

(DIS)COVERING THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF THE COLORED IN *THE VANISHING HALF* BY BRIT BENNETT

Ejaz Hussain¹

Lecturer at Government Graduate College Samundri, Faisalabad.

Department of English
ejazhussain4722@gmail.com

Muzammil Taqi²

muzammiltaqi082020@gmail.com

Maham Ehsan³

mahamehsan00@gmail.com

Asad Ullah Javed⁴

M.Phil Scholar, Government College University Faisalabad

asadmalik1818@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

*Colored people are subjugated and marginalized in every possible way due to their racial identity. It is one of the burning issues not only in the contemporary American society but around the globe. The present research universalizes the phenomenon of creating binaries on the basis of race and color. It investigates how racial identities are generated to achieve certain political goals. It challenges the self-proclaimed notion of the white Americans that they are living in post-racial society. It identifies the multiple issues attached with this socially constructed phenomenon of racism. It examines the nature of systematic racism foregrounded in *The Vanishing Half* written by the Afro-American author Brit Bennett while employing Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's concepts discussed in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. These concepts intersect the modern forms of racism. It shows that minorities are victims of identity crises. They are the most invisible and unrepresented creatures. Multiple psychosocial issues are faced by these marginalized and colored people. They suffer under the supremacy of the white man.*

Keywords: racism, racial identity, black-white binary, white supremacy, colored identity, identity crises, politics of race, racialization

INTRODUCTION:

The colored people are stigmatized, segregated, and always kept at the margins of the society. Racism exists everywhere and takes multiple forms. Racism is “division of humankind into groups” and compacted to “fit specific political contexts.” (Bethencourt, 2013, p.31). The colored people are struggling to come out of this situation. They are going through identity crises and facing racial prejudices. There are multiple interventions in the lives of these colored people. The sole cause of these things is the white man's desire to dominate these people. Two things must be understood in order to grasp the idea of this research. First, the word colored is associated with all the colored people other than whites. Secondly, the idea of discovering the invisibility means to highlight the situations where these people are not given proper rights, not represented in the mainstream society. The idea of covering the visibility is referred to the solution of the highlighted issues which means giving them representation and equal rights in order to create a balanced and an ideal society. Furthermore, this concept is explored in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett using the ideas and concepts introduced by Delgado and Stefancic in their jointly written work *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2017). In this work the modern forms and methods are discussed related to the representation of the colored people. These concepts are not unipolar but multipolar as they are related to society, psychology, race, racism, and power politics.

The Vanishing Half (2020) revolves around the lives of the twin sisters, Desiree and Stella. Both of the sisters embark on the journey to find a better place and better opportunities to overcome the crises associated with their colored identity. There is a generational cycle to understand the issues attached with the identity of the colored people. Twin's father, Leon, was tortured due to his colored identity and later on shoot dead in the colored section of the hospital. Twin's mother forced to work in the houses of the white people. The twin sisters escape their hometown to improve their lives but face a lot of problems due to their racial identity. The third generation also faces these issues due to their colored identities. Jude, the daughter of Desiree, gets no acceptance in the society being a colored. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) tells the tale of the sufferings of the three generations. Apart from these characters there are many others who face these issues due to their racial identity. They become victims of this vicious politics played on the basis of racism. Among the other characters Reese and Sam are prominent who encounter multiple issues due to their racial identity.

There are certain characters who feel insecure even after passing (disguising) as a white. Stella is one of those characters. She marries a white man but constantly remains in fear of being exposed. She watches terrible dreams due to her past memories. Desiree remains unable to adjust anywhere in the society. She returns home after sixteen years to escape from the problems linked with her racial identity. Adele Vignes, the twin's mother, remains unable to cross the barrier of race. She was buried in the colored section of the graveyard after her death. It indicates that colored people are unable to get equal rights when they are alive and even afterlife. Reese, Jude's black boyfriend, suffers many times due to his racial identity and Sam, Desiree's husband, feels differentiated among his white fellows while Jude becomes obsessed with the whiteness.

