

A NEW VISION OF CHROMATIC CONSTRUCTS OF IDENTITY IN BRITT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

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Abstract

African-American Literature often explores themes such as identity race, racism, discrimination, social inequality, and the quest for freedom and equality. Popular scholars which include Bell Hooks, Britt Bennett, Alice Walker as well as Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, had made significant contributions to African American literature through their insightful and powerful writings. They have used their literary works as a means of expression, cultural preservation, and social commentary. The first novel by Bennett. *The vanishing half* was her second novel and had been shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. The objective of the paper is to display the different shades of colouring their Self Identity and racial discrimination in *The vanishing half* and the effects that have created in African-American Literature.

Key Words: Chromatic constructs, Self-Identity, Racial discrimination, Racism, Social inequality

Introduction

The Vanishing Half is a historical fiction novel by American author Brit Bennett. It is her second novel and was published by Riverhead Books in 2020. The novel debuted at number one on *The New York Times* fiction best-seller list. HBO acquired the rights to develop a limited series with Bennett as executive producer. *The Vanishing Half* garnered acclaim from book critics, and Emily Temple of Literary Hub noted that in 2020 it was the book most frequently listed among the year's best, making 25 lists.

The novel starts with a flashback of Leon getting shot by five white men to be accusing to writing a displeasing letter to a white woman continuously. His father was dragged out of his house and was shot four times before the eyes of his family. The twins could do nothing rather than thinking of what was happening to their father. It was obvious that the accusation on their father is wrong as everybody knows well that Leon doesn't know to read or to write. After he survived the first lynching he got admitted in the hospital and got treatment after a few hours the white men found out that Leon survived and getting treated and shot him in the head.

He was really dead at that time. From the death of Leon everyone could just accept that even though they have come this far from other people and had their own town surrounding and occupied by their own people, they couldn't stop a crime of the white people. They couldn't resist a concept that the white can do whatever they want in the free world. The people there always thought and grown in such an environment that whites are the superior ones seems like an elephant tied to a rope. Where a baby elephant is tied to a rope, and then it grows with it in the thought of it could not break the rope.

Even though the elephant became an adult it has its own concept that it could not break the rope where it has lived in that way for long years. After the loss of their father the whole town came to a point where no place in this world can be a safer place to them. As they had the idea

those whites are superiors. Even though many of the people in Mallard had light skin and many of them had passed as whites, they were still open to racism and violence.

After the return of Desiree, Adele feels so strange of having only one twin in the house. As a mother of twins living fourteen years of supporting and caring them, obviously it would be the state of a mother. Even though she feels strange, she couldn't let Desiree move out again. When Desiree started showing signs of hesitation to stay in Mallard and started planning to leave from there, Adele insisted to put Jude in a school in Mallard itself. She even signed it for herself in the local school and convinced Desiree to be with the family.

When Desiree dressed Jude in a white and pink dress Adele opposed to Desiree's idea. As those bright colours would emphasise the darkness of Jude's skin. While walking Jude to school, she realised that her mother's opinion is the truth. As she walked with Jude down the road they saw many people were staring at Jude, which she felt so awkward. The people who resided in Mallard were half white and half black, it means that one side of their parent is black and the other side is white. Everyone looked down in the black chose their next generation to be lighter and lighter as everyone could be white someday.

The superiority of white is also passed on to their children. They could have had their child to be in mixed or black but feeling of inferiority was buried deep in their heart for black. They never noticed that the dressing was wrong they noticed that it was a black girl in that white and pink dress. Desiree even convinced Jude that she got those looks because she is new for the place. After dropping Jude off at school, Desiree plans of getting a job in Opelousas.

She reached Opelousas with Willie Lee in search of a job as fingerprint analyst in the police station of Opelousas. Her experience and knowledge made her pass the test in a record time, but her native have not held her hand in getting the job. She was rejected by them because

She is from Mallard. The town and their identity plays a major role in even getting their daily chores and also make them to feel weak in financial dependence from others and treating them like a slave and allowing them to feel pity for their identity and ignoring to provide their self-respect. After she is so discouraged by this incident she goes to Surly Goat, a bar in the outskirts of the town which has been founded by her grandmother Marie Vines.

