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## Self-reinvention in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett

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**Abstract:** The following paper makes a critical reading of *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett in addressing issues related to race, identity, colorism and psychology vis-à-vis Blacks within America's social fabric. This paper aims to reveal that life choices operated by characters in this novel with regard to their racial identifications are political means through which they reinvent themselves and assert their identities. Finding themselves in a social environment where white hegemony is pronounced and blackness is considered subaltern, black characters in *The Vanishing Half* develop strategies to cope with these issues on their own terms. Thus, they proceed in re/defining their racial identity in succumbing, for some, to whiteness dynamics, evincing it through the preservation of their light complexion from any person with a darker skin tone, or again into passing over for white, or conversely for others, in standing their ground as they elect to accept their blackness and live in consequence.

**Keywords:** Self-reinvention, Race, Identity, Colorism, Passing,

### Réinvention de soi dans *The Vanishing Half* de Brit Bennett

**Résumé:** Le présent article fait une lecture critique du roman de Brit Bennett intitulé *The Vanishing Half* en s'attaquant aux problématiques de race, d'identité, de colorisme, et de psychologie auxquelles fait face la communauté noire dans le tissu social Américain. Le but de cet article est de révéler que les choix de vie des personnages en rapport avec leurs appartenances identitaires raciales sont des moyens politiques au travers desquelles ces personnages se réinventent et affirment leurs identités. Etant dans un environnement social avec une hégémonie blanche prononcée, ainsi que la couleur de peau noire considérée subalterne, les personnages noirs dans cette œuvre développent des stratégies pour faire face à ces problèmes selon leurs propres manières. Ainsi, ils procèdent par la re/définition de leur identité raciale en succombant pour certains aux dynamiques raciales blanches en démontrant cela par la préservation de leur teint clair de toute personne de teint noir ou en se faisant passer pour blanc, ou pour d'autres, par la défense de leurs principes en acceptant leur couleur de peau noire et en vivant en conséquence.

**Mots-clés :** Réinvention de soi, Race, Identité, Colorisme, " Passing"

### Introduction

*The Vanishing Half* is a novel set within the African-American literary field. It presents itself as a novel that is illustrative of issues of identity, race, discrimination, colorism and internal struggles that black America has been grappling with to date. Indeed, although progress has been remarkably made in terms of racial relations in America today, a particular trauma is still resonating inside the black community when it comes to whom some black people identify

to and how they do so in terms of skin tone acceptance. Thus, such a trauma manifests itself in the establishment of a color benchmark vis-à-vis the skin tone that they can relate to for some and passing for white for others. From a critical lens, Brit Bennett remarkably sheds light on the issue along with its rippling effects in her remarkable novel. Spanning from the 50's to the 90's, this novel takes us on a journey from a southern town called Mallard in Louisiana, with light-skinned black twin sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes whose lives are in many ways reflective of significant choices that they make in a social milieu in which the lighter one is, the better it is. Stella passes for white, espouses a white man and has a child with him while Desiree dramatically settles in the black realm in having a dark-skinned girl with a black man, which is in stark opposition to the rampant anti-dark skin philosophy in her hometown Mallard. Establishing their lives on trajectories that take them to several places in America, these characters engage in experiences from which they come to grips with racial dynamics and develop particular types of identities that shape their whole existences. Thus, the ways in which these characters along with their subsequent offspring develop such identities and reinvent themselves in their communities, coupled with the impact of the choices that they make, are queries that we will endeavour to elucidate.

The objective of this paper is to reveal that self-reinvention in this novel is realized both through resolute choices operated by individuals with regard to whom they racially identify to, and through the individual identity that they elect to put to the fore irrespective of community standards or expectations. To do so, we will analyze characters' psychologies and actions through Freud's psychoanalytical method in order to comprehend their thought processes, their actions and their motivations. In the following part of this paper, we will firstly put the emphasis on nonconformity to social dynamics that some characters develop, then, on the phenomenon of passing as a choice of living, and finally on characters' self-awareness.

