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Literary Theories

Digital Voices and Racial Identity: Reimagining Selfhood in The Vanishing Half

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Abstract: The novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett explores issues of racial identity, belonging, and selfhood in contemporary society. The narrative follows the lives of twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, whose contrasting life choices reveal the psychological and social implications of racial passing. Stella chooses to live as a white woman, leaving behind her family and community, while Desiree embraces her Black identity and eventually returns to her hometown. The novel also reflects contemporary concerns about identity construction within the context of digital voices and global storytelling. Bennett challenges the traditional idea that identity is fixed or stable by portraying characters who struggle with ambiguous racial boundaries. Instead, identity appears fluid and continuously shaped by individual decisions and social structures. Furthermore, the novel amplifies marginalized voices and highlights the emotional cost of invisibility and assimilation. Ultimately, *The Vanishing Half* demonstrates how racial identity and selfhood are being reconsidered in contemporary literature and contributes to broader discussions about race, representation, and belonging in the digital and global era.

Keywords: Racial Identity, Selfhood, Racial Passing, Marginalized Voices, Global Storytelling



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Introduction

Issues of racial identity and belonging continue to dominate contemporary literature, particularly in works that explore how individuals negotiate social expectations and personal identity. In modern literary discourse, racial identity is no longer viewed merely as a biological or social category but as a complex relationship shaped by memory, culture, and lived experience.

The *Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett provides a compelling exploration of these issues through the story of twin sisters whose lives diverge because of the choices they make regarding race and identity. Through the experiences of Stella and Desiree Vignes, Bennett examines how race influences opportunity, belonging, and intergenerational relationships.

Published in 2020, the novel received widespread critical acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of racial passing and identity formation. It highlights how racial identity can be performed, suppressed, or reshaped depending on social circumstances. In a society increasingly engaged in discussions about race through digital platforms, works such as Bennett's provide an important cultural space where marginalized voices can redefine identity and challenge dominant narratives. In this sense, the novel contributes significantly to contemporary debates on representation and selfhood.

The central conflict in *The Vanishing Half* revolves around Stella's decision to live as a white woman and abandon her Black identity, family, and community. In contrast, her twin sister Desiree returns to her hometown and openly embraces her racial heritage. These opposing decisions reveal the psychological and social consequences of assimilation and resistance.

The narrator reflects on the twins' childhood, noting that they were "inseparable as children, identical in appearance but entirely different in spirit" (Bennett). This early description foreshadows the different paths that will later shape their identities. Through these characters, Bennett demonstrates that identity is influenced not only by personal choices but also by social pressures and historical circumstances. The novel therefore presents race as a fluid construct shaped by cultural expectations and power structures.

Racial passing—the act of identifying oneself as belonging to another racial group, often to gain social advantages—is one of the most significant themes in the novel. Historically, racial passing has functioned as a survival strategy for individuals navigating systems of racial inequality. Bennett situates this historical phenomenon within a contemporary narrative, illustrating how the desire for safety and opportunity can lead individuals to alter or conceal their identities.

Stella's decision to pass as white reflects her awareness of the privileges associated with whiteness. Living in a racially segregated society, she recognizes the social mobility and security that whiteness can provide. As the novel explains, "She wasn't abandoning her old life so much as stepping into a new one" (Bennett 105). This moment highlights the complexity of Stella's transformation; it represents not merely an escape but also an attempt to reconstruct her identity within a different social framework.

However, Stella's new identity comes with significant psychological costs. She must constantly hide her past, which results in anxiety and emotional isolation. Her fear of being exposed affects her relationships, including her relationship with her daughter. Her life ultimately illustrates how racial passing can offer material advantages while simultaneously creating deep emotional vulnerability.

The themes explored in Bennett's novel can be examined through the lens of cultural and identity theory. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that identity is not fixed but constructed through cultural representation and social discourse. According to Hall, identity "is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture." Instead, identity is continuously formed through historical and cultural processes.

Stella's transformation exemplifies this idea. Her whiteness is not an inherent quality but something she performs and reinforces through daily behavior and social interactions.

Similarly, the concept of performativity proposed by Judith Butler provides another useful framework for understanding Stella's experience. Butler suggests that identity categories are produced through repeated social performances. From this perspective, Stella must continually perform whiteness in order to maintain her new identity. This process highlights how race itself can function as a socially constructed performance rather than a purely biological reality.

While Stella attempts to erase her racial heritage, Desiree represents the opposite process: the reclamation of identity and community. After leaving her hometown as a young woman, Desiree eventually returns with her daughter Jude. Her return emphasizes the enduring connection between identity and cultural belonging. Unlike Stella, Desiree reconnects with the people and traditions that shaped her early life. The narrator observes that Desiree returned to Mallard “darker than she had gone away, the burden of the world in her eyes.” This description symbolizes her emotional maturity and the experiences that have influenced her understanding of race and belonging.

