but they would be seriously mistaken (Rahat 33-34).

Richard Wright's *Native Son* also deals with the issue of racial injustice, Bigger's trial at the book's conclusion, where he is found guilty of Mary Dalton's rape and murder. Despite the fact that Bigger did commit the crime, neither the judge nor the jury bothered to hear Bigger's side of the story, in which his attorney Max explains that he had a horrible

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upbringing and was raised in a harsh, impoverished environment. The protagonist received the death penalty after Max's request for a life sentence was overturned. This demonstrates that the Chicago legal system of the 1930s was incredibly unforgiving of African Americans, regardless of whether they had a traumatic past or not (Rahat 36).

These writings and others portray the racial injustices—such as convicting someone of a crime they did not commit, imposing a harsher sentence despite their difficult upbringing, purposefully prosecuting and imprisoning Black people, and so forth—remain relevant in today's society. This proves that racial injustices that were portrayed in books published decades or even a century ago still exist in American culture (Rahat 45).

Similarly, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is one of the best examples of African American literature that shows racial injustice. Through the character of Sethe, Morrison looks at the deep physical and mental wounds caused by racism and slavery. The novel shows how white society oppresses, exploits, and dehumanizes Black people on a regular basis. In *Beloved*, Sethe endures severe cruelty while enslaved: white men measure her body like an animal, beat her, rape her, and mark her as property. Morrison depicts how Sethe's trauma drives her to murder her own child in order to spare herself from the atrocities of racial oppression. "Nobody, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper," Sethe explains (*Beloved*, 251). Despite being tragic, this act brings to light the harsh fact that Black mothers in slavery were powerless to defend their offspring. Morrison also shows how Black women and men lost their sense of self, family, and dignity. Similar to Sethe, Paul D. And Halle suffer from emotional devastation in addition to physical abuse. In the end, the book reveals that slavery was a system of racial dominance that attempted to eradicate Black humanity in addition to being a system of forced labor. Morrison documents how racial injustice haunts African Americans long after slavery is over through Sethe's story (Subi 101-103).

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In a similar vein, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker effectively highlights how Black women in America face both racial and gender oppression. The novel illustrates how sexism and systemic racism combine to keep Black women marginalized, silenced, and mistreated through the experiences of Celie, a young Black girl growing up in rural Georgia. First subjected to physical and emotional abuse by her stepfather and then by her husband, Celie symbolizes the individual and collective challenges Black women encounter in their own communities as well as in the larger racist society. The lack of a proper name for Celie's husband ("Mr. \_\_\_") represents the dehumanization of Black people, depriving them of their identity and dignity. The novel also shows how Black men can reinforce the cycle of oppression by committing acts of violence in their communities under the influence of white society's oppressive norms (Khati 32-33). Therefore, *The Color Purple* is a powerful critique of the link between racial injustice and gender oppression. It demonstrates that survival and liberation necessitate confronting both, and it honors the bravery of Black women who fight to reclaim their humanity in the face of systemic violence.

In conclusion, these literary works demonstrate that racial injustice is not a relic of the past, but a living reality that evolves over time. From *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, African American literature documents suffering while also exposing the deep structures of racism and emphasizing the power of resistance and survival in the face of oppression.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has established the fundamental concepts required for comprehending the politics of racial identity in literary discourse. It clarified how race, colorism, and racial passing function as social control and individual negotiation mechanisms by examining their historical and theoretical dimensions. The distinction between racism and colorism, as well as the psychological consequences of both, demonstrate the multifaceted nature of racialized

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experience. Racial passing's analysis reveals that it serves a strategic function of both resistance and survival. Finally, the incorporation of Critical Race Theory has highlighted the significance of literature as a platform for exposing, contesting, and reimagining racial hierarchies. These insights form the foundation for the literary analysis that follows, particularly when reading *The Vanishing Half* as a text deeply entwined with the complexities of race, identity, and systemic injustice.

## ***CHAPTER TWO***

**A Critical Race Reading of *The Vanishing Half***

### Introduction

Throughout American history, black people have been marginalized and referred to by many words, many of which are derogatory or insulting. Historically, white Americans have used derogatory words such “negro,” “colored,” “black,” and “African American”. These linguistic shifts underline the ongoing struggle of Black communities for dignity, identity, and social recognition under systematic oppression. Racism in the United States is seen more as a cultural problem than an individual reality, and the subject remains controversial. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework for understanding how systematic racism has shaped American law and public policy.

Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* investigates the serious consequences of systemic racism in the American culture by looking at the lives of twin sisters Desiree and Stella, who follow different paths—one acknowledging her black background and the other trying to be white—that are strongly shaped by Mallard conventions. Brit Bennett’s novel probes the grave effects of systemic racism in the American society. The demands of a racially split society, which enforces strict beauty and racial identity criteria. Their different paths highlight not only the external facts of racial discrimination, but also the complex psychological and social consequences of identity within a system that privileges whiteness.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) experts like Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado emphasize that racism is not only personal prejudice but is ingrained in society’s institutions and basic structure. This chapter provides the practical application of CRT to *The Vanishing Half*. The story illustrates Bell’s theory of interest convergence—the belief that improvements for people of color only occur when they align with white interests—by showing how systemic racism creates racial divisions and promotes whiteness through Stella’s choice to disguise herself as white. On the other hand, Desiree’s story highlights the continued discrimination that people who openly identify as Black face. Both Stella and her

daughter Kennedy, who grows up unaware of her Black heritage, are greatly affected by the emotional weights associated with her passing, which include loneliness and the constant fear of being found out. Jude, Desiree's daughter, on the other hand, highlights the disparate experiences impacted by race by overcoming the challenges of publicly identifying as a Black woman. Furthermore, by revealing the ways in which race, gender, and class interact to shape the sisters' identities and experiences, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality shows the complexity of oppression and surviving in a racially divided society.

### **2.1. The Vanishing Half- A Critique of Racial Essentialism**

Modern literary studies are being looked at more and more through the prism of critical race theory in connection to questions of identity and race. In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett offers a comprehensive look at racial essentialism. The main argument of racial essentialism is that a person's race is a constant biological trait or quality that shapes their traits and abilities (Zeng et al. 2). Racial essentialism is defined as the belief that socially constructed racial categories reflect "intrinsic" biological differences (Tsai 201).

This essentialist view overlooks the social, historical, and contextual elements that really shape identity. Rather, Bennett's book reveals that racial identity is flexible and shaped by society, so changing depending on the details of a person's life experience. Identity is formed through social views and personal choices rather than being a biologically predetermined fact from birth. Applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which asserts that social identity categories are intertwined and co-created rather than separate, we gain new insights into how race, gender, and class converge in literature to question fixed and essentialist notions of identity. As Crenshaw points out, "Because the intersectional experience goes beyond the additive impact of racism and sexism, any analysis that overlooks intersectionality fails to properly examine how Black women are uniquely marginalized" (Crenshaw 140).