Significance of the Research

Binaries exist everywhere around the globe. This paper focuses upon the binaries created between the white people and the people other than the white. This phenomenon of division among the people is universal as the subjects/people are marginalized and treated differently on the basis of physical appearance, color, cast, creed, and social status. At some places, this phenomenon exists in form of division based on the color while at the other places it exists in the form of social status. Looking at the scope of this research, it establishes that there is no logical or scientific evidences which can support the concepts generated on the basis of race. People are judged and assessed on the basis of these factors. It is practiced everywhere but it takes different forms. In this way, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is carrying a universal message for the humanity that racism is still apparent in the world and it must end in order to create a peaceful, cooperative, positive and productive environment around the globe. More importantly, Critical Race Theory is taken for the analysis which challenges the ideology of meritocracy, objectivity, the idea of equal opportunities and facilities, and neutrality of race as these are the major concerns of the contemporary (American) society. Specifically, it is very significant for the races reading in the American society where people are treated, judged, assessed, and approached according to their races, cultures, and appearances rather than being a human. It challenges the so called notion of Americans that they are living in post-racial and there are no such things as race or racism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Vanishing Half (2020) is studied and approached by a number of scholars. Multiple concepts are explored by the different researchers. The psychological domain, societal issues, cultural perspectives, political tactics, and definitely the most highlighted issue in the novel is racism are touched and explored. The very issue of identity is central to the work which is introduced by Enas Alrudaini. She discusses the complex formative process of identity through a psychological conduct. The major focus is given on Stella, the protagonist of the novel. Her personality is approached through the application of the concepts of denial and identity which lead to certain kind of problems related to identity. Stella's life was controlled by her unconsciousness which was completely "dominant to her logical and realistic status" (Al Rudaini, 2020, p.6). The concept of denial is displayed through the character of Stella. She denies multiple things in order to get recognition as a white. She overturns her cultural values, leaves her family, denies from her real identity to achieve the mark. She is defined as a megalomaniac character due to her obsession with power to dominate the other people. Dr. M. Ahmad and H. Akbar along with S. Mahmood has explored "the racial prejudices and inferiority faced by the African Americans" and the issues relevant to race and identity. (Akbar & Ahmed, 2021, p.1). Al Areqi has introduced the postcolonial version of this fiction. He emphasizes on the "importance of race and identity for the African Americans" colored people putting twin sisters into a theoretical analysis. (Al Areqi, 2022, p.1). A comparative study is conducted by A. Daniel where he compares this fiction with that Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*. His major concern in this research is to put "intense focus on categories and binaries" to intersect the systematic nature of racism. (Daniel, 2021, p.1). Perez unpacks this fiction observing race as something more than complicated. He suggests a way out of these troubles by saying that the colored people must "find their identity and place in an unwelcoming world" where racial aggression is above the peak and enviousness towards the black people is expanding within short instances. (Perez, 2020). Grant has described it as a "light-skinned twin sister reconstructs a new identity as a white woman in a clever novel that confounds expectations" and relates it with the old tales that of related to racism. (Grant, 2020). Sehgal has explored the joint concepts of power and performance of the race in the fiction and describes it as a "story of racial passing which is uniquely and intensely American form." (Sehgal, 2020). Shapiro has found it a critique of whiteness from the perspective of the individual who passes for "white by-choice – a choice motivated by an understandable desire for privilege, financial stability, and most of all safety." (Shapiro, 2020). George comes up with multiple things at the same time like of race, identity, love, and empathy and tags it a "generational portrait of the passing age" and relates it with the present time. (George, 2020). M. Rue explores what most of the people remain unable to locate in this fiction. She talks about the "benefits of being white surpass and the pain of sacrificing her own blackness." (Mass, 2022, p.ii).