### **1. Nonconformity to social expectations**

In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett addresses the issue of nonconformity to social expectations in a remarkable way as she sheds light on both an intra-racial discrimination based on skin tone that takes place within the black community of Mallard where the twin sisters hail from and the defiant response that one of them takes in order to challenge her community's standards and assert her identity. Indeed, in Mallard, the issue around blacks' skin tones is of note as acceptance within their community is based upon conformity to their color benchmark that holds light skin as the minimum requirement. In their midst, one

is accepted and treated fairly when one is light-skinned at least. So, to preserve such a color benchmark in their community, “nobody married dark” (2020, p. 5)”. Such behaviors are indeed grounded in a psychological trauma resulting from the enslavement of blacks and the ensuing discriminations and marginalization that they underwent in America along with their dream of being white, pure. In this respect, the critics Matthew Desmond and Mustapha Emirbayer observed that “blackness, then, was regarded as a mark, a blemish whereas whiteness, by implication, was constructed as the essence of racial purity” (2010, p.68). Abiding therefore to such a philosophy in contemporary America is revelatory of a group of people that has psychologically succumbed to white supremacy and that now has recourse to a method based on lightness preservation by default of attaining whiteness in discriminating against their peers with darker skin tones.

However, nonconformity to her folk’s philosophy and skin-tone preference and affiliation places Desiree on a self-reinvention path as she reappears in Mallard with her dark-skinned child. Indeed, her going to New Orleans and her subsequent union and child with Sam who is a black man are facts that undoubtedly break with social conventions held in her hometown Mallard where they do not marry dark-skinned people. What is more, many are left in utter disbelief and shock as she dares to return to her hometown with her dark-skinned daughter. For a light-skinned girl from Alphonse Decuir <sup>1</sup>lineage to leave and come back with a dark-skinned daughter is the last thing that they could think of. Loo, exclaiming as he saw Desiree with her child from afar “lord,... I never seen a child this black before” (2020, p. 5) or Desiree’s own mother telling her that a “dark man would be no good to her” (Id, 37) are both, situations that Desiree defies and illustrative of the politics of self-reinvention that she gives impetus to. Let us note as well for Mallard folks to represent or view Desiree as a nonconformist to standards is also a marker of the very collective identity that they have formed, reinventing themselves consequently within the broader American social fabric. Thus, such representations of Desiree by Mallard folks are strong expressions of the collective identity that they stand by and strive to maintain. These ideas are additionally reinforced through the adversity of Desiree’s mother toward the black man who is recruited by Desiree’s husband in order to find her back when she deserted their home and who happens to know Desiree and who even becomes her boyfriend in the end. In Mallard, he undergoes a series of humiliation by Desiree’s mother, Adele, as he

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<sup>1</sup> Alphonse Decuir founded Mallard. His father was a white slave owner, and his mother was a slave. He was Desiree and Stella’s great-great-great grandfather.

doesn't meet the skin color requirement in order to be accepted in their midst. Following that episode, his uncle lets him know that in that place, he is "a nigger's nigger" (Id, 53) vis-à-vis these light-skinned people. This intra-racial stratification is tantamount to practising racism. Black people with light skin color considering themselves superior to those with dark skin tones may as well show a type of trauma happening among the black community as the racism, stereotypes, and discriminations they have suffered from white people is now redirected toward their own black peers with darker skin tone. Thus, Let us note that in incorporating the issue of colorism within the black community, Brit Bennett tackles in a striking way the issue of "color line" pushed forward by Du Bois when he asserted "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." (1903, p. 9).

Here in *The Vanishing Half*, in addition to the color line existing between blacks and whites, the issue of color line acutely springs forth within the same racial community. Such a fact is indeed reflective of a real social preference for people with lighter skins happening within the black community and also in the entire American society when it comes to blacks' access to media, job opportunities, politics or in social relationships. Being too black tends to be unwanted and castigated. Desiree is now to make her moves in this social quagmire where affiliation to dark-skinned people is seen from a bad eye. Furthermore, her going against the intra-racial color line in electing to get with dark-skinned people is part of the new and unabashed identity that she incorporates and asserts without fearing her peers' adversity. She identifies as fully black, espouses blackness and vehemently affirms it through her union with black men and through her love for her dark-skinned child and the audacity to bring that one to her hometown Mallard. We therefore gather that the stratification in blacks' skin tones along with the ensuing discrimination taking place in the black community as observed in Mallard create particular types of black people who prolong the racism they endure from whites to their own black counterparts. Hence, the identity that Desiree develops once she leaves Mallard demonstrates the reconfiguration of her ideals, thoughts, and mindset that she now sets in motion as being fully aware of her folks' love for whiteness and abhorrence of any person of dark skin color.

