

Racial Segregation and Identity Negotiation in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: A Postcolonial Analysis of Mimicry and Hybridity

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Abstract

*This study aims to examine how racial segregation is depicted in the novel and to analyze how the characters navigate their identities within the context of segregation. The primary source of this research is *The Vanishing Half* (2020) written by Brit Bennett. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, and the findings are presented in narrative form. The analysis is guided by postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of mimicry and hybridity proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. The results reveal that racial segregation is portrayed as a systematic practice enforced in public spaces, functioning as a form of social control that sustains White supremacy over Black communities. Furthermore, the novel illustrates how mixed-race characters negotiate and reconstruct their identities through strategies of mimicry and hybridity in response to racial oppression.*

Keywords: mixed-race community, postcolonialism, racial segregation.

A. Introduction

The postcolonial period has left profound and enduring wounds in the histories of formerly colonized societies. These wounds are not only recorded in political archives or historical documents, but are also preserved and reimagined in cultural productions such as novels, poems, and plays. Since the era of European imperial expansion, Western powers established systems of authority that shaped political structures, social hierarchies, cultural values, and even personal identities across generations. Leela Gandhi (1998) explains that postcolonialism is a disciplinary project devoted to revisiting, remembering, and critically interrogating the colonial past. In this sense, postcolonialism is not merely about recalling history nostalgically; rather, it is an intellectual effort to examine how colonial power continues to influence the present.

Postcolonial criticism emerged as a theoretical response to the lingering effects of imperial domination. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2007), postcolonialism encompasses all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. It is therefore an appropriate framework for analyzing cross-cultural encounters and the complex identities that arise from European imperialism. One of the most significant issues addressed within

postcolonial discourse is race, particularly the way racial categories were constructed to justify domination and inequality.

The meaning of race has shifted significantly from the colonial to the postcolonial period. As Peter Wade (2010) notes, during the colonial era race was often defined rigidly in terms of bloodline and ancestry. It functioned as a supposedly biological marker that determined a person's place within a social hierarchy. In the postcolonial period, however, race has increasingly been understood as a social and political construct rather than a fixed biological reality. Victor Ray (2022) argues that race operates as a political category that attempts to homogenize groups and arrange them within hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, often justified by science, law, or custom. Thus, race became a powerful tool used by dominant groups to legitimize discrimination and maintain systems of oppression.

In the United States, racial hierarchy was institutionalized through the system of racial segregation, particularly during the era of the Jim Crow laws. David K. Fremon (2014) explains that the so-called "Jim Crow laws" severely restricted the freedoms of African Americans, creating conditions that in many respects resembled slavery. These laws, enforced from the late nineteenth century until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, mandated the separation of Black and White citizens in nearly every aspect of public life. Segregation governed schools, transportation, hospitals, housing, employment, and even cemeteries. Public facilities were marked explicitly to indicate which racial group was permitted to use them. Such visible markers of exclusion reinforced the idea that racial division was natural and inevitable. This strict and pervasive system shaped not only social relations but also the ways individuals understood themselves.

Racial segregation had particularly complex consequences for people of mixed racial heritage. Positioned between Black and White communities, mixed-race individuals often experienced what postcolonial theory describes as ambivalence or in-betweenness. Identity, as Sahgal (2024) suggests, is formed through a continuous interaction between individuals and their social environments. It is influenced by past experiences, present conditions, and future aspirations. For mixed-race individuals living under segregation, identity formation was deeply affected by double discrimination: exclusion from White society and, at times, marginalization within Black communities.

The concept of the "in-between" space is central to the postcolonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha (1994). Bhabha argues that cultural identity is negotiated in what he calls the "interstices," the overlapping spaces where differences meet and interact. Within these spaces, individuals may adopt strategies such as mimicry—imitating the dominant culture in order to gain acceptance—or experience hybridity, the blending of cultural identities into new forms. For mixed-race individuals under racial segregation, mimicry could become a survival strategy, while hybridity reflected the complex fusion of cultural influences that shaped their lives.

