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**RACIAL PASSING AND THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM: A
CRITICAL RACE THEORY ANALYSIS OF BRIT BENNETT'S
*THE VANISHING HALF***



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Abstract

*This study examines the representation of racial passing and the permanence of racism in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) through the theoretical lens of Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory (CRT). The study aims to explore how Bennett portrays racial passing not merely as an individual act of identity transformation but as a survival strategy shaped by systemic racism and white privilege. Employing a qualitative research methodology and close textual analysis, the research investigates the experiences of Stella and Desiree Vignes, whose contrasting life choices reveal the enduring influence of racial hierarchy in American society. The analysis demonstrates that Stella's decision to pass as White provides temporary social mobility but fails to dismantle the structural inequalities that necessitate racial passing in the first place. Conversely, Desiree's experiences expose the persistent discrimination faced by African Americans who openly embrace their racial identity. The findings further reveal that racism extends beyond individual prejudice to operate through institutions, social practices, and cultural norms that sustain white privilege across generations. Bennett's portrayal of family separation, identity conflict, and intergenerational trauma reinforces Bell's concept of the permanence of racism by illustrating that racial inequality continues to shape opportunities, relationships, and lived experiences despite the perception of social progress. The study contributes to contemporary literary criticism by extending the application of Critical Race Theory to Bennett's novel and demonstrating how contemporary African American fiction continues to expose the structural nature of racism in the United States.*

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Derrick Bell, racial passing, permanence of racism, white privilege, Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, African American literature.

1.0 Introduction

Race has remained one of the most contested categories in American history and literature, shaping social relations, access to opportunities, and the construction of identity. Although race is understood as a social rather than a biological category, its influence continues to structure everyday experiences through systems of privilege and exclusion. American literature has consistently explored the complexities of racial identity, particularly the experiences of African Americans who have negotiated the enduring effects of slavery, segregation, and institutional discrimination. Contemporary fiction extends this tradition by examining how racial identity intersects with personal agency, family relationships, and broader social structures (Omi & Winant, 2015).

One of the most significant manifestations of racial inequality in American history is the phenomenon of racial passing, whereby light-skinned African Americans present themselves as White to escape racial discrimination and gain access to social, economic, and political privileges. While passing may provide temporary opportunities for social mobility, it often demands the rejection of one's cultural heritage, family ties, and personal identity. Consequently, racial passing reveals not only the persistence of racial hierarchies but also the psychological and ethical costs associated with navigating a society structured by systemic racism (Hobbs, 2014).

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) revisits the tradition of passing narratives through the lives of identical twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, who choose radically different paths after leaving their hometown of Mallard, Louisiana. Stella embraces a White identity and enjoys the privileges associated with whiteness, whereas Desiree returns to her Black community and confronts racial discrimination directly. Through their contrasting experiences and those of the next generation, Bennett explores the enduring effects

of race, colorism, family memory, and identity formation within contemporary America. Rather than presenting passing merely as an individual decision, the novel exposes the social structures that make such a choice both possible and costly (Bennett, 2020).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an effective framework for examining these issues because it conceptualizes racism as an ordinary and deeply embedded feature of American institutions rather than an exceptional or isolated phenomenon. Developed by legal scholars including Derrick Bell, CRT argues that racial inequality is reproduced through legal, political, economic, and cultural systems that sustain White privilege despite formal commitments to equality. Bell's concept of the permanence of racism is particularly relevant to Bennett's novel because it suggests that individual success or assimilation cannot eliminate structural racial oppression. Stella's ability to pass as White improves her social status but does not dismantle the racial system that necessitates passing in the first place (Bell, 1992).