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The character of Stella Vignes is a vivid example of racial fluidity in the novel. That Stella chooses to not pass as white shows what “race” is in play, and demonstrates that “race” is something not biologically inherited but performed and built on. Now, as she looks back, “There was nothing to Being white except boldness. You could convince anyone you belonged somewhere if you acted like you did” (Bennett 143). Stella’s choice shows that race is a performance. This means that in her case, whiteness is not so much something passed down through families but of social performance and perception. Her assimilation into white society grants her access to material comfort and social privilege, evidenced by her new life (Boakye-Nkrumah 58).

However, there is a substantial personal cost associated with this new life, since “she hadn’t realized how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you,” Stella feels a great deal of guilt and loneliness (Bennett 162). In addition, her false identity gradually takes the place of her true self, cutting off her connections with her family and past life: “Now what began as a lie felt closer to the truth” (146). In addition, Stella’s choice is a reflection of larger historical and cultural forces pertaining to racial hierarchy. According to Anthony Appiah, Anglo-Saxonism and other ideologies have historically created a social structure that marginalized other people and favored white, Anglo-Saxon characteristics. Stella’s decision to identify with the dominant racial group serves as an example of how race is a social position that can be used to gain privilege and mobility rather than a fixed biological essence (Boakye-Nkrumah 58–59).

The novel, in particular, challenges essentialist notions of identity through Kennedy’s transformation into a professional actress. The novel emphasizes how everyone acts out their identities through her character. Kennedy describes her work as an actress as “True acting meant becoming invisible so that only the character shone through ” (Bennett 252). This comment can be interpreted literally. Kennedy, who was raised as “white,” has unconsciously

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been acting all her life: “Her whole Life, in fact, had been a gift of good fortune—she had been given whiteness. Blonde hair, a pretty face, a nice Figure, a rich father. She’d sobbed out of speeding tickets, Flirted her way to endless second chances. Her whole life, A bounty of gifts she hadn’t deserved.” (285).

Despite Kennedy’s white identity, the Jim Crow era’s one-drop rule—which stated that any amount of African heritage made one African American—would have made her Black. According to the novel’s framing, which is primarily set during the segregation era, Kennedy has been passing as white because of her Black mother. This example of Kennedy demonstrates how race is constructed using external signifiers. However, the novel employs Kennedy—an actress—to explore the concept of identity. To be more specific, *The Vanishing Half* draws parallels between acting, passing, and reality, blurring the distinctions between the three concepts. The novel explores whether Kennedy’s “white” identity has become a reality, as she has been “passing” throughout her life. The novel demonstrates that passing is more than just crossing a boundary between categories; it also involves becoming both/and. The analogy between passing and reality highlights how passing can accomplish multiple tasks simultaneously. The novel depicts acts of passing that occur across identity categories. *The Vanishing Half* challenges the assumption that identities are discrete, natural, and fixed (Siemes 159).

Through the intersections of race, gender, and power in *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree Vignes shows how racial essentialism is dismantled. Stella passes for white and reaps benefits from society, Desiree does not hide from her Black identity even though she experiences oppression because of it. Her abusive relationship with Sam exhibits the inner hierarchies within the Black community itself. Despite their shared ethnicity, it is evident that it is Sam’s masculinity, while Desiree’s gender femininity that drive his dominance over her to violence. His charge that “She still think she better than us.” (Bennett 88) also suggests that racially

perceived solidarity will be ineffective against gendered social power. Instead, the shapes of personal relations are influenced by race, gender and class. In other words, the ‘intersectionality’ of the race, gender and class is what matter here. For Crenshaw, oppression does not occur along one axis. That is to say, oppression must be understood in multiple, overlapping ways (Boakye-Nkrumah 55).

Desiree’s suffering also reflects wider cultural pressures that internalize colorism and classism within the Black community. Her mother had warned her again and again—“hadn’t she told Desiree that a dark man just wouldn’t be good for her? [...] Now he was punishing her for it” (Bennett 39) revealing how social biases will be passed even among oppressed communities. The mother’s adherence to white supremacy beauty standards attribute more value to fair skin, which makes it even more difficult for Desiree to assert her independence. Desiree as a Black woman, as someone marked by colorism, and as a target of intraracial class and gendered violence. Her story demonstrates that race is not a monolithic or biologically fixed identity, but rather a social construct that intersects with other systems of oppression (Boakye-Nkrumah 55).

Jude’s experience highlights the emotional and psychological toll of society’s rejection due to racialized beauty standards. As a child, Jude believes she is undeserving of love because of her dark skin and the colorism in the society around her. She confesses, “I couldn’t imagine any boy ever loving me” (Bennett 110). This shows that society tells people brown is not beautiful and they do not belong because you are not white enough. Jude is not just battling against a lack of self-esteem; rather, how racial essentialism and gendering mess with his head. Her experience confirms Crenshaw’s insight that race and gender are not simply separate identities – they mutually shape each other, affecting social possibilities and emotion-reality (Boakye-Nkrumah 64).

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Reese's narrative adds yet another dimension to the novel's critique of essentialist notions of identity. Reese himself has demonstrated that gender simply cannot be taken for granted as an objective, biologically determined fact – nor its counter-part race. Rather we can clearly see both of them as social constructs which vary greatly from one moment to another. Yet during his period of transition Reese feels free and equal—"He had shed his family right along with his entire past" (Bennett 106). Such a symbolic rejection of imposed identity is an agonizing process in its own right, and yet it brought with it the possibility for forging one that was truly his own. The story of Reese follows that of the Vignes sisters: just like Stella drops her Black identity to fit in with whites, Reese dropped his assigned gender identity to live genuinely. Both stories show how society imposes immutable categories of identity –whether racial or sexual—revealing how individuals resist and reformulate themselves in response to these constraints (Boakye-Nkrumah 65).

At the same time, the situation reflecting Mallard during the 1960s is contrasted with other story spaces in this novel so as to develop still further its critique of racial essentialism. Though the action of the novel takes place in Louisiana during the 1960's, *The Vanishing Half* shifts between its settings in different times and places—from early 1960s Louisiana to late 1990s Los Angeles and New York. In this way, different American societies are thrown out there briefly before us. It is powered mainly by race course. For example, the mainly Black-and-white (and black-and-white) state of affairs in Louisiana during its Jim Crow years is contrasted with 1990s New York's multi-racial landscape. Comparing such varied environments, the novel reveals how racial categories we believe to be fixed and natural are in fact quite arbitrary and socially constructed. These imposing spatial and temporal shifts provide the most compelling proof that racial essentialism is absurd and identity (over time as well as space) shifts by the second (Siemes 158).

Therefore, via Stella, Kennedy, Desiree, Jude, Reese, and the changing temporal and geographic contexts of the novel, Bennett creates a captivating story that dismantles racial essentialism. The concept that race fundamentally influences identity is debated in *The Vanishing Half*. Rather, it demonstrates that identity is intricate, contextual, and performative, influenced by historical background, performance, and consciousness. Crenshaw's intersectional framework is clearly present in the book, which provides an insight into identity as dynamic, complex, and socially constructed.