Apart from these perspectives there are certain concepts which can be found in the novel like Marxist perspective is yet to be explored. It is evident in the novel from feminist point of view. A postcolonial version of the novel is also important while talking about the research gap and areas to be explored for futuristic approach to the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of analysis theoretical framework is derived from Delgado and Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2020). The critical race theory (CRT)

“is a collection of activities and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power.” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.3). It puts the same issues into broader perspective the conventional civil rights movement considered. It includes economic, history, settings, emotions and unconscious. CRT sprang up in 1970s from critical legal studies, radical feminism, and takes some ideas from postmodernist critics. CRT’s main concern is to intersect the modern forms of racism which leave more impact on psychology rather than social circumstances. Politics also plays its part in nurturing these modern forms of racism. Multiple interpretations are delivered by a number of critics about CRT. Tyson describes it as a “theory concerns itself with every topic that is relevant to race.” (Tyson, 2006, p.367). CRT brings each segment partially using the concepts like intersectionality, differential racialization, black white binary, racial segregation, institutional racism, interest convergence, and color blindness, which is identical to Fanon’s idea of collective catharsis, which suggest a remedy for these differences among the races and emphasis on the equality, liberty, identity and representation in the mainstream society. *Intersectionality* holds that “identity of an individual is a combination of multiple things” rather than a single fact and these things effect the every action of that individual like a man who is colored might be an African or African American and at the same he could be a Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, or Jew in terms of religion. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.22). Furthermore, gender is also there and political affiliations also impact one’s actions. So, intersectionality observes all of these things while talking about someone. It observes these things in interjective method. *Intersectionality* holds that “no person has a single , easily stated, unitary identity.” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.10). For example a white feminist also may belong to a Christian community or a business man may belong to leftist party or an African American journalist may be a male or female or gay. It claims that a person’s identity is influenced and effected by political affiliations, gender, religious beliefs, culture etc. “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances.” (p.11). Further, *Intersectionality* can be defined as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings,” (p.58) And all of these categories with some others had different disadvantaging factors. This concept is explicitly applicable for *The Vanishing Half* (2020) as the protagonist sisters belong to African race having Christian beliefs and distinguish identity. These intersectional factors influence their every action as well as the attitude of the other people. This phenomena is apparent everywhere the twin sisters initiate any action in the novel. For their parents it is even evident after their deaths. Another important concept which is applicable form the analysis is *differential racialization*. It is a process by which the society views and treats the each racial and ethnic groups in the mainstream society. *Differential racialization* describes and investigates “the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times” (p.10). It looks at the ways how the white people are preoccupied with the notion of identity. It also investigates the ways in which the society prefers to place the citizens into different boxes on the basis of their physical appearance and attributes as well as their cultural values. This concept is applicable for the analysis as the many of the characters in the novel were targeted and suppressed due to racial identity. CRT also shows multiple realities and among those the biggest one is that the “black Americans by

no means are equal to whites.” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2005, p.83). The psychological impacts of racism are deeper than those of physical. The psychological version of racism talks about the “constitution of human subject” and argue that the invisibility of race ‘may involve racialization’ through the visible subjects. (Tuhkanen, 2009, p.xii). Most of the previous scholars and critics in this field of racial and ethnic studies involve the brutal elements associated with race and racism. The colored people were tortured and brutally forced to do those acts which are beyond the human capacity in terms of physical struggle. People were tortured, murdered, and forced to do physical efforts more than their capacities and stamina. These people died due to hunger and torture practiced by the white man. CRT is different than the previous theories and intersects the modern forms of racism which are practiced at a large scale in order to keep the minority groups at the margins of the society. Furthermore, CRT labels “white supremacy as an oppressive, dominant, and destructive force” in the society, and tries to encounter it. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.68). CRT holds that racism is a “social construction without having any scientific evidences” which can support it. (p. 33). It was invented in order to push the colored population on margins and to exploit them in every possible way. A significant resistance is also displayed by the colored people to come out of the crises. Passing is very significant concept in CRT and it is referred to the action when someone belonging to the colored community having white/light/bright color disguises herself/himself as a white and hides her/his real identity in order to get the certain benefits which are thrust upon the white people. Separatism is also one of the primary terms in CRT along with black-white binary, color imagery, institutionalized racism, hate crime, micro-aggression, and unconscious racism.