Although previous scholarship has explored themes of identity, colorism, family history, and racial passing in *The Vanishing Half*, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining the novel through Derrick Bell's concept of the permanence of racism. Existing studies often emphasize identity construction or psychological conflict while overlooking the structural dimensions of racial inequality that Critical Race Theory foregrounds. This study addresses that gap by investigating how Bennett represents racial passing as both a survival strategy and a reflection of the enduring operation of systemic racism in contemporary American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

1.1 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of racial passing and the permanence of racism in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) through Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory. The study investigates how the novel portrays racial passing as a response to systemic racism while demonstrating that individual assimilation into whiteness cannot eliminate structural racial inequality. It further explores how white privilege, institutional racism, and racial identity shape the experiences of the novel's characters and contribute to Bennett's critique of contemporary American racial relations.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of racial passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* through the lens of Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory.
2. To analyze how the novel demonstrates the permanence of racism by exposing the influence of systemic racism and white privilege on racial identity and lived experiences.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by providing a Critical Race Theory analysis of Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* through Derrick Bell's concept of the permanence of racism. While existing scholarship has largely focused on racial identity, colorism, memory, and family dynamics, this study shifts attention toward the structural dimensions of racism that shape the characters' choices and experiences. By examining racial passing as a consequence of systemic racial inequality rather than merely an individual act of identity transformation, the research offers a more comprehensive understanding of Bennett's social critique.

The study also enriches Critical Race Theory by extending Derrick Bell's theoretical insights into contemporary African American fiction. It demonstrates how literature functions as a powerful medium for exposing the persistence of white privilege, institutional discrimination, and racial hierarchies despite the perception of a post-racial society. Furthermore, the research provides valuable insights for scholars of African American literature, race studies, cultural studies, and identity politics by highlighting the continuing relevance of racial passing in discussions of systemic inequality and social justice.

2.0 Literature Review

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its nuanced exploration of racial identity, colorism, family history, and the social construction of race. Critics have emphasized that the novel revitalizes the African American passing tradition by situating it within contemporary debates on identity and belonging. Rather than portraying passing as merely an individual choice, Bennett presents it as a complex negotiation with social structures that privilege whiteness while marginalizing Black identities. Through the lives of Stella and Desiree Vignes, the novel demonstrates that

racial identity is shaped not only by physical appearance but also by historical, cultural, and institutional forces (Brooks, 2022).

A significant body of scholarship has examined racial passing as the central thematic concern of the novel. Scholars argue that Stella's decision to pass as White reflects the social and economic advantages attached to whiteness in American society. However, these studies also contend that passing requires emotional sacrifice, isolation, and the suppression of familial and cultural identity. Bennett's narrative therefore challenges the assumption that racial passing leads to liberation by illustrating its psychological and ethical consequences. The novel reveals that while passing may alter social status, it cannot erase the historical realities of racism or the individual's connection to their racial heritage (Morrison, 2021).

Another major area of research focuses on colorism and intraracial discrimination. Researchers argue that Bennett exposes the privileges associated with lighter skin within both White and Black communities. The fictional town of Mallard, where lighter skin is idealized across generations, symbolizes the internalization of racial hierarchies created by White supremacy. Studies suggest that Bennett demonstrates how colorism reproduces inequality within marginalized communities while reinforcing broader systems of racial oppression. Consequently, the novel broadens discussions of race by highlighting how discrimination operates not only between racial groups but also within them (Hunter, 2007).

Several scholars have analyzed the novel through the concepts of identity formation and performativity. They argue that racial identity in *The Vanishing Half* is neither fixed nor biologically determined but socially constructed and continuously negotiated. Stella's performance of whiteness illustrates the instability of racial categories, while Kennedy's discovery of her family history demonstrates that identity remains deeply connected to memory and ancestry. These studies conclude that Bennett questions essentialist understandings of race by portraying identity as a dynamic process shaped by social expectations and lived experiences (Hall, 1996).

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the intergenerational dimensions of trauma and memory in the novel. Critics argue that the consequences of racial passing extend beyond Stella and Desiree to influence the lives of their daughters, Kennedy and Jude. Family separation, silence, and inherited trauma become central mechanisms through which Bennett illustrates the lasting effects of racism across generations. These studies suggest that racial injustice is not confined to a single historical moment but continues to shape family relationships and personal identities over time (Hirsch, 2012).