### **2.2. The Vings Twins: Different Racial Choices**

Mallard promotes light-skinned Blackness to the extent that it aims to produce “a more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before” (Bennett 9), reflecting the introduction of the U.S. Constitution “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice.” (Siemes 151). This belief system integrates colorism into the fundamental civic identity of the town, representing a type of discrimination where individuals with lighter skin receive preferential treatment over those with darker skin. Colorism reinforces whiteness as the beauty standard and maintains a social hierarchy rooted in race (150).

In Mallard, whiteness is not only a goal but also reinforced by institutions taught in educational settings, honored at local gatherings, and made ordinary through narratives of individuals who “pretended to be white.” Consequently, both Stella and Desiree grow up in a setting that associates light skin with beauty, privilege, and advancement (Siemes 151).

However, their upbringing is also influenced by a harrowing event that leaves a profound mark: young Desiree and Stella Vignes observe the brutal lynching of their father, Leon, by white assailants, which significantly impacts their psychological growth and their views on race (Bennett 29). A horrifying act of racial violence that exposes them at a young age to the deadly consequences of being Black in a predominantly white society. This instance

is not merely an individual misfortune but a significant trauma that leaves a mark of fear, fragility, and helplessness on the girls.

In the quiet of the closet, Desiree automatically places a hand over Stella's mouth to conceal them, and Stella copies the action—an intense moment that signals the start of their psychological divide (Bennett 29). The scene captures how racial violence persists beyond death; it lingers in memory, identity, and the decisions survivors take to cope. This is especially true for Stella, whose future choices stem from a strong need for safety and power. The anguish of losing their father along -with Mallard's harsh colorism- sets the psychological circumstances for the twins' identities to start to separate.

Although both sisters were raised in the same home and received the same social messages, Stella and Desiree react to Mallard's colorist beliefs in fundamentally different manners. Stella embraces the village's "colorstruck" beliefs, whereas Desiree actively opposes them ( Siemes 151). Desiree dismisses the town's beliefs; marrying "the darkest man she could find" (Bennett 8) and departs from Mallard in pursuit of a life free from racial limitations.

Stella, conversely, embraces Mallard's colorist beliefs. From the start, she links lightness to opportunity and whiteness to safety and accessibility. Ultimately, she disappears from Mallard to embrace a new existence, posing as a white woman (Bennett 8), fully engaging in a white community where she acquires privilege, safety, and social advancement, all while concealing her real racial background, abandoning not only her hometown and her twin sister but also the memories that previously shaped her identity (a version of Stella with no family, friends, and history). Therefore, Mallard's fixation on skin color is more than a mere setting—it is a societal influence that significantly impacts the twins' racial decisions.

These differing choices emphasize the intricate methods through which race is socially formed and experienced. The differing lives of the twins demonstrate that identity is not just

passed down but is also influenced by the social, economic, and cultural environments in which people exist. Their narratives function as a compelling gateway to conversations regarding racial passing, internalized racism, and the coping mechanisms that marginalized individuals employ in reaction to systemic inequity.

Stella's passing can be effectively analyzed through Derrick Bell's theory of interest convergence: the notion that "the rights of Black individuals progress only when they align with the interests of white individuals" ( Delgado & Stefanstic 149). Bell argued that " Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns history verifies" (12). In short, even if the interests of blacks and whites align in support of civil rights, advancement will be hindered by certain factions within white society whose economic interests are still benefited by racial separation. Even if the interests of blacks and whites align in support of civil rights, advancement will be hindered by certain factions within white society whose economic interests are still benefited by racial separation.

For Stella, her upbringing in Mallard shows her that being "white" has tangible benefits. It can be inferred that she absorbs these beliefs from the moment she steps into Darlene's Charms shop, which caters exclusively to white individuals. In this excerpt, she walks into the store without altering her voice, movements, attire, or hairstyle. Nonetheless, since the store is exclusively for white individuals, the cashier sees her as white, enabling Stella to buy products that would typically be off-limits to her (Siemes 151) . Stella does not gain entry because of a change in racial perspectives or equity; rather, she is embraced as her perceived whiteness supports the current social structure. Her presence in the store does not endanger white interests. She resembles them, acts according to their expectations, and maintains their comfort.

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As Bennett writes, this makes her act “practical, so practical that, at the time, her decision seemed laughably obvious.” (170). Stella’s appearance as white at the shop reveals how racial categories are formed, coming not from a set of verifiable indicators but imposed on those indicators in artificial manners (Siemes 150).

A few years later, after Stella and Desiree escape from Mallard, Stella secures a secretary position in New Orleans meant exclusively for white individuals. To obtain the position, she starts to present herself as white (Her sole means of achieving financial stability relies on adhering to a white identity). As Desiree explains: “An office like that would never hire a colored girl, but they needed the money, living in the city and all, and why should the twins starve because Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned she was colored? It wasn’t lying, she told Stella. How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her?” (Bennett50). Similar to countless other African Americans, Stella’s demise was brought about by material necessities. Desiree’s reasoning for the action indicates that Stella was uncertain and required persuasion that the act was not something to regret (Iapinska 72) . If she had not identified as white, such a job offer would have never been made to her. The scenario highlights how racial identity, shaped by systemic racism, frequently dictated access to essential opportunities such as employment.

Based on Bell’s theory, Stella’s advancement hinges solely on her capability to conform to whiteness, and her racial improvement is acknowledged only as it upholds and preserves the existing order of white supremacy. Therefore, by presenting themselves as white, people obtain the social and economic advantages set aside by structural racism, essentially obtaining a type of ownership in whiteness, a fabricated worth that raises them above those who are still clearly recognized as Black, or “at the bottom of the well.”

### 2.2.1. Desiree Vinges: Reclaiming Blackness

In *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree's personal identity is built around self-awareness, which allows her to remake herself. Indeed, Desiree goes through events that change her sense of self in a profound way, as she decides not to give in to societal expectations but rather to stand up to external influences and forge her own path (AKRE 459).

In this framework, Desiree's exit and her later dismissal of the town's tacit regulations can be interpreted through the perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT), highlighting the significance of self-definition, counter-narratives, and racial pride in combating systemic oppression. In his book, *We are not Saved* Derrick Bell argues that fostering Black pride is essential to combat the psychological impact of systemic racism. Bell clarifies that "Blacks cannot purge self-hate without nurturing black pride through teaching designed to show that the racism of whites, rather than the deficiencies of blacks, causes our lowly position in this society" (228-29). Desiree's rejection of Mallard's colorist beliefs exemplifies this principle. By opposing the town's fixation on lightness and affirming her Black identity, she challenges the system that strive to diminish her worth.