Interest Convergence/material determinism is a central concept in CRT in this research because it is widely practiced by the white elites in order to get personal benefits while these actions seem useful for the betterment of the society, especially for the colored community. It can be described as “self-interest of elite whites than from a desire to help blacks.” (p.9). This concept is divided into two academic approaches: the idealist and the realists. The later, also called “economic determinists” is applicable for the analysis which “holds that racism is much than a collection of unfavorable impressions of members of other groups.” (p.21). It is a medium by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchy decides who takes benefits, best jobs, best schools, and invitations to parties. The reason behind this phenomenon is capitalist’s need for labor as before this the Africans were respected and recognized as civilized as they were highly advance in medicine, mathematics, and astronomy long before the Europeans had much knowledge of these fields. There rare materialistic realities behind these initiatives. It is applicable for the analysis as there are plenty of characters who experience and effected by this phenomenon of interest convergence or material determinism. This is a transitional concept which changed over the course of history based upon the best interests of the privilege class. It could be observed from Mexicans to Africans to Latinos to modern day Islamic fundamentalist faction. For analysis it is applied to the black workers in the novel.

Color Blindness is another key term widely used to analyze the facts relevant to CRT. It is identical to a disease where a person fails to distribute the colors appropriately as he remains unable to see the certain colors. Just like the way, this concept emphasizes that

all the people must be given proper and equal rights without dividing them into categories and colors. Story-telling, narrative techniques, and counter story-telling is also used in CRT to create a certain impact. Black-White Binary is another significant concept in CRT which is evident even if someone tries to ignore. It is prevalent everywhere in the contemporary American society. It investigates the power structure and shape of knowledge. It critically looks at the ways and methods used to accelerate these binaries and factors behind these harsh realities which are the cause of suffering for the colored people but a blessing for the white civilians. Relevant to this concept is White Privilege which is thrust upon the white people. It is a “myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race” and it is obviously the white race which is crested in social setup. (p.89). The framework is suitable for the analysis of *The Vanishing Half* (2020) as a plenty kg concepts are applicable. Among these concepts are *intersectionality*, *differential racialization*, *black white binary*, and *colorblindness* is a way out of the problems of the colored community. The novel deals with the issues of colored people while CRT’s main concerns is to study race, racism, and power relations in the society which makes a logical connection for the both novel and selected framework.

Analysis

Racism, as a whole, is a political phenomenon but some of the aspects of racism are more political than the others. Race, racism, and racial identity are the major concerns in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) which are associated with the colored people. Racism is one of the fundamental and burning issues in the contemporary world which is evident at various platforms. The protagonist twin sisters, Desiree and Stella, are the representatives of the millions of the colored people dispersed in the different localities. The very issue of identity is also explored through the characters which lead to the transformation of the major characters in order to get recognition in the society. Colored people are marginalized and subjugated in modern ways as the old practices are replaced with the new ones. These people are considered the unwanted in the social lacuna and they face psychological issues. Stella, Desiree, Adele, Leon, Jude, and Reese are the prominent characters for the analysis. They face numberless problems due to their racial identity. Although Stella gets recognition as a white but she always has fears in her mind to be exposed at any instance.