Desiree was entering it for the first time. Desiree is drinking and reflecting on her life when she spots Early Jones at the far end of the bar. Desiree remembers seeing Early before the summer the twins left the town. Early Jones had been delivering fruits for her house. The two were flirting and Early would leave more fruits for Desiree. Despite of getting a warning from Adele not to see any black boys of dark-skinned boys, Desiree cherished their relationship for a while.

Until Desiree met Early she had never spent much time with dark-skinned boys. She had only ever seen dark-skinned young men from rural families who had relocated to the outskirts of town and cultivated the land for a brief time before moving on. That summer, however, Early Jones appeared on the front door with a bag of fruit. He was working at a farm on the outskirts of town at the time, bringing fruit to the inhabitants of Mallard. He persuaded Desiree to go outdoors and taste the fig he had just bitten into.

She expected them to kiss, but they didn't. Even still, sharing the same fruit with him was personal and exhilarating to her. They spent as much time together as possible throughout the summer. Early Jones lived with his aunt and uncle, making deliveries for the Fontenots. They

were planning to move to New Orleans at the end of the harvest. One day Adele saw Early and told him to leave, which made Desiree upset. After those long days, finally Desiree met Early in the bar. After a while these many days, they started flirting again.

When Early Jones tried to lift her scarf, Desiree pushed him hard and left the bar quick. That night when Adele made Early to run away, his uncle laughed at him. He felt that people in Mallard acts the same way as white when it is dealing with dark people. Early goes to the front of Desiree house and takes a picture of she while smoking. When Sam asked Early about finding Desiree, He lied that he haven't found Desiree and says that he needed more time. The people in Mallard saw being light skinned is the only way to live in peace. But it is not fair that they avoid people with dark skin.

The invincible war between the white skinned and dark people with the light skinned ebony people has never been sorted out. The book *"The vanishing half"* deals with the challenges faced by individual caught between the different race and those are unethical to judge the people's mind and their characters according to their skin colour. Even though people in Mallard were partly from the darker side they failed to even treat the Ebony coloured people better. In the knowledge of white people they were never equal to them and the people in Mallard never accept to be in the group of light skinned dark people. They thought of becoming lighter and lighter rather than accepting their nature by birth. Most of the time the mindset is that the white colour and the light tone shade in their body colour plays a major role and allow them to feel the superiority even among their own family. After the twins reached New Orleans, as young girls they found a job in a Laundromat rather than getting a fulltime job, as they were too young for a full time job.

After leaving the home and living a hard life, Desiree insisted in returning back to Mallard, but was baffled when Stella convinced her to stay in New Orleans. Desiree thought that it was her mistake to take her sister out of the home and make her struggle. It opposed the thought of Stella as she thought that her sister would never leave behind. A week after Desiree assaulted Early Jones at The Surly Goat, rumours about her connection with Early began to circulate. While the inhabitants of Mallard could understand Stella passing for white, Desiree's decision to marry a dark-skinned guy was inconceivable to them, and they suspected it would lead to difficulties, in need of work.

Desiree finds a waitress job in Lou's Egg House and met Early once. Early Jones offers Desiree that they could trace Stella as he was good at tracing people. At first Desiree hesitated, but at last she accepted to trace Stella. He left saying that he has some work to do in Texas and stated that when he return they could go and trace where Stella had gone. After leaving the town, Early couldn't resist talking with Desiree. He would call Desiree a lot while in Texas. By then Early had lied to Sam that he couldn't track down Desiree and he lost track of her.

She had become white because it was practical, so practical at that time, her decision seemed laughably obvious. Why wouldn't you be white if you could be? Remaining what you were or becoming something new, it was all a choice, any way you looked at it. She had just made the rational decision. (Bennett 225)

As a month has been passed the presence of Desiree and Jude had been disturbing the people in Mallard. As they have never encountered the situation of having a dark skin child with them. Desiree now forgot the thought of leaving Mallard as she would work during her shift days and would talk to Early at the end of her shifts.