## **2. Passing as a choice of living**

In *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett puts to the fore a society crippled by the overarching issue of racism along with its tremendous consequences on and among individuals with black ancestry. In this respect, racial dynamics involving

skin color along with the constraints and possibilities that they offer take a dramatic shift as the phenomenon of passing comes to prominence. Let us first observe that in order to circumvent the problem of the color line<sup>2</sup>, passing has been through American history a common practice for some racially ambiguous men and women. Starting in the period before the Civil War, some black people with very light skin tones passed in order to either escape slavery and ultimately gain freedom and fight for equality or to have access to what they would not have access to if they identified as black. However, other black people used passing as a means to deny their real racial identity, erase their history, as they sought a better social status in a society pervaded with racism. In this vein, the critic Allyson Hobbs states that “passing was a potent weapon against racial discrimination, but it was also a potential threat to personal and community integrity” (2014, p. 13). Being able to pass successfully was a key to freedom but also posed a moral problem for those who used it as a way to express their shame and their rejection of the race that they belong to. In the same vein as literary works such as *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* by William Wells Brown, *Passing* by Nella Larsen, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson, or *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* by Jessie Redmon Fauset, *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett addresses the issue of passing in a remarkable fashion and particularly on a contemporary relevance. Her fictional work spanning the 50's and 90's addresses the issue of passing through the character of Stella Vignes whose life takes on the passing trajectory in a significant fashion.

In this novel, Stella Vignes first experiences success in passing, and then indulges in it. Indeed, passing for white at the Darlene's Charms shop and taking a liking at it, or when “she'd gone to the South Louisiana Museum of Art on ordinary Saturday morning not Negro Day, and walked right up to the main entrance, not the side door where Negroes lined up in the alley. Nobody stopped her, and again she'd felt stupid for not trying this sooner” (2020, p. 149) or passing to get a job and get a white husband are revealing of her breaking with her previous black racial identity through the possibilities that her light skin offers her. To her, if whiteness is within reach, then it has to be grasped and performed. In this regard, she says to Willie Lee “look at you, you just redheaded as Father Cavanaugh [who is a white priest in Mallard]- why does he get to be white and you don't?” (Id, 69). The possibility that one's skin tone approximately similar to a white one offers her to pass is to her unfathomable not to seize and, considering the fact that they are in a society where whites are more valued than others, what