In terms of social opportunities, the colored people are limited to the margins of the society which is associated with the concept of *interest convergence* as these situations are created by the white elites. Colored people have no equal access to facilities bestowed upon the white people in terms of health, education, and other public platforms are also determined to give lesser opportunities to the people belonging to colored section of the society. If in any case white man do something for the betterment of colored people it can be judged by the lenses of interest convergence which is referred to white man’s self interest in doing something socially effective for the colored. There’s always a huge benefit for these people when they do something for the colored people. It pays in the background and colored community, in most cases, remains unaware of these tactics. The prime example comes when Kennedy, daughter of Stella, narrates the stories behind the donations given to the colored students in the school as she says that she knows “how Tina J. stole the stage at the talent show or Bobby R. won the tee ball game” in the school.

(p.106). When Stella gets a job of secretary in the reputed firm she fills a form where the colored section was evident. She didn't mark the section and got the job which wasn't meant for the colored people. After submission of the application the attendant looks "her application, stumbling where the girl had marked colored" but Stella knew the facts and logic behind the addition of that section and didn't mark that section. (Bennett, 2020, p.12). In contrast to the colored people the Dupont family is a fine example to understand how the white population gets more opportunities. Dupont family has a white lineage and they were living luxuriously being a white. The head of the family was working as a bank manager and such posts only exist for the white people. Stella only gets these opportunities when she passes as a white and hides her real identity which shows that certain things are only meant for the white people. She marries a white man and lives a luxurious life after that and never thinks becoming a colored entity again. It clearly identifies the interests of the white elites. There are specific jobs and opportunities for the colored people while the white people get higher positions in the society.

Differential Racialization is evident at various places in the novel which is best defined as a process through which "each racial and ethnic group comes to be viewed and treated differently" by the other people of the society specifically by the white people. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.172). Almost every colored character in the novel differentially racialized at various places in the novel. Sam, Desiree's husband, is the first character to come in the orbit of this concept. After marriage he tells her that he sat in the classes where white professors refused to answer his questions due to his racial identity. He tells Desiree that he "dated white girls who would not hold his hand in public." (Bennett, 2020, p.14). He further tells her that the white guys don't invite him at their homes. All of these incidents happen due to his racial identity. He is viewed and treated differently due to his colored lineage. Early Jones is another subject of differential racialization as he gives his best to find a suitable job but remains unable to settle anywhere due to his colored identity and ends up in a jail after stealing. He adds more stories to his tale of life when sitting with Desiree that once he was visiting a church and "a man smacked me once at church" and the scars of that event still existing on his neck. (p.50). Jude, Desiree's daughter, is the most (in)visible and the one who is more sinned against than sinning and her sin was to born in a colored family. Every time she encounters the public she feels uncomfortable due to her racial identity. She is (un)noticed everywhere she goes. Even her boyfriend, sometimes, seems reluctant to accept her. She is entitled as darker than darkness due to her skin color and she looks always nervous when she goes in the crowd. She was entitled as a "tar baby" and "black as the beginning and the end of the world" by her peers and fellows. (p.56). Even her family, sometimes, seems reluctant to accept her presence being a black although the whole family is colored. She is oppressive, exploited, physically tortured, socially unwelcomed even by her family members, sexually abused, and all of these factors collectively lead her to psychological disturbance. Later on, when she wins the race at national level no one says congratulation to her except her coach. She was a subject of every kind of abuse during her school days. Not a single aspect of her life is free of grief and pain which is thrust upon her due to her physical appearance. These events in the novel show that colored people are kept at margins and the practice of differential racialization is common in everyday situation. The colored people are the victims of these practices. They are unable to come out of

these things and to improve their life standard because white elites are dominant everywhere.