The problem here the people encounter is not that Jude is black. They had been in worry that they are uncomfortable having an Ebony coloured girl among them. It is obvious when even Adele couldn't accept a dark skin boy to talk with her daughter. But when it is to her granddaughter, she couldn't give place for the hatred about the dark people and accepts her granddaughter and even wants to spend time with her. The thought of feeling that dark is inferior is broken by the overflow of emotion. It could be also said that emotion blinds a man from his principles and laws. Before leaving to Texas Early Jones revealed the truth that her husband has hired Early Jones to find Desiree.

Having won a track scholarship to UCLA, Jude arrives in Los Angeles in the autumn of 1978. As before, now Early doesn't always live with Desiree and Jude all the time. He would leave to chase some fugitives but returns and stays in Mallard for a while. Jude lived in solitary and loneliness in Mallard. Her friends would always make fun of her skin colour and calls often with racism names. Even though she knew that her father was a bad man, she would imagine like her father coming to Mallard and saving her from the torment she is been living.

But she remembers that her father mistreating her mother. He would beat her up so badly that she is fully covered by bruises. But her father had warned her to be careful with her mother as she had light skin than Sam and Jude. To survive and to escape from Mallard she focused on running. She joined the track team of the school and won multiple races. But nothing has changed in the behaviour of students they hurt the same as before. As she was the best runner, she got her scholarship to UCLA, which is why she is now moving to Los Angeles. On the other hand Early hasn't found Stella till now.

Desiree holds the thought that Stella would come one day for sure. But Desiree felt that even she couldn't be bold when entering Mallard. She felt guilty as she left her mother alone when she moved out of the city. She also felt that she had built a life for herself. She is not married to Early, but they had a strong connection where it is opposed by Adele. But Desiree didn't expect her mother to accept their relationship.

After knowing that Stella has been moved to Boston, the trail went clueless. At first he said that he would find her to please Desiree. But as clue has gotten into thin air, he lost his confidence of finding her. He clearly noticed that Stella made things that they couldn't find her. Even though, Early Jones is not interested in disappointing Desiree. As if we look at Jude, nobody in Los Angeles has ever heard of Mallard. Nobody Jude encounters in Los Angeles has ever heard of Mallard, which is partly due to the town not being shown on any maps. Reese, a young man from Arkansas, can't believe Mallard isn't on any maps, so she brings him to the library and shows him. Jude can sense the proximity of his body as they lean over the chart.

She met him for the first time at a Halloween party. She felt embarrassed during the party, but she quickly made friends with Reese, who was costumed as a cowboy. She was taken with his southern drawl and outstanding good looks, and they began spending all of their time together. Jude struggle here is so hard and different from the struggle of her mother's. She made no friends as she is seen as a different people from them. The people in Mallard are mainly focusing on becoming light skinned as fast as they could. The study of making their own culture is not built fully, but we could say that they never join hands with the dark skinned people. They try to adapt the culture of the white as it is followed by the people who think be superior.

Reese's original name was used to be Therese Anne Carter. When he travelled to LA from Arkansas, he slowly changed his appearance and started wrapping his chest and wore different

clothes. He also cut his hair at a truck stop. He even bought some steroids illegally. Jude finds that Reese works in a gym in there; she joined the gym to see Reese. Reese too recognised Jude from a party. They both began to talk and Jude came to know that Reese's dream is to become a professional photographer.

In December, Jude works a catering job in Beverly Hills, working at a retirement party for a wealthy Mr. Hardison, a loyal client of the Hardison Group. Jude hesitates when a young blonde girl asks her for a drink because she's been advised to behave herself. The girl introduces herself to Jude as being twenty-one and starts drinking a martini while talking to Jude about her mother's absence from the celebration. Jude drops the wine bottle she's holding when a dark-haired woman abruptly enters the party. The problem of light coloured can be related with Reese as he was born as a female and feels as a male. Even though he feels like a male he couldn't forget the thought that he is Anne Carter. He needs to take steroids to forget the fact that he is female. He needed bandages to cover his breasts. As the people in Mallards needed light skin to cover the fact that they are partly dark skin people. They see that being white is a superficial class where being a dark skinned is not a good thing of remaining as a light skinned dark is also inferior. Their only thought is that white is superior and other are always inferior no matter what happens.

They are fixed with this thought so that they could never fall apart from this at any circumstances. The superiority class assigned by them has no base or principle. They are just simple as they need to be white. Stella is leading a wealthy life in Los Angeles. Stella was known to be a calm and reserved person by her surroundings. But when there spreads a news that a black family is going to be coming into their neighbourhood, Stella couldn't sit back.

She shouts and surprises her neighbours opposing the entry of black people into their neighbourhood. Even Blake Sanders, Stella's husband was shocked seeing the outburst of Stella. He confronts her that no black family would be moving in their neighbourhood, if they so the home association has lawyers and they would deal with the rest. After 8 years of marriage Stella's nightmares were revolving around her father's death. But she could never tell such things to Blake, as she hasn't revealed her new identity. Even when Kennedy is kicking her belly, she was in a confusion that whether the baby would be black or white.

She planned if the baby is black, then she would tell that Blake was in affair with a black woman. But it turned out to be that the baby looked so white. Stella once told Kennedy in her childhood days that she is from Mallard in a confidence that Kennedy would forget. She told that her parents died in a tragic accident to Blake. Now Stella inherits every property of Blake. She even has a house maid. She remembers when she was working in Opelousas she has been assaulted by the house owner. That is the main reason Stella agreed to leave Mallard in the first place.

Over the course of the next several weeks, Stella and her neighbours find out that the Black family that is purchasing the home across the street has threatened to sue the Homeowners Association for violating its rules and regulations. Stella and the other residents in the neighbourhood are intimidated by the family's obvious extraordinary wealth. Stella engages in gossip with the other families in the housing complex, many of whom are determined to prevent a pattern whereby Black individuals move into the neighbourhood following the arrival of the first Black family.

Stella fears what these powerful white people could do to get their way, even if she agrees with her neighbours that she doesn't want to live among Black people. Stella not only passed as

white, she learned the habits of white and spoke for white. But the fear of being black never left her free to talk in every circumstance. Her expressions during the talk were so appreciated among the white people as she shouted as being one of them. Her thought of turning her husband as victim when the baby was born was well characterised for her. Her thought of being in the safer side is clearly determined.

She even thinks of accusing her husband as cheating her. Also their argument was failed due to the entry of the couple Loretta and Reginald. They have a daughter named Walker. When the neighbours discover that Reginald, Loretta's husband, is the actor who plays Sergeant Tommy Taylor in the police drama *Frisk*, their protests against the Walkers become a little less intense. Blake, who enjoys watching the show, finds it especially enjoyable to live next door to the Walkers. Stella closely observes how the Walkers live their life, even though Blake and Stella maintain their distance.

Stella witnesses Kennedy and Cindy, the Walkers' daughter, playing with dolls across the street one morning. Kennedy is startled when Stella abruptly grabs hold of her and forbids her from playing with Black people. That evening, Loretta arrives at Stella's home to give back the doll that Kennedy had left behind when Stella hurriedly carried her away. Stella avoids Loretta for weeks out of embarrassment. At church one day, Cath informs Stella that the Walkers are trying to get Cindy into the local school. In an effort to make Loretta feel better, Stella decides to cook her a lemon cake one afternoon in June.

Stella accepts Loretta's invitation to her party and is given a drink. Stella says she's going to apologise and refuses the drink. Stella thinks that perhaps Cindy and Kennedy might play sometime before she departs. Soon after, one morning, Stella and Loretta saw Cindy and Kennedy having fun in the park. Before marrying Reginald and relocating to Los Angeles, Loretta had intended to become a history professor, she recalls telling him when they first met at Howard University. Loretta continues, they moved to Palace Estates because of the nicer neighbourhoods and schools; that's why Stella and Blake moved there, too. Stella and Loretta become friends during the summer.

But Stella keeps her relationship with Loretta a secret from Blake, telling Kennedy to make up playdate stories with Cindy whenever Blake inquires about their day. But Loretta and Stella argue over sending Cindy to Brentwood Academy during one of Loretta's weekly card games. Stella believes it is foolish and will only get Cindy and Loretta into problems, but Loretta maintains that her daughter ought to have the same chances as the other pupils.

Cindy is ultimately sent by the Walkers to St. Francis in Santa Monica, which