As a child, Desiree's response of "rolled her eyes" when she hears about Mallard's founder (Bennett 9) shows her initial opposition to the town's beliefs and its fixation on light-skinned heritage. Her lack of interest in Mallard's past indicates a greater unease with its foundational beliefs. Eventually, as she discovers more about the town's history, she intentionally dismisses it, understanding that she does not wish to be characterized by a location that imposes strict racial hierarchies. The comparison "How she felt like you could flick away history like shrugging a hand off your shoulder" (9), highlights how effortlessly she desires to rid herself of a burden of history that seems forced upon her.

Desiree attempts to avoid the issue of colorism whenever it is brought up. This emphasizes her unease with the situation. Rather than face or question colorism openly, she

frequently prefers to detach, maybe as a coping strategy or a kind of quiet resistance. Desiree is going to make her moves in this social labyrinth where attachment to dark-skinned persons is perceived in a terrible light (Siemes 152).

Desiree's choice to depart from Mallard stems from her rejection of the town's ingrained colorism "[E]veryone's obsession with lightness" (Bennett 11). Her portrayal of the town as "colorstruck" (Bennett 20), highlights how Mallard assigns social worth to lighter skin, reinforcing a hierarchy even among the Black community. By intentionally marrying "the darkest man she could find," (8). Desiree purposefully challenges and undermines the town's colorist beliefs, since "in Mallard nobody married dark" (31). Her decision serves as an act of resistance, a means to regain control over her identity and dismiss the internalized racism that Mallard advocates. This action illustrates her rejection of the restrictive norms that influenced her childhood. While others in the community seek for lighter complexion and social integration, Desiree chooses to embrace Blackness in its most obvious form (Siemes 152).

Furthermore, her decision to cross the intra-racial color line and associate with individuals with dark skin is part of her new and unapologetic identity, which she embraces and proclaims without fear of repercussions from her peers. Desiree's relationship with Sam would not have been well welcomed in Mallard; it contradicted all the community stood for because Sam was a dark-skinned African American. Desiree's return to Mallard with her child reveals the town's attitude to her choice of marriage. "In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far" (Bennett 8). Desiree's return to Mallard is a remarkable act of courage (Lapinka 76-77).

Despite understanding the town's deep-seated colorism and stringent social expectations, she chooses to return not just as a woman who broke the norms by escaping, but

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also as the mother of a dark-skinned kid. Her courage to endure judgement and social rejection demonstrates her strength and dedication to safeguarding her daughter. Rather than hiding or conforming, Desiree addresses the town's biases directly. Her strength stems from reclaiming space in a community that had no a chance for individuals like her daughter, transforming her homecoming into an act of resistance, dignity, and maternal bravery rather than retreat.

She terminated her terrible relationship with her husband Sam by leaving him and moving back to Mallard with her black daughter Jude. She is aware that Mallard's views are based on colorism, and that bringing her especially dark-skinned daughter into this atmosphere will result in criticism and rejection. Instead of acceptance, the desiree returns seeking protection and stability. Her acts demonstrate great strength: while being aware that she may face criticism for defying the town's social norms and beauty standards, she puts her daughter's welfare before of Mallard's.

In the context of Critical Race Theory, her actions represent a strong rejection of internalized racism as well as a reaffirmation of black identity. This strongly corresponds to Derrick Bell's perspective in "Faces at the Bottom of the Well," in which he expresses: "Of course, we emphasize and encourage the formation and maintenance of strong Black families as an essential for survival in a hostile racist society" (820). Desiree's commitment to creating a family based on Black pride rather than racial denial exemplifies the concept of survival through resistance, unity, and affirmation of Black identity.

Additionally, Desiree also illustrates important qualities of self-awareness and independence; she has the capacity to navigate the world according to her own standards, appreciate her worth, and take control of her own life. She identifies as Black, celebrates her identity, and communicates an alternative story to the dominant cultural standards, upholding dignity, pride, and rebellion against institutional oppression.

### 2.2.2. Stella Vingnes: Embracing Whiteness

In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett highlights a society hindered by the pervasive problem of racism and its significant implications on and among individuals of black descent. In this context, the racial dynamics related to skin color and the limitations and opportunities they present undergo a striking transformation as the concept of passing gains attention. First, let us note that to avoid the issue of the color line, passing has been a frequent occurrence throughout American history for various racially ambiguous individuals. Other black individuals, however, used passing as a technique of denying their true racial identity and erasing their past in order to achieve a higher social standing in a racist culture. In this sense, the critic Allyson Hobbs claims that: “passing was a potent weapon against racial discrimination, but it was also a potential threat to personal and community integrity” (13).

Brit Bennett tackles the theme of passing through the character Stella Vingnes, whose life notably follows the path of passing. Stella’s choice to present herself as white directly illustrates systemic racism and aligns with CRT’s “social construct” principles which asserts that “race and races are outcomes of societal thoughts and interactions”. Not objective, inherent, or stable, they align with no biological or genetic truth; instead, “races are classifications that society creates, alters, or discards as needed” (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Showing how race relies on looks and social views instead of any objective reality. Her capacity to cross racial boundaries – along with the stark change in her treatment thereafter – reveals how race functions as a means of social control, influencing who is granted privilege and who encounters discrimination. Stella’s transition is more than simply a personal reinvention; it is a deliberate response to a system that favors closeness to whiteness while punishing Blackness. Her decision demonstrates the pressure institutional racism puts on people to keep to socially created standards for the sake of survival or success.

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Though Stella appears to successfully pass as white and acquires the associated social and economic advantages, she ultimately succumbs to the psychological and emotional toll of racial passing. Stella Vignes initially finds success in passing and subsequently revels in it. Certainly, identifying as white at Darlene's Charms shop and enjoying it, or when, "she'd gone to the South Louisiana Museum of Art on ordinary Saturday morning not Negro Day, and walked right up to the main entrance, not the side door where Negroes lined up in the alley. Nobody stopped her, and again she'd felt stupid for not trying this sooner" (Bennett 115). Stella's unquestioned admittance through the museum's main door emphasizes the performative aspect of race and demonstrates how whiteness, when tied to appearance, serves as a pathway to social advantage and spatial liberty, or seeking employment and obtaining a white husband indicate her departure from her prior black racial identity, facilitated by the opportunities her light skin provides (AKRE 457).

For her, if whiteness is attainable, it must be seized and enacted. In this context, she speaks to Willie Lee "look at you, you just redheaded as Father Cavanaugh [who is a white priest in Mallard]- why does he get to be white and you don't?" (Bennett 10) captures Stella's internalized idea that race is an arbitrary social construct, can be navigated, or even avoided through behavior and looks, ultimately rationalizing her decision to assert whiteness as a method of empowerment and survival.

The chance that her skin tone closely resembles a white one presents an opportunity for her to pass, a notion she finds impossible to ignore. Given that they reside in a society that places a higher value on whites. Whiteness becomes an attribute she feels entitled to embrace to truly live and experience all that America can provide. Thus, departing from her mother and her sister Desiree to commence a white journey shows a significant decision on her part that entails a complete transformation of her identity, cutting all connections to her black roots as

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she “did not want to be found” (Bennett 75) or her display of hostility towards blacks, as her white husband Sanders would observe “she’d never spoken kindly of a negro” (113).