Although existing scholarship has made valuable contributions to understanding *The Vanishing Half*, most studies concentrate on identity, gender, colorism, memory, or family dynamics. Comparatively fewer scholars have examined the novel through Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory, particularly his concept of the permanence of racism. Existing analyses often discuss discrimination as an individual or psychological experience without sufficiently addressing the structural and institutional nature of racism that Bell identifies. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how Bennett critiques systemic racial inequality through the narrative of racial passing (Bell, 2004).

The present study addresses this gap by employing Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory to examine racial passing as a response to enduring structural racism rather than merely an individual identity choice. By focusing on the permanence of racism, the study demonstrates that Bennett portrays passing not as an escape from racism but as evidence of the resilience of racial hierarchies within American society. This perspective contributes to contemporary literary criticism by connecting Bennett's fictional narrative with Critical Race Theory's broader critique of institutional racism, White privilege, and racial inequality.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the representation of racial passing and the permanence of racism in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Qualitative literary research is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of textual meanings, narrative structures, characterization, and thematic representations within literary texts. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research emphasizes interpretation and critical analysis, allowing researchers to investigate how literature reflects and critiques social realities. Since the present study focuses on racial identity, systemic racism, and white privilege, qualitative textual analysis provides the most suitable approach for interpreting the ideological and cultural dimensions embedded in the novel (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary source of data is Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020), while secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and theoretical works related to Critical Race Theory, racial passing, African American literature, and identity studies. Relevant academic materials are collected from reputable databases such as JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Springer, Google Scholar, and Project MUSE to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research. These sources provide the theoretical and scholarly foundation for interpreting the selected textual evidence (Flick, 2022).

The analysis follows a close reading approach in which significant passages related to racial passing, racial identity, institutional racism, and white privilege are identified and interpreted. The selected textual evidence is analyzed through the principles of Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory to demonstrate how the novel critiques structural racism and exposes the persistence of racial inequality in contemporary American society. The findings are organized thematically according to the major concepts of the theoretical framework, ensuring coherence between the research objectives and textual analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based on textual analysis. This design facilitates a systematic examination of literary texts by interpreting language, symbolism, characterization, dialogue, and narrative development in relation to the selected theoretical framework. Rather than measuring numerical variables, qualitative textual analysis seeks to understand how meaning is constructed within literary discourse and how literature reflects broader social and cultural realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study is interpretive in nature because it investigates the representation of racial passing as a literary and socio-cultural phenomenon. The research does not attempt to generalize findings statistically but instead provides a detailed critical interpretation of selected passages from the novel. The textual evidence is categorized according to Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory, particularly the concept of the permanence of racism, enabling a comprehensive understanding of Bennett's critique of institutional racism and white privilege. This research design is well suited to literary studies because it allows for contextual and thematic interpretation while maintaining close engagement with the primary text (Tracy, 2020).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory (CRT), with particular emphasis on his concept of the permanence of racism. Emerging from legal scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, Critical Race Theory argues that racism is not an isolated or accidental phenomenon but an ordinary and enduring feature of American society. Rather than viewing racism solely as the result of individual prejudice, CRT emphasizes that racial inequality is embedded within legal, political, educational, economic, and cultural institutions. Consequently, racism continues to reproduce social inequalities even when laws appear formally neutral (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Among the leading scholars of Critical Race Theory, Derrick Bell argues that racism is permanent because it serves the interests of dominant social groups and remains deeply rooted in institutional structures. His theory challenges liberal assumptions that legal reforms alone can eliminate racial inequality. Instead, Bell maintains that racial progress is often temporary and contingent upon the interests of those in power. This perspective provides an effective framework for analyzing *The Vanishing Half*, where Stella's decision to pass as White offers individual social mobility but leaves the larger system of racial hierarchy intact. Her experience demonstrates that racial passing may alter one's social position without dismantling the structural conditions that produce racial discrimination (Bell, 2008).