A historical example of identity negotiation can be seen in the life of Anatole Broyard. Born to a Creole family of mixed European and African descent, Broyard

chose to “pass” as White during the Jim Crow era in order to access professional and social opportunities unavailable to Black Americans. According to Bénédicte Boisseron (2014), Broyard’s parents also practiced passing in certain contexts, presenting themselves as White to secure employment. Broyard ultimately distanced himself from his Black relatives to maintain his constructed identity, and his children only discovered their heritage near the end of his life. His story illustrates how racial pressure could compel individuals to reconstruct or conceal their identities in pursuit of safety and success.

Such issues of racial segregation and identity negotiation are powerfully explored in literature. As M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2015) explain, a novel is an extended work of prose fiction that often reflects the social realities of its time. Through narrative elements such as plot, character, point of view, and setting, novels enable readers to engage imaginatively with historical and cultural conflicts. One significant contemporary work that addresses racial segregation and mixed-race identity is *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett. The novel tells the story of identical twin sisters, Desiree and Stella Vignes, who grow up in a small Louisiana town inhabited primarily by light-skinned Black residents. As adults, the sisters choose radically different paths: one remains within the Black community, while the other passes as White and severs ties with her past.

Through its portrayal of segregation-era America, the novel depicts how systemic racism shapes personal choices and family relationships. The characters’ experiences resonate strongly with Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry and hybridity, as they negotiate their identities within a racially stratified society. By examining *The Vanishing Half* through a postcolonial lens, this study seeks to analyze how racial segregation is represented and how mixed-race characters navigate their identities in response to structural oppression. In doing so, the research contributes to broader discussions of race, identity, and the enduring legacy of colonial and segregationist ideologies in contemporary literature.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to collect and analyze data, as this method is most appropriate for examining literary texts and interpreting social and cultural meanings embedded within them. Qualitative research emphasizes interpretation rather than numerical measurement. As John W. Creswell (2013) explains, qualitative research begins with particular assumptions and the use of interpretive or theoretical frameworks to explore how individuals or groups understand social or human problems. In literary studies, this approach allows the researcher to analyze narrative elements, social contexts, and ideological structures in depth. Therefore, the findings of this research are presented descriptively in the form of analytical explanations rather than statistical calculations.

The primary data source of this research is the novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett. The data consist of words, phrases, sentences, and narrative passages that reflect the issues of racial segregation and identity negotiation. The data collection

process involves several systematic steps. First, the researcher conducted a close reading of the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plot, characters, and socio-historical setting. Second, the researcher identified and categorized textual evidence related to racial segregation practices and the characters' experiences of discrimination. Relevant quotations were then selected and documented as primary data. Finally, the collected data were organized according to thematic categories aligned with the research questions.

In the data analysis stage, the researcher applied postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of mimicry and hybridity proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). These concepts serve as the theoretical framework to interpret how racial segregation is represented in the novel and how mixed-race characters navigate their identities within a racially stratified society. After analyzing and verifying the data in relation to the theoretical framework and previous studies, conclusions were drawn based on the overall findings of the research.

C. Findings and Discussion

The Vanishing Half (2020) by Brit Bennett presents a compelling exploration of African American life in the aftermath of colonial ideology and during the height of racial segregation in the United States. The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of inequality under the Jim Crow system, particularly through the experiences of mixed-race individuals. From the outset, Bennett introduces the town of Mallard, a self-contained community founded by light-skinned Black families who sought refuge from the harsh discrimination of the outside world. Within this setting, the experiences of the twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, reveal how racial segregation shapes both communal life and personal identity.