Despite being black herself or even her claim of not knowing Loretta, who is her black neighbor and friend, as she tells her white friends “she is not my friend”(Bennett 148) . By reconfiguring her soul, she not only rejects her black identity and heritage but also embodies an adversary to the black community by demonstrating this through her commitment to sustaining white supremacy (AKRE 457-458).

Her aversion to blackness also reflects her own internal insecurity about being exposed, having her genuine self-uncovered, and her authenticity shown. Being caught passing before, along with the success she has achieved, being married and perceived as white by her husband for years, and having a daughter she continues to deceive about her family history or racial background, are all factors she struggles with as she works to incorporate them into her new identity.

Her black neighbors in the predominantly white neighborhood symbolize both unease and a reminder of her black heritage, as she not only punishes her daughter for playing with “niggers” but she also avoided “for three weeks , Stilla avoided Loretta Walker” (Bennett 124), her black neighbor. Overlooking her whiteness and embracing all racist and white behaviors within her spirit, combined with the constant anxiety she experiences, are crucial elements that hinder her from accessing the genuine freedom that her new identity is meant to provide. (AKRE 458).

Her friendship with Loretta later emerges as a comforting choice that enables her to evade the conflict with her inner desires, while her own daughter dramatically becomes entangled in her mother’s falsehoods about her racial heritage. Therefore, it can be seen in the novel that she presents her daughter as white, ensures her behavior aligns with that identity, and tirelessly reshapes herself to manage the burden she bears. Amidst all these uncertainties,

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Stella connects her freedom and her life to her decision to pass for white and stay that way permanently.

Informing Desiree's daughter Jude about who was able to locate her "I can't go back through that door. It's another life, you understand?" (Bennett 189). Strengthens her decision regarding the life she leads. An interesting aspect highlighted by Brit Bennett in this novel is the steadfast decision to pass and permanently live as white, contrasting with those who do so temporarily to escape and find freedom, such as Frederick Douglass in his Narrative. Strengthens her decision regarding the life she leads. An interesting aspect highlighted by Brit Bennett in this novel is the steadfast decision to pass and permanently live as white, contrasting with those who do so temporarily to escape and find freedom, such as Frederick Douglass in his Narrative (AKRE 458-459).

Numerous critical race theorists and social scientists contend that racism is widespread, systemic, and deeply entrenched. From this viewpoint, it appears that no white individual in society is entirely innocent. The interaction of meanings assigned to race, the stereotypes held about others, and the desire to protect one's own status all significantly shape one's viewpoint (Delgado and Stefancic 79). Given this, Stella's choice to pass can be analysed via the perspective of critical race theory, especially as stated by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their book "Introduction to Critical Race Theor", which emphasizes that racism and race are pervasive and ingrained aspects of society rather than exceptions. Through CRT, Stella's behaviors go beyond personal decisions and are influenced by systemic forces, molded by a society that favors whiteness and penalizes blackness, More significantly, passing allowed Stella to break free from the entrenched beliefs of Mallard, a community fixated on colorism and racial purity, which had caused her emotional scars and a damaged identity, her choice to pass serves as both a survival tactic and a form of psychological freedom, as she aims to separate herself from the pains and pressures of her

history while striving for a life defined by independence and transformation. Thus, thereby demonstrating the extent to which entrenched racial hierarchies shape identity and agency.

### **2.3. Jude Winston: Dark-Skinned Identity in a Colorist Society**

Racism is still a common structural force in society showing itself both openly and subtly. According to Bethencourt, racism is the “division of humankind into groups” and is condensed to “suit particular political contexts.” (Qtd in Hussain 502). Individuals of color frequently experience stigmatization, segregation, and systemic marginalization, resulting in persistent identity crises and psychological challenges. These social dynamics are not coincidental but arise from historical and political frameworks established to perpetuate white supremacy and privilege (Gardner-Kennedy 41). In Brit Bennett’s novel *The Vanishing Half*, these complexities are meticulously examined, especially through the character of Jude Winston, whose experiences illustrate the convergence of racism, colorism, and internalized oppression.

Jude Winston’s identity is deeply influenced by her dark skin in a society that practices colorism, leading to both intra-Black bias and external discrimination from white society that push her to the margins. Raised in the mainly light-skinned village of Mallard, Jude witnesses the harmful impacts of colorism firsthand. In Mallard, having lighter skin is seen as a “gift” and represents beauty, whereas dark skin, such as Jude’s, is frequently marginalized and diminished (Bennett 23). As noted before, “the majority of the residents in Mallard regard ‘[l]ightness’ as a ‘gift’” (Bennett 6), which distinguishes Jude due to her darker complexion (Siemes 60). This fosters a profoundly isolating atmosphere where Jude’s dark complexion is seen as a disadvantage. She faces ongoing discrimination from both adults and peers, as the community circulates “crude whispers ... each time [Desiree and Jude] walked around town” (Bennett 73). As an adult, Jude remembers the cruel names that were directed at her: Tar Baby. Midnight. Darky. Mudpie. Said, Smile, we can’t see you. Said, You so dark You blend

into the chalkboard. Said, Bet, you could show up naked to a funeral. Bet Lightning bugs follow you in the daytime. Bet when you swim it look like oil (94).

These names not only showcase the personal slurs Jude faced but also highlight the systemic racism that pervades the society she resides in. In this manner, Jude's dark complexion acts as a social hurdle, separating her from chances and engagements (Siemes 60).

Jude's social dynamics are clarified by Critical Race Theory (CRT), especially the systemic aspect of racism, which is ingrained in society rather than existing solely as an individual prejudice (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Jude's experiences show how colorism is employed as a social stratification tool in both white society and the Black community. Jude's skin tone is seen as an obvious defect that Mallard needs to hide or change. The townspeople consider Jude's race to be a physical handicap (Łapińska 78). This is evident when the community reacts to her presence, comparing her to a war veteran with a visible injury:

They weren't used to having a dark child amongst them and were surprised by how much it upset them. Each time that girl passed by, no hat or nothing, they were galled as when Thomas Richard returned from the war, half a leg lighter, and walked around town with one pant leg pinned back so that everyone could see his loss. If nothing could be done about ugliness, you ought to at least look like you were trying to hide it. (Bennett 69)

This comparison underlines how strongly ingrained the desire for light skin is inside the community since it becomes a clear indicator of beauty and value. Their conversations at the local barbershop expose the community's fixation on lightness even more; there, individuals debate "about whose wife was fairer" and some think "drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark" (Bennett, 10). Jude's efforts to lighten her skin provide more insight on colorism's internalization. Aiming to fit Mallard's beauty criteria,

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Jude and her grandmother participate in skin-lightening ceremonies (Siemes 63): They poured baths with lemon and milk ... [Grandma] pasted honey masks on [Jude's] face, then slowly peeled them off She juiced oranges, mixed them with spices, and applied the mixture to Jude's face' (Bennett 119).