Critical Race Theory also highlights the relationship between race, power, and white privilege. In Bennett's novel, whiteness functions as a form of social capital that grants access to opportunities unavailable to Black individuals. Stella's successful performance of whiteness illustrates how racial privilege operates institutionally rather than biologically, while Desiree's experiences reveal the persistent discrimination faced by those identified as Black. Through these contrasting narratives, Bennett exposes the systemic nature of racism and challenges the notion that America has entered a post-racial era. Derrick Bell's framework therefore provides an appropriate analytical lens for examining the novel's critique of racial passing, identity, and structural inequality (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The theoretical framework guides the interpretation of the selected textual evidence by examining how racial passing reflects the permanence of racism rather than its disappearance. It enables the study to investigate the institutional mechanisms that sustain racial hierarchies, the operation of white privilege, and

the psychological consequences of navigating socially constructed racial boundaries. Consequently, Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory provides both the conceptual foundation and the analytical tools necessary to address the research objectives and answer the research questions of the present study.

4.0 Data Analysis

Brit Bennett presents racial passing not as an expression of individual freedom but as a survival strategy necessitated by a racially oppressive social order. Through Stella Vignes' decision to pass as White, the novel demonstrates that racial identity is socially constructed and governed by institutional power rather than biological difference. Stella's transformation is motivated by the privileges attached to whiteness, including economic security, social acceptance, and protection from racial violence. Bennett therefore suggests that racial passing is not an act of liberation but a response to systemic inequality. This representation closely aligns with Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory, particularly his argument that racism is a permanent feature of American society because access to privilege continues to depend upon racial hierarchy rather than equality. The foundation of Stella's decision lies in the traumatic murder of her father, Leon Vignes. Bennett illustrates that the twins' understanding of race is shaped by an early encounter with racial violence, demonstrating that systemic racism affects not only individuals but entire families.

"White folks kill you if you want too much, kill you if you want too little... You gotta follow they rules but they change 'em when they feel." (Bennett, 2020, p. 28)

This statement encapsulates the arbitrary and oppressive nature of White supremacy. The quotation reveals that Black people are denied agency because the rules governing their lives are determined entirely by those in power. Regardless of obedience or resistance, Black individuals remain vulnerable to racial violence. From Derrick Bell's perspective, this passage illustrates the permanence of racism, demonstrating that discrimination is embedded within the social order rather than resulting from isolated acts of prejudice. Bennett therefore portrays Leon's murder as evidence that racial injustice functions systematically, allowing White violence to operate with impunity while denying Black communities equal protection under the law. Bennett reinforces this critique through Desiree's recollection of her father's death, emphasizing that even the seemingly protected community of Mallard cannot escape the reach of White supremacy.

"As the years passed, their father would only come to her in flashes, like when she fingered a denim shirt and felt small again, pressed against the rough fabric spanning her father's chest. 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. The Vignes twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses who grew up without a daddy because white men decided that it would be so." (Bennett, 2020, p. 28)

This passage vividly illustrates Bell's assertion that racism is not confined to particular locations or individual interactions but permeates the institutional fabric of American society. Mallard was established as a refuge for light-skinned African Americans, yet Bennett demonstrates that the town remains powerless against the broader racial hierarchy. The phrase *"even here"* underscores the impossibility of escaping systemic racism through geographical separation or community solidarity. More significantly, the statement *"white men could kill you for refusing to die"* symbolizes the unchecked authority exercised by the dominant racial group over Black lives. Leon's death is not represented as an exceptional tragedy but as a consequence of institutionalized racism that legitimizes racial violence.

The description of Stella and Desiree as *"tiny girls in funeral dresses"* further highlights the intergenerational consequences of structural racism. Their father's lynching deprives them of emotional security and shapes the trajectories of their adult lives. Stella eventually chooses to pass as White in pursuit of safety and privilege, whereas Desiree retains her Black identity and continues to confront racial discrimination. Bennett thus illustrates that racism extends beyond individual suffering to influence family structures, collective memory, and future generations. Through Bell's Critical Race Theory, this passage demonstrates that racial inequality persists because the institutions sustaining White privilege remain fundamentally unchanged.