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Professor Eddie Glaude Jr. terms the “Value Gap”, whiteness is for her a feature that she is to rightfully claim in order to exist, to enjoy everything that America has to offer. Leaving therefore her mother and her sister Desiree to embark on a white journey reveals a drastic choice of hers that comes with a reconfiguration of her whole self, severing all ties with her black origin as she “did not want to be found” (Id, 94) or her demonstration of adversity towards blacks as her white husband Sanders would notice “she’d never spoken kindly of a negro” (Id, 147) although being black herself or even her denial of knowing Loretta who is her black neighbor and friend as she says to her white friends “she is not my friend” (Id, 194). Through this reconfiguration of her soul, she not only denies her black affiliation and roots but she also acts as a foe to the black race in exemplifying it via her devotion to the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Her adversity to blackness is as well expressive of her own internal insecurity to be unmasked, to have her true self unearthed, her authenticity revealed. Being even caught passing before coupled with the success that she has had, being married and viewed as white by her husband for many years, having a daughter to whom she keeps lying about her family history or her racial background are components that she keeps grappling with as she sets out to integrate them by all means to her novel self. Let us additionally mention that her black neighbors in her white neighborhood become a source of both insecurity and reminiscence of her black origin as she not only castigates her daughter for playing with “niggers” (Id, 165), but she also avoided “for three weeks” (Id, 166) Loretta Walker, her black neighbor. Passing over for white and integrating all racist and white manners in her soul along with the ever-present dread that she has are significant facts that push her in dynamics where she fails to access real freedom that her new self is supposed to grant her. Her befriending Loretta becomes subsequently an alleviating option that helps her escape the struggle with her inner self’s longing as, as well, her own daughter becomes involved in a dramatic way in her mother’s lies regarding her racial background. Thus, one can observe in the novel that she configures her daughter as white, she makes sure that she acts as such, and relentlessly reconfigures herself in order to grapple with the load that she carries. In the midst of all these insecurities, Stella links her freedom, her existence to her choice of passing over for white and remaining as such forever. Telling Desiree’s daughter Jude who managed to find her “I can’t go back through that door. It’s another life, you understand?” (Id, 249), reinforces her choice of the life that she has. Such an obstinate choice that Brit Bennett sheds light on in this novel is an interesting facet related to a nourished choice for passing and living permanently as white without looking

back, unlike people who do it on a short period of time to escape and gain freedom like Frederick Douglass in his Narrative.

### 3. Self-awareness

In the vanishing half, self-awareness represents a key feature through which personal identities are constructed, allowing therefore characters to reinvent themselves. Indeed, characters in this novel go through experiences that ultimately shape their sense of self in an acute fashion as they either choose to give free rein to social expectations to have an impact on them or to find means to stand against any external force and make their own way. Let us observe that, Leaving Mallard for New Orleans, the twin sisters develop starkly different identities. First, Desiree Vignes manages to form and assert an identity that is different from social expectations in Mallard. The bold decision that she makes as she gets with dark-skinned people in her love affairs with her black husband Sam, and black boyfriend Early Jones in the end, along with the fact that she puts an end to the abuse that she suffered in her relationship with her husband Sam in leaving him and decide to go back to Mallard with her black daughter are elements that point to her self-awareness, her capacity to navigate the world on her own terms, knowing her worth and being the actor of her own life. She is black, she accepts her blackness and imparts her vision of life to America irrespective of the repercussions on herself or on her daughter. As to her sister Stella, her self-awareness can be revealed through her resolute choice to deal relentlessly with vulnerabilities, insecurities as her life is based on a lie, the one of being white. Illustratively, "she'd always worried about Kennedy discovering her secret and rejecting her, Blake leaving her, her whole life disintegrating in her hands" (Id, 259). Her life is even more vulnerable by the appearance of Desiree's daughter. Indeed, this appearance primarily constitutes a potential threat to the new identity and subsequent white world that she has formed and tried to secure in any way possible and secondly, a constant reminder of her black roots that she relentlessly conceals regardless of who she pretends and seeks to be.

Disclosing a key information as she tells her daughter that she has been to Mallard to see her sister, whom she had denied the existence of, and telling her daughter "I want you to know me" (Id, 326) are facts that vindicate how self-aware she is, vis-à-vis the white world that she has created and made believe, disguising herself, lying, and living these lies on a daily basis. The performance dynamics observed with Stella can be seen as well with her daughter Kennedy as the latter indulges in the acting world in theaters and in real life. The girl is described as "a long limbed who changed her mind daily about the person she wants to be" (Id, 227) and having her mother telling her "why can't you just be

yourself" (Id, 227) is a tone of irony that the author brings to the fore as Stella, who wholeheartedly decides to become somebody that she is not, to live and raise a family as such, becomes the one to tell her daughter to be herself. Consequently, knowingly acting and living white along with the ensuing repercussions reveal how fully self-aware Stella is when it comes to her thoughts, her actions and all the consequences in her self-reinvention project.