Furthermore, Jude's grandmother pushes her to remain "out of the sun" and to don a "big gardening hat" during summers to stop her skin from darkening (Bennett 94). These damaging behaviors show Jude's internalized self-loathing and highlight how generational spread of colorist ideas continues racial hierarchies (Siemes 61, 63). Jude finds it difficult to think that anyone could really love her because of her dark skin even after she leaves Mallard and starts a loving relationship with Reese. Her self-doubt is clear: "[S]he couldn't picture any boy loving her" (Bennett 126). Later, following intimacy with Reese, she considers: "[Reese] didn't care that she was dark, maybe, but he couldn't really like it. No one could (Bennett 149).

Jude's growth and resilience in the face of these challenges are the main themes of her story. After Jude wins the 400-meter state championship and is awarded a scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles, she has the chance to "rescue ... herself" from Mallard (Bennett 93). Serving at catered events in Beverly Hills is one of the many jobs she works to support herself and Reese. She then submits an application to medical school, showcasing her perseverance in overcoming racial, class, and gender barriers (Siemes 62). Jude's journey also demonstrates how she gradually accepted the way she looked. She courageously swims in the open with Reese at Venice Beach, something she had never done in Mallard: "in Mallard, she never dared to swim in the river" (Bennett 141).

Despite being vulnerable, she embraces her body fearlessly and fights the shame that society places on her, demonstrating a deep internal change (Siemes 62). Jude's value system is further demonstrated by her preference for Desiree over Stella. Jude affirms when Desiree

regrets not having taken a different route: “I’m glad you’re not like her,” [Jude] said. ‘I’m glad I ended up with you’” (Bennett 386). Thus, Jude rejects Stella’s pursuit of whiteness and material success in favor of authenticity, love, and integrity.

This transformation aligns with Irene Visser’s (2015) theory that postcolonial trauma narratives focus not merely on victimhood but on resistance and healing. Jude’s story, then, reconfigures trauma: rather than centering on suffering alone, *The Vanishing Half* emphasizes Jude’s resilience and the possibility of overcoming the damage inflicted by colorism (Siemes 62-63).

Finally, the town of Mallard serves as an example of how deeply ingrained and sustained colorist ideologies can be, even though individuals such as Jude exhibit personal resistance. Their “obsession with lightness” (Bennett 10) exposes their complicity in upholding white supremacist beauty standards, despite the fact that they occasionally mock racial segregation laws (Siemes 63).

In conclusion, Jude Winston’s experiences highlight the pervasive impact of colorism on Black people, demonstrating how it shapes their opportunities, relationships, and sense of self-worth. Colorism, as seen through the lens of CRT, is a systemic issue rooted in the larger structures of racism and white supremacy, rather than a personal one. Jude’s eventual rejection of colorist ideals and acceptance of her true identity highlight the possibility of resistance and healing, providing a compelling story of hope and self-empowerment.

### **2.4. The Legacy of Colorism in Mallard**

Mallard, Louisiana, is a mythologized town built explicitly on colorist ideals. As Brit Bennett writes, “The town was more idea than place” (Bennett 10). It was a town for men like Alphonse Decuir, a freed son of a slave and her master, who had inherited his father’s land and built a town for men like him. That man, Alphonse Decuir, a light-skinned freedman, founded the town in 1848 with a specific vision: to create a community where each generation

would be lighter than the one before. He did not just want freedom; he wanted to build a town purified of darkness, where lightness became legacy. “A more perfect Negro Each generation lighter than the one before.” (10).

Generations later, locals still remembered it as a town inhabited solely by light-skinned African-Americans. In Bennett’s novel, Mallard’s origin story is presented without question, anchoring the community in an explicitly color-coded hierarchy. CRT helps us see that this “utopia” is not innocent: race and color in Mallard are socially constructed privileges, passed down as a family creed (Boakye-Nkrumah 41-42).

In Mallard, colorism is systemic because lighter skin is valued, and darker skin punished. Residents marry only other “creamy skinned” (Bennett 11). “people and even avoid dark foods during pregnancy, hoping their children come out lighter “ (13). Colorism is not just personal bias but a community doctrine in Mallard, defining who belongs. As Bennett describes: “In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far.” (9). This quote reveals the town’s fixation with skin color as a core value (Boakye-Nkrumah 43).

CRT emphasizes that race is a social construct — a category created to maintain power hierarchies. Mallard literalizes this; the town’s residents redraw the line between Black and “white” to exclude themselves from Blackness, even as they remain legally Black. By privileging light skin, Mallard’s founding logic treats race as a malleable identity. As Delgado and Stefancic note: “Race and races are products of social thought and relations, Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic Reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (3).

Mallard embodies this social phenomenon rooted not in biology but in social dynamics. Their “utopia” assumes essential racial traits (whiteness vs. Blackness) based on complexion.

A utopia is typically defined as an idealized perfect society — often unrealistic or unattainable (Singh 945). CRT views utopias with suspicion because they can mask oppression as “ideal.” In theory, Mallard is a light-skinned utopia: it promises harmony and pride among its chosen people. But in practice, this vision is self-limiting and hypocritical. As Jitender Pal Singh writes: “Utopia represents a vision of an ideal society, a blueprint for a better world.” (944).

Mallard’s founders believed they were creating a better world for themselves, but the result was a closed, insular caste that reproduced the old racism in a new form. Mallard’s mythic founding reveals its colorist utopia – an imagined haven where lightness is sacred. CRT critiques such visions by showing how they reinforce hierarchy. Mallard’s very purpose was to separate its people from Blackness even as it remained segregated from white society. One moment in the novel captures this contradiction: “You were supposed to be safe in Mallard—that strange, separate town—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 38).

This shows how even the “safe” utopia of Mallard is shaped by external racial violence and internalized colorist logic (Boakye-Nkrumah 44). This vision deeply affects Stella and Desiree Vignes. Stella, the lighter twin, absorbs Mallard’s creed from childhood and later realizes it offers her escape. In New Orleans, Stella passes as white to get a secretary job. Bennett dramatizes Stella’s internal conflict with dialogue and imagery. When a man questions why she left her sister “for a man,” Stella replies: “Not for him. I just—I liked who I was with him. I liked who I was pretending to be.” (Bennett 304). Stella equates passing with freedom and self-acceptance. Desiree later guesses, “White,” as the reason Stella left, and Stella responds: “No. Free.” (304). These moments reveal that Stella’s “utopia” is personal liberation through whiteness. Yet CRT warns that this “freedom” comes at the cost of rejecting her own history and community. On another level, Mallard’s utopian promise is

empty. Delgado and Stefancic discuss anti-essentialism, noting: “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity.” (4).