Through Desiree’s journey, Bennett highlights the resilience of marginalized communities. The town of Mallard itself reflects a complex relationship with race. The narrator remarks that Jude is “the darkest-skinned baby anyone in Mallard had ever seen” (Bennett 57). This moment reveals the community’s internal color hierarchies and its preference for lighter skin tones.

Despite these social constraints, Desiree’s return demonstrates the importance of cultural roots and collective identity. Cultural critic bell hooks argues that reclaiming cultural identity can function as a form of resistance against oppressive systems. According to hooks, marginalized communities must reclaim their narratives in order to challenge dominant social structures. Desiree’s story reflects this process by illustrating how identity can become a source of empowerment rather than limitation.

Another important dimension of *The Vanishing Half* is its exploration of generational identity. The daughters of Stella and Desiree—Kennedy and Jude—inherit the consequences of their mothers’ decisions. Their lives reveal how racial identity evolves across generations. Jude grows up fully aware of her racial identity and becomes determined to challenge the social barriers placed before her. Her experiences in college represent a search for intellectual independence and personal freedom. Unlike Stella, Jude refuses to conceal her identity and confronts issues of race and discrimination directly. Kennedy, on the other hand, is raised believing that she is completely white. When she eventually learns the truth about her heritage, she experiences a profound identity crisis. Her confusion illustrates the long-term psychological consequences of Stella’s decision to hide her past.

Through these characters, Bennett demonstrates how identity is shaped both by inherited narratives and personal discovery. As the novel suggests, “The past didn’t feel past at all” (Bennett 113). This statement emphasizes a central theme of the novel: identity cannot be entirely erased, even when individuals attempt to conceal their history.

Scholar Paul Gilroy emphasizes the importance of historical memory in shaping diasporic identities. In his study of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy notes that the history of the African diaspora is continually shaped by the movement and experiences of Black communities. Cultural memory therefore connects individuals to a broader historical narrative. In *The Vanishing Half*, memory becomes a powerful force that ultimately brings hidden identities back to the surface.

Although the events of *The Vanishing Half* are largely set in the late twentieth century, the novel's themes remain highly relevant in the digital era. Today, discussions of race and identity increasingly take place in online spaces, where individuals share experiences and challenge dominant narratives.

Modern scholars often describe digital platforms as “counterpublics,” spaces where marginalized voices can resist dominant representations and create alternative narratives. In this sense, Bennett's novel resonates with contemporary digital discourse by presenting complex and diverse experiences of racial identity. Through its exploration of personal stories, the novel encourages readers to critically examine the social structures that shape identity. By highlighting the emotional consequences of racial passing, Bennett invites readers to reflect on the human impact of systemic inequality.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Vanishing Half* is its portrayal of the psychological strain caused by hidden identity. Stella's life demonstrates that assimilation often requires the suppression of personal history and emotional ties. Despite achieving social and economic security, Stella experiences persistent loneliness and anxiety. She cannot speak openly about her past, even within her own family. This secrecy creates emotional distance between herself and others and prevents her from forming genuine relationships.

Psychological studies frequently suggest that long-term identity concealment can lead to emotional distress. Individuals who constantly monitor their behavior to avoid exposure often experience heightened anxiety and self-alienation. Stella's experiences reflect this psychological reality, illustrating how the pursuit of social acceptance can result in profound internal conflict. In contrast, Desiree's willingness to embrace her identity allows her to build more authentic relationships. Although she faces economic difficulties and social challenges, she does not suffer from the same internal struggle as her sister. Bennett's portrayal suggests that authenticity, even when difficult, can lead to greater emotional stability than assimilation.

The *Vanishing Half* offers a profound exploration of racial identity, belonging, and selfhood in contemporary literature. Through the contrasting lives of Stella and Desiree Vignes, Brit Bennett demonstrates that identity is shaped both by individual choices and by larger social structures. The novel portrays race not simply as a biological category but as a complex social construct influenced by history, culture, and power. By examining racial passing, generational identity, and psychological vulnerability, Bennett reveals the emotional consequences of crossing racial boundaries.

Stella's decision to live as a white woman highlights the privileges associated with whiteness while also exposing the personal sacrifices required to maintain such an identity. Desiree's journey, in contrast, emphasizes the importance of community and cultural heritage in sustaining a sense of self. The experiences of the next generation further demonstrate how identity evolves over time. Jude and Kennedy inherit the legacies of their mothers' decisions, illustrating how racial narratives continue to shape families and communities.

Ultimately, *The Vanishing Half* encourages readers to reconsider traditional understandings of race and identity. Through its complex characters and nuanced storytelling, the novel contributes to ongoing discussions about representation and belonging. In an era of global communication and digital storytelling, Bennett's work reminds us that identity is never fixed or final. Instead, it is continuously negotiated through memory, community, and lived experience.

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