Additionally, Kennedy, being informed by Desiree's daughter of her black origin finds herself in a quandary vis-à-vis her racial identity and subsequently comes to grips with it. She confronts her mother with a picture of her and her family at her father's funerals, that she received from Jude, in telling her "I want you to tell me who you are" (Id, 298). Despite what such a revelation has on her, Kennedy goes through this vulnerable state in which she is to face the truth regarding first, her mother's real racial identity along with hers. In her attempt to make sense of it all and define her life, and who she wanted to be, she leaves without informing her parents of her whereabouts and writes to her father in saying "went to find myself[...] I'm safe. Don't worry about me" (Id, 305), in the same fashion as her mother left to remake herself. The white world in which she has long thought to belong to, coupled with who she is really now or said to be make her feel nonplussed at first, but then, self-aware for the next step to take.

Moreover, in the novel, Brit Bennett brings forward the rippling effects of lauding lighter or white skin colors over darker ones through Desiree's daughter's crisis of identity and ultimate self-awareness. In fact, Jude faced vulnerabilities and insecurities related to her racial identity from her early ages. She was mocked, insulted and called "Tar Baby" (Id, 85) because of her dark skin. With regards to those insecurities and vulnerabilities, she decided to detach from her dark skin tone and seek a lighter one. Facing rejection, oppression and self-contempt, she subsequently succumbs to the dynamics impacting her and attempts to lighten her skin to be accepted by her people. In this respect, the ad that she saw is instrumental in spurring her to find a solution to her quandary as it is noted in the novel:

She'd seen a Nadinola ad in Jet—a caramel woman, dark by Mallard's standards but light by her own, smiling, red-lipped, as a brown man whispered into her ear. *Life is more fun when your complexion is clear, bight, Nadinola-light!* She ripped the ad out from the magazine and folded it into a tiny rectangle, carrying it with her for weeks, opening it so many times that white creases cut across the woman's lips. A jar of cream. That was all she needed. She'd slather it on her skin, and by fall, she would return to school lighter and new. (Id, 106)

Aiding her to realize this volition with a better method, her light-skinned grandmother Adele Vignes:



created potions. She poured baths with lemon and milk and instructed Jude to soak. She pasted honey masks on her face, then slowly peeled them off. She juiced oranges, mixed them with spices, and applied the mixture to Jude's face before she went to bed. (Id, 106).

But, these reconfigurations efforts made on the girl's skin turned out to be unsuccessful as "nothing worked. She never lightened" (Id, 106). Hating "to be called beautiful" (Id, 107) because to her, beauty is white or by default light, the low self-esteem that she develops coupled with the skewed view of the world that she has of herself because of the barrage of stereotypes directing towards her via her skin color took a huge toll on her soul and trouble her identity. However, the identity that she constructs after the social and psychological assault on her skin color is remarkable. As she grows up, she becomes acutely aware of the ordeals that she has been through since her childhood, resilient in dealing with it, understanding of the blacks' plights in America's social fabric, appreciative of what she is as it is exemplified in the novel "Jude was living the life she always wanted, years ago. Still loved by the same man, on her way to becoming a doctor." (Id, 281), and audacious and inquisitive as she comes to discover the whereabouts of her mother's twin sister and tell her "I wanted to meet you" (Id, 248). She consequently emerges in the novel as a character that becomes self-aware and embraces her true self.

### **Conclusion**

At the close of this analysis, we have been able to reveal that self-reinvention in *The Vanishing Half* is operated through resolute choices entailing notions of nonconformity to social expectations, racial identity choice through the phenomenon of passing, and through self-awareness. Within the American social fabric, the main characters in *The Vanishing half* have manifested their choices regarding who they identify to as in either configuring or reconfiguring from psychological and social angles their inner selves or as in living up to society expectations of themselves or as in getting on individual journeys where they define their own routes. As such, we have been able to reveal how the twin sisters along with their children have dramatically shaped their lives in individual ways and born responsibilities for the choices that they made in their lives. Their race, their identities and the color of their skins have been used as political instruments through which they have been able to impart their visions of who they are in America and how they decide to evolve in it, assuming their respective choices and consequences. Thus, Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* provides a framework whereby individual identities within racial, psychological and political contexts can be addressed in the perspective of understanding how social dynamics affect individuals' lives.

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