Stella’s fractured self – a Black twin with a secret white life – proves this. She experiences loneliness and identity fracture. Bennett illustrates this with insight, “She hadn’t realized how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you.” (162). Stella’s passing makes her feel singular, not special. She is caught between worlds and finds neither satisfying. CRT would say Mallard’s utopia achieved the opposite of genuine community: instead of solidarity, it breeds alienation.

Thus, Mallard’s “light-skinned paradise” exemplifies a racially essentialist vision: it assumes that light skin inherently means better destiny. CRT rejects essentialism, showing that such logic maintains white supremacy even within Black communities. Mallard’s strict color line proves race is socially defined: even though Mallardites are Black by law, they consider themselves superior to other Black people. In Mallard’s utopia, value is attached to phenotype, not character or person. CRT exposes this as internalized racism. Stella’s plight – trading one constraint for another and living in fear of being “found out” – shows the cost of Mallard’s myth. Her daughter Kennedy inherits this legacy.

### **2.4.1. Colorism and Generational Identity**

Mallard’s legacy extends to the next generation, shaping Kennedy (Stella’s daughter) as much as it did her mother. Kennedy grows up extremely light-skinned, raised in a white-dominated world. She enjoys privileges Mallard promised (comfortable life, toys, respect), yet feels rootless. Her internalized colorism creates dislocation and identity confusion. When Jude (Desiree’s darker daughter) enters her life, Kennedy confronts her buried heritage. Bennett writes Kennedy’s thoughts in sharp contrast, “She would know, she decided. You couldn’t go through your whole life not knowing something so fundamental about yourself. She would

feel it somehow. She would see it in the faces of other blacks, some sort of connection. But she felt nothing” (Bennett 260).

This quote highlights Kennedy’s alienation. Despite knowing genetically she is Black, Kennedy feels no intrinsic bond with Blackness. CRT’s concept of intersectionality helps explain this: Kennedy occupies overlapping identities (Black and white in one person), but she was raised entirely within the privileges of whiteness. She can redefine herself at will – a freedom that comes only from Mallard’s privileged stance. Jude tells her, “They only like light Negroes out there. You’d fit right in” (Bennett 281) in Mallard because the people of Mallard were so fond of light-skinned Black people. Yet Kennedy resists this claim, insisting her father is white. This reaction shows Kennedy’s confusion about which identity is “truer.” Mallard raised her to see light skin as ideal, but not to accept being Black at all (Łapińska 81). Another quote deepens this identity conflict, “She had been acting her entire life, which meant that she was the best liar that she knew. Well, second best.” (Bennett 285). Here, Bennett highlights Kennedy’s lifelong performance — not just as an actress, but as someone masking her racial truth. Her entire life becomes a series of roles, further illustrating her fragmented identity and the emotional toll of denying her heritage.

By contrast, Jude grew up dark-skinned in Mallard and embraced her Black identity. She never questions who she is or resents it – in fact, she is comfortable with herself. For example, Jude confidently lives in Minneapolis and even comments to Kennedy that “you would fit right in” in Mallard (Bennett 281). Jude’s steadiness underlines the destructive effect of Mallard’s myth on Kennedy. Jude knows who she is; Kennedy is endlessly remaking herself. Kennedy’s career in acting – “transforming” on stage – symbolically reflects her search for self. CRT would note that intersectional factors (Kennedy’s race, gender, socioeconomic class) intersect to shape her identity crisis. She is wealthy and fair enough to

pass, yet still legally and biologically Black. The social construction of race here leaves her unanchored.

Therefore, Bennett shows Kennedy's confusion as a legacy of Mallard's colorism: the town's creed taught one generation to reject darkness and the next to reject Blackness itself. In sum, Mallard's utopian dream becomes a haunting legacy: its ideals invade the identities of Stella, Desiree, Kennedy, and Jude, producing internal conflict, alienation, and a profound misunderstanding of race and self.

### **Conclusion**

Brit Bennett troubles racial essentialism in *The Vanishing Half* when she illustrates that race and skin color are socially constructed and not biological realities. Mallard's community was designed to efface Blackness and prize light skin. Through this lens, Bennett interrogates the existential, generational, and psychological experiences around the identification of identity with skin color. This tension is played out in the story of the Vignes twins: Stella, who lives as a white woman, for whom belonging ultimately comes at the sacrifice of safety and under the constant threat of discovery; Desiree, who reclaims her Blackness and finds power in the truth. Being white is something that allows her to have privilege, but also isolates her from her history and ancestry

Their daughters are shaped by Mallard's ideals. With her dark skin, Jude is anchored in self-knowledge, while Kennedy, born into whiteness, experiences dislocation and identity confusion. Kennedy's entitlement gives her the veneer of freedom, not the drag of history or of connection. This difference is meant to emphasize the novel's central thesis, namely, that colorism is not simply a social prejudice, but a system that reproduces inequality in the shape of aesthetic preference.

Bennett does not only critique a fictional town; she lays bare how closeness to whiteness is a currency in American racial logic, even among Black people. Mallard's project founder

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because it is a project built on exclusion — on the myth that lighter skin equals a better life. *The Vanishing Half* argues that freedom is not merely escaping Blackness, but in confronting the systems that taught us to be afraid of it. Underneath the skin, however, Bennett discovers the true vanishing: the erasure of self that comes with denying one's roots.

# ***GENERAL CONCLUSION***

## General Conclusion

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This study explored the themes of racial identity and the intricacies of passing in Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half*. The narrative demonstrates how the decisions of one's forebears influence the formation of one's identity. Building upon the key concepts of CRT, the research analyzed how the novel critiques the socially fabricated essence of race and reveals the systemic disparities that underlie racial classification, while also reflecting the dynamic and frequently politicized aspects of racial identity within the American setting.

The analysis showed that self-reinvention in *The Vanishing Half* is achieved through hard decisions involving ideas of nonconformity to societal norms, racial identity selection via the process of passing, and through self-awareness. Consequently, we have uncovered how the twin sisters, along with their offspring, have significantly influenced their lives in unique manners and embraced the responsibilities stemming from the decisions they made throughout their lives.

Therefore, the decision to cross the color line carried significant repercussions, affecting not just the person who violated the established racial hierarchy. In the novel, Stella's racial passing not only causes emotional struggles for her but also affects her relationship with her entire family, regardless of whether they are aware of her passing. Her crossing the color line also affects the formation of her daughter's identity, a matter that Kennedy cannot resolve no matter how much effort she puts in. Kennedy, however, chose to continue identifying as white even though she was aware of her mother's background and society's perspective on race. That decision, however, did not help her in discovering the absent identity she was constantly pursuing.

On the other hand, Desiree shows that happiness can be found outside of the problems that come with being a certain race. Desiree stays in Mallard for almost twenty years after she comes back. Desiree is finally happy with who she is after letting go of all the ideas she had

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about how other people saw her. She finds herself in small-town living and as a mother, where race is not a big deal. Even after she leaves Mallard, she does not care about race issues and is still happy with herself and her life.

Rather, the cost in Bennett's novel appears to relate to the identity issues of the upcoming generation. The physical violence associated with race is directed at those who do not cross the color boundary: the father of the Vignes twins or Desiree. This can demonstrate that racial violence is unwarranted, and the aggression shown by the offenders may not be individual but rooted in pre-existing beliefs about race.

Colorism and the community's bias towards lighter skin in Mallard act as the fundamental influences guiding the twins' differing racial decisions. The ingrained notion that fairer skin signifies higher social worth drives Stella to present herself as white for privilege and safety, while Desiree opposes this idea by staying true to her Black heritage. Their journeys highlight how profoundly established colorist beliefs can affect individual identity and life choices in a racially hierarchical society.

Their ethnicity, identities, and skin color have served as political tools through which they have expressed their perspectives on their place in America and how they choose to develop within it, accepting their individual decisions and outcomes. Consequently, Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* offers a structure through which personal identities in racial, psychological, and political settings can be examined in terms of comprehending how social dynamics influence people's lives.

Additionally, the analysis of *The Vanishing Half* was significantly influenced and improved by the theoretical framework that was introduced in chapter one. The novel's central framework, Critical Race Theory, showed that race is a social and political construct. It also demonstrated that racial classifications are historically and culturally constructed instruments that uphold social hierarchies and systemic inequality rather than being biologically based.

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Furthermore, the study of colorism revealed intra-racial dynamics, highlighting the idea that racial value is socially constructed and showing how being close to whiteness—especially through lighter skin—grants access to advantages that are frequently denied to people with darker skin. Similarly, the issue of racial passing was examined as a complex survival strategy in a racially divided society as well as an individual decision, raising important questions regarding loss, authenticity, and freedom.

Crenshaw's intersectionality theory and Bell's interest convergence theory established a fundamental framework for examining the interconnected systems of oppression and the situational aspect of race. Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality clarifies how the interconnected aspects of race, gender, and class influence the experiences of Stella and Desiree. Desiree's challenges emphasize the intertwined impacts of racial discrimination, gender expectations, and economic difficulties, whereas Stella's choice to embrace a white identity can be seen as a reaction to the accumulated social and financial limitations encountered by Black women. This method emphasizes the intricacy of their identities as they are entangled in interconnected oppressive systems.

Bell's theory of interest convergence posits that advancements in racial equity occur solely when they also serve the interests of the dominant group. In the story, characters with lighter skin or those who can pass receive advantages not through genuine equality, but because their assimilation fits with the interests of those in power. This, combined with other theories, highlights how larger power frameworks influence personal identity, revealing the tension between individual choices and systemic oppression.

This dissertation adds to the area of African American literary criticism and Critical Race Theory by offering a comprehensive analysis of racial passing and identity politics in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. While previous studies have often explored the novel through the frameworks of traditional racism, identity, or trauma, this examination fills a

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notable gap by analyzing Bennett's narrative through the core concepts of CRT—especially Derrick Bell's notions of racial realism and interest convergence. It contends that Bennett not only revisits the concept of passing as a historical occurrence, but also reinterprets it as a modern, generational, and profoundly political approach to dealing with systemic oppression. Moreover, the research provides new understanding of how literature mirrors the intergenerational struggle in racial identity, illustrating how younger generations receive, oppose, or reinterpret the traditions of racial passing.

By grounding its reading in the theoretical frameworks of Bell, Crenshaw, and Delgado, this dissertation not only deepens our understanding of *The Vanishing Half* but also expands the broader academic conversation on Black female agency, colorism, and the politics of racial identity in 21st-century literature. Ultimately, it positions Bennett's novel as a vital text that challenges static notions of race and contributes meaningfully to the evolving discourse on race, identity, and power in contemporary American fiction.

A limitation faced in analyzing the chosen novel is the lack of secondary critical materials that specifically focus on the text. Because of the scarce scholarly literature on this particular novel, the research relied heavily on close reading enhanced by appropriate theoretical ideas, while permitting an extensive examination, constrained the capacity to address varied critical perspectives and comparative studies. Moreover, this dependence on primary textual analysis might restrict the integration of wider interdisciplinary viewpoints or current critical discussions. A further challenge stems from the subjective aspect of interpretation involved in close reading, potentially impacting the generalizability of results.

In conclusion, a significant area for future study might involve examining motherhood and intergenerational trauma in *The Vanishing Half*. The novel delicately illustrates how trauma, decisions, and silence are passed down through generations—especially between mothers and daughters—even though racial identity and passing are major themes. Deep

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insights into the emotional and psychological impacts of race, grief, and separation may be gained by examining the ways in which maternal connections impact identity, memory, and healing. Closely linked to this is the influence of location and migration in shaping identity and sense of belonging. The characters' journeys—from the secluded town of Mallard to places such as New Orleans and Los Angeles—reflect internal changes in identity, as geographical movement frequently aligns with the yearning for transformation or liberation. Exploring the ways in which physical environments affect psychological and racial change could provide greater understanding of how identity is formed, shaped not just by relationships but also by the settings in which they occur.

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## الملخص:

مع التركيز على المرور العنصري والتمييز على أساس اللون كتعبيرات عن العنصرية المنهجية، تبحث هذه الأطروحة في كيفية تطور الهوية العرقية والتفاوض عليها في رواية برييت بينيت لعام 2020 بعنوان "النصف المتلاشي". من خلال اختيار هويات مختلفة، تواجه الشخصيات - وخاصة الأختين التوأم ستيليا وديزيري فينيس - أنظمة عرقية قمعية. تختار ستيليا أن تمر كامرأة بيضاء وتتكيف مع المجتمع الأبيض، بينما تحتضن ديزيريه هويتها السوداء وتحافظ على روابطها بمجتمعها. من خلال الأعمال الرائدة لديريك بيل وكيمبرلي كرينشو وريتشارد ديلجادو، تبحث هذه الدراسة القائمة على نظرية العرق النقدية في الطرق التي يتقاطع بها العرق والهوية والسلطة في القصة. في ظل الخلفية الاجتماعية والتاريخية لأمريكا في القرن العشرين، تسلط الرواية الضوء على الآثار النفسية والسياسية للمرور العنصري، مع التركيز على كيفية ارتباط البياض بالامتياز وارتباط الإقصاء بالبياض. الهوية العرقية في الرواية ديناميكية، كما يوضح التحليل. يختلف هذا المفهوم باختلاف الظروف، ويتأثر بأفعال الناس، ويرتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالسلطة والسياسة. في النهاية، تأمل هذه الدراسة أن تسهم في نقد الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي من خلال توضيح كيفية استخدام بينيت لمفهوم "التمرير العرقي" لمنح النساء السود مزيداً من السيطرة على حياتهن، مع انتقادها الواضح للعنصرية المستمرة في المجتمع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** نظرية العرق النقدية، الهوية العرقية، التمييز على أساس اللون، التمرّد العرقي، النساء السود، الأمريكيون الأفارقة.