1. Racial Segregation within the Mixed-Race Community

The Vignes twins inherit their light complexion from their ancestor, Alphonse Decuire, whose appearance was admired within Mallard. Despite their relative privilege within the Black community, the twins are not protected from racial violence. Their father, Leon Vignes, is brutally murdered by White men who falsely accuse him of writing inappropriate remarks to a White woman, even though he is illiterate. After breaking his fingers and shooting him, the attackers pursue him to the hospital and ultimately kill him. This tragic event reflects the normalized violence of the Jim Crow era, when White supremacy functioned above the law. As the novel states, "White folks kill you if you want too much, kill you if you want too little" (Bennett, 2020, p. 37).

Leon's murder exemplifies the dehumanization embedded in segregation. Under colonial logic, as explained by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the colonized are constructed as inferior or degenerate in order to justify domination. In the context of the United States, Black individuals were framed as morally and socially inferior, making violence against them appear permissible. The accusation of inappropriate contact with a White woman further reflects the rigid racial boundaries that governed social relations.

Segregation in Public Facilities

The ideology of “separate but equal” institutionalized racial hierarchy in public spaces. Although presented as equality, segregation consistently disadvantaged Black citizens. In the novel, Bennett depicts this reality through everyday scenes. Stella visits the South Louisiana Museum of Art on a day not designated as “Negro Day” and enters through the main entrance rather than the side door reserved for Black visitors (Bennett, 2020, p. 155). This moment underscores how segregation operated spatially, dividing entrances, services, and experiences according to race.

Similarly, at the beach, White lifeguards enforce separation by directing Black swimmers to remain on the “colored side” marked by a red flag (Bennett, 2020, p. 160). Even natural, open spaces are regulated by racial codes. These practices align with Bhabha’s assertion that colonial discourse disrupts the Western narrative of universal personhood by marking racialized bodies as inferior. Segregation thus becomes a daily performance of hierarchy.

After fleeing to New Orleans, Stella and Desiree encounter even harsher discrimination. They must wait in alleys to be served food from a separate window, “like a street dog” (Bennett, 2020, p. 199). This imagery reinforces the dehumanizing effects of segregation. Stella’s internal reflection during this moment foreshadows her decision to pass as White, imagining a life in which she would be served with dignity rather than humiliation.

After the Abolition of Jim Crow

Although the Civil Rights reforms of the late 1960s formally dismantled Jim Crow laws, Bennett illustrates that segregation’s legacy persists. Public signs may be removed, and legal barriers lifted, but social attitudes remain deeply rooted. Even decades after desegregation, Adele Vignes is buried on the “colored side” of St. Paul’s Cemetery, reflecting the endurance of racial division: “the white folks in the north side, the colored in the south” (Bennett, 2020, p. 365).

This continued separation echoes Bhabha’s concept of the “time lag,” suggesting that modernity cannot instantly erase colonial structures of thought. Although laws change, social hierarchies often survive in subtle or symbolic forms. Through its depiction of violence, spatial segregation, and lingering inequality, *The Vanishing Half* demonstrates that the legacy of racial segregation extends beyond legislation into the deepest layers of identity and community life.

2. The Navigation Identity of the Characters

The navigation of identity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett is deeply shaped by the racial hierarchy established during the Jim Crow era. The systematic dehumanization of Black people produces a psychological and social impact on the mixed-race community, fostering an obsession with whiteness and encouraging strategies of mimicry and hybridity. According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), colonial discourse constructs the colonized as inferior, attaching them to stereotypes of primitivism and moral deficiency. Such representations disturb the

Western narrative of personhood and justify exclusion. Even in the postcolonial period, these constructions persist, marginalizing Black communities and influencing how mixed-race individuals perceive themselves.

The Obsession with Whiteness

Mixed-race individuals in the novel occupy an unstable position within the racial hierarchy. They are considered too dark to be White yet too light to be fully embraced as Black. This in-between status creates anxiety and encourages efforts to move closer to whiteness. The character of Alphonse Decuire, the founder of Mallard, embodies this dynamic. As Bennett writes, his mother “had hated his lightness; when he was a boy, she’d shoved him under the sun, begging him to darken” (2020, p. 6). His light skin, inherited from a White father, becomes both a privilege and a burden.

In response to racial hostility, Alphonse establishes Mallard as a haven for light-skinned Black families. Over generations, residents deliberately marry lighter partners in the hope of producing even fairer children: “Each generation lighter than the one before” (Bennett, 2020, p. 6). This aspiration reveals an internalization of colonial values that equate whiteness with superiority. Bhabha (1994) argues that identity under colonialism is shaped not by self-definition but by how the dominant power defines the colonized. Despite their light skin, Mallard residents remain classified as “colored” within the broader American system. Their obsession with producing lighter children reflects both resistance to and complicity with racial hierarchy. Whiteness becomes not only a marker of social mobility but also an aesthetic and moral ideal rooted in Western standards.

Mixed-Race Responses toward Blackness

The internalization of racial hierarchy is further illustrated in Mallard’s reaction to Jude, Desiree’s dark-skinned daughter. When Desiree returns home, townspeople are shocked by Jude’s complexion: “Black as tar... like she flown direct from Africa” (Bennett, 2020, p. 3). Their reaction exposes the persistence of colonial “fixity,” a concept Bhabha (1994) describes as the rigid construction of the Other through repeated stereotypes. In Mallard, lightness has become a fixed marker of identity, and Jude’s dark skin threatens that constructed image.

The townspeople’s disbelief—“I just don’t see how nothin that black coulda come out Desiree” (Bennett, 2020, p. 4)—reveals their denial of their own Black ancestry. Jude becomes a visible reminder that Mallard’s lightness does not erase its historical connection to Blackness. Even children replicate this prejudice. Jude is mocked with nicknames such as “Tar Baby,” and classmates question whether Desiree is truly her mother because of their contrasting skin tones (Bennett, 2020, p. 91). Such bullying demonstrates how racial ideology is transmitted across generations.

Similarly, Early Jones, a darker-skinned outsider, faces hostility in Mallard. A pale man slaps him in church for touching holy water before his wife (Bennett, 2020, p. 32), symbolizing the exclusion of darker bodies from spaces associated with purity and respectability. These responses illustrate how mixed-race individuals, in their

attempt to distance themselves from Blackness, reproduce the very structures of discrimination that oppress them.

Through these portrayals, Bennett demonstrates that identity navigation under segregation is not only about resisting White dominance but also about negotiating internalized prejudice. The novel reveals how colonial constructions of race continue to shape community values, interpersonal relationships, and individual self-understanding long after the formal structures of segregation begin to fade.

Mimicry and Hybridity Depicted by the Characters in the Novel

In *The Vanishing Half* (2020), Brit Bennett vividly portrays the strategies of mimicry and hybridity through the character of Stella Vignes. From a young age, Stella demonstrates an awareness of her light skin as a potential passport into White society. One early incident occurs when a shop assistant mistakes her for White: “White folks, so easy to fool!” (Bennett, 2020, p. 73). The moment gives Stella an unexpected thrill. What begins as an accident quickly becomes an experiment in identity performance. For the first time, she realizes that racial categories, though rigidly enforced, can be destabilized through appearance.

According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), mimicry functions as a “double articulation.” On one level, it is a colonial strategy meant to discipline the colonized by encouraging imitation of the dominant culture. On another level, it becomes a subtle form of resistance, because imitation can expose the instability of the very system it seeks to uphold. Stella’s performance of whiteness reflects this duality. By successfully passing as White, she gains access to privileges denied to Black citizens, yet her ability to “fool” others also reveals that racial identity is not as fixed as segregation laws suggest.

Stella’s behavior is not unique within Mallard. The town’s residents frequently share stories of individuals who passed as White to obtain opportunities unavailable to them as “colored” citizens—riding in the White section of trains, earning teaching certificates, or receiving higher wages (Bennett, 2020, p. 74). These acts of passing illustrate how mimicry becomes a survival strategy within an unequal system. By appropriating the identity of the dominant group, mixed-race individuals temporarily seize power. At the same time, their success exposes the artificial boundaries of racial segregation. If a person can cross the color line simply by appearance, the ideology of racial purity begins to fracture.

Stella’s mimicry intensifies after she leaves Mallard and moves to New Orleans. Eventually, she severs ties with Desiree and fully adopts a White identity while working at Maison Blanche. Each morning, she mentally rehearses this transformation, imagining a past untouched by racial trauma: “She let her mind go blank, her whole life vanishing, until she became new and clean as a baby” (Bennett, 2020, p. 197). This psychological erasure demonstrates the depth of her commitment to mimicry. However, as Bhabha (1994) suggests, mimicry can never achieve total sameness; it produces “almost the same, but not quite.” Stella’s lingering anxiety

around White women—her nervousness and fear of exposure—reveals the incompleteness of her transformation. Her original identity cannot be fully erased.

Beyond mimicry, Bennett also explores hybridity. Bhabha (1994) defines hybridity as the emergence of new cultural forms from the interaction between colonizer and colonized. For mixed-race individuals, hybridity is not merely theoretical; it is embodied. Stella's life as a White woman does not eliminate her Black ancestry. Instead, it creates an internal ambivalence. Her fear of giving birth to a dark-skinned child—imagining her husband recoiling in horror (Bennett, 2020, p. 157)—symbolizes this anxiety. The possibility of a darker child threatens to expose the illusion of racial purity upon which her new life depends.

Stella's experience illustrates hybridity as both empowerment and vulnerability. While it enables her to navigate two worlds, it also traps her in constant fear. Her identity becomes a fragile construction, sustained by silence and performance. Through Stella's journey, Bennett demonstrates that mimicry and hybridity are not simple solutions to racial oppression. Instead, they reveal the psychological cost of living within a system that demands rigid racial boundaries while simultaneously proving those boundaries unstable.

D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented in the previous section, this study draws two major conclusions.

First, racial segregation in *The Vanishing Half* is portrayed as a rigid and systemic practice embedded in social structures, including public facilities, economic opportunities, and everyday interactions. The novel illustrates how segregation operates not only as a legal framework but also as a social ideology that normalizes white supremacy and marginalizes Black and mixed-race communities. Although the mixed-race community in Mallard attempts to construct a space that privileges lighter skin and distances itself from Blackness, they remain deeply affected by the broader system of racial hierarchy. The persistence of discrimination, intimidation, and unequal access to resources demonstrates that segregation is not merely institutional but psychological and cultural. Even after the formal abolition of segregation laws, the ideology underpinning racial division continues to shape social attitudes and personal relationships. Thus, racial segregation is depicted as a lingering structure of power that survives beyond its legal termination.

Second, racial segregation produces contradictory effects that compel mixed-race individuals to navigate their identities in pursuit of security, mobility, and social acceptance. The colonial construction of whiteness as the superior and desirable identity generates an internalized aspiration toward whiteness within the mixed-race community. As a result, strategies such as mimicry and hybridity emerge as responses to racial oppression. Through mimicry, characters such as Stella adopt the appearance, behavior, and social codes of the dominant white community in order to gain access to privileges otherwise denied to them. However, this strategy simultaneously exposes

the instability of racial categories, as identity becomes performative rather than fixed. Hybridity further reflects the ambivalence experienced by mixed-race individuals who exist between two racial positions without fully belonging to either. This duality reveals the fragility of the colonial discourse that seeks to maintain rigid racial boundaries. Ultimately, the novel suggests that while mimicry and hybridity offer temporary solutions for survival and advancement, they also generate psychological conflict and identity fragmentation, underscoring the enduring impact of racial segregation on individual and collective identity formation.

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