The concept of *intersectionality* is evident at various places in the novel. Many of the characters are associated with this concept. All the major characters in the novel effected and influenced due to their racial identity. First, it is evident in the case of Stella as she gets a job when she pretends as a white. Here, her colored identity and background influences her and effect her action. There are certain other characters in the novel who disguise as a white to get the benefits meant for the white people. Among these characters the first is Mr. Warren as he gets the job in railway department and gets more pay than the other persons working with him because they were colored. Marlana Goudeau passes as white to gets her teaching certificate. Luther Thibodeaux is another man who works in a company where the owner thinks that he is white and he gets more salary than the rest of the workers in the company. At the one hand, where colored phenomenon is cause of shame and disgrace for the colored and at the other hand it is giving dignity, pleasures, and comforts to the white people. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is full of the events which show the both sides of coins; the one is brighter while the other is darker. Stella and Desiree are the best example to make it true as both of the sisters have bright colors and one of them disguises herself as a white while the other decides to be a colored. Stella enjoys a luxurious life after marrying a white guy while Desiree lives in miseries and troubles throughout her life. Stella is a mouthpiece of the views of whites about the colored as she swims in the “white only pools” when she is with her family and lives in a society where only white people are allowed to build their homes. (p.104). When a colored family comes in that society the rest of the community gathered to overthrow them out of the society to make it clean and peaceful. Stella also participates in the meeting and insist on the stop of the colored and her husband says that “association will never allow it” to construct a house of the colored in the society. (p.100). These incidents are also linked with the concept of *intersectionality* as the white people put everything at priority which is advantageous for them. Behind these actions lie the economic and materialistic benefits. On the other hand the colored people are always under the influence of their racial identity.

Hate crime and victim blaming are two of the central concepts in CRT and these are evident after certain instances in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) as it best describe the phenomenon of these practices. Leon, twins father, was killed because “he had written nasty things to a white woman” although he does not know how to read and write. (Bennett, 2020, p.22). Before that he kept in a *colored* section in the hospital which shows political behavior towards the colored as they are not given the equal treatment. There are not only colored sections in the hospitals but almost in the every institution there are separate sections for the white and colored. Even after death this division remains continue. When Adele Vignes dies she was buried in the colored graveyard although she was practicing Christian throughout her life. Looking at the religious perspective of racism there are certain events in the novel which shows politics takes no effect even from religion but religion, sometimes, is influenced by the politics. Reese once tells Desiree that even their “Santa Claus is colored.” (p. 122) It seems sarcastic but it’s in the real circle of the society among the others.

Despite living under multiple sufferings there are certain suggestive ways out of these crises. Some of the ways are ideological while the others are based on practicality. Struggle for identity is one of the fundamental themes in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) and few characters went on this way to explore their existence and to come out of the invisible territory to live a life of their choice. Stella is the first character to embark on this journey and successfully paves her way for her comfortable life. She passes as a white and enjoys the privileges which are always bestowed upon the white. Desiree chooses to stick to her roots and returns home with strong determination but somewhere she seems frustrated after a long struggle and decides to live where she feels secure, where she belongs. The concept is *colorblindness* suggests a remedy of these problems. It's practice in the society can help in eliminating these things from society which are cause of tension and problems for the colored people. It emphasizes on the provision of equal opportunities for all the people without differentiating their color, social status, identity, or appearance.

CONCLUSION

The Vanishing Half (2020) looked at the various interventions which were the main cause of the sufferings and marginalization of the colored population to the peripheries. It discovered where the colored people were invisible and not given their fundamental rights. It also established that the colored people were meant to play a subordinate role in every field of life while white man enjoyed their privileged status. The concepts of *interests convergence* and *differential racialization* is evident at various places with relation to the plenty of characters in the novel. *Intersectionality* and other relevant ideas also influenced the actions of all the characters in the novel which have different consequences for the different characters. It was also evident that despite of these sufferings the colored population struggled a lot to get their rights. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) also showed that there were suggestive and practical ways to come out of these crises. The first among these ways was to be connected with the cultural roots and along with this one must search for his/her identity. When one's connected with his/her roots he/she could perform certain actions and could take initiatives like Stella and Desiree in their own ways. This research proved that the best way to put these subjects out of these troubles was the implementation of the concepts like color blindness and intersectionality. It could be one of the highly recommended solutions to the binaries and troubles existing in the American society and where the colored people are suffering under the white supremacists.

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