The novel further illustrates how racism operates through everyday social interactions by depicting Jude's first experience at school. Desiree attempts to prepare her daughter for acceptance within the community, believing that kindness and friendliness will help her establish relationships.

"You gotta talk to people today," she said. "I talk to people I like," Jude said. "But you don't know yet, who you gonna like. So you gotta be friendly to everyone, just to see." (Bennett, 2020, p. 56)

Although this exchange appears to be ordinary parental advice, it carries significant ideological meaning when interpreted through Critical Race Theory. Desiree encourages Jude to approach others with openness, assuming that social acceptance can be achieved through positive behaviour. However, Bennett immediately undermines this expectation as Jude becomes the object of curiosity and exclusion because of her dark complexion. The passage therefore exposes the limitations of individual agency within a racially stratified society.

Bell argues that racism is structural rather than behavioural; consequently, discrimination cannot be overcome solely through good manners, education, or personal effort. Desiree hopes that Jude's friendliness will enable her to belong, yet the novel demonstrates that racial identity determines social treatment long before personality is considered. Bennett thereby reveals that systemic racism functions through everyday interactions that normalize exclusion and reinforce racial hierarchy.

Moreover, this episode foreshadows Jude's lifelong struggle against both racism and colorism. Her dark skin distinguishes her even within Mallard, a community where lighter skin is associated with beauty, status, and social acceptance. Bennett therefore illustrates that racial inequality is reproduced through ordinary social practices from childhood onward. Jude's experiences confirm Derrick Bell's argument that racism continually adapts to new social contexts while preserving existing structures of White privilege and racial hierarchy. Consequently, the novel portrays racial passing as a response to systemic oppression rather than a genuine escape from it, reinforcing the central Critical Race Theory principle that racism remains a permanent feature of American society.

5.0 Conclusion

This study has examined Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) through Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory to investigate the relationship between racial passing and the permanence of racism in contemporary American society. The analysis demonstrates that Bennett portrays racial passing not as an escape from racism but as a response to the structural inequalities that continue to privilege whiteness and marginalize Black identity. Through the contrasting experiences of Stella and Desiree Vignes, the novel illustrates that racial identity remains deeply intertwined with social power, institutional discrimination, and access to opportunity.

The findings reveal that Bell's concept of the permanence of racism provides a compelling framework for understanding the novel's critique of American racial relations. Episodes such as Leon Vignes' lynching, Stella's adoption of a White identity, Desiree's experiences of discrimination, and Jude's encounters with colorism collectively demonstrate that racism functions as a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon. Bennett emphasizes that racial hierarchy shapes family relationships, personal identity, education, employment, and social mobility, thereby reinforcing the argument that racism adapts to changing historical contexts instead of disappearing.

Furthermore, the study shows that racial passing offers only temporary access to privilege while demanding the suppression of cultural heritage, family ties, and authentic identity. Stella's social advancement is accompanied by fear, isolation, and emotional fragmentation, suggesting that assimilation into whiteness cannot eliminate the structural foundations of racial inequality. Bennett therefore challenges the myth of a post-racial America by exposing the continued operation of white privilege and institutional racism beneath the appearance of progress.

Overall, this research contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by demonstrating the continued relevance of Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory in the analysis of modern African American fiction. It highlights how *The Vanishing Half* exposes the enduring realities of systemic racism and invites readers to reconsider the relationship between race, identity, privilege, and justice in the United States. Future studies may extend this line of inquiry by comparing Bennett's novel with other contemporary passing narratives or by examining racial passing through complementary frameworks such as Intersectionality, Critical Whiteness Studies, or Trauma Theory to further enrich discussions of race and identity in twenty-first-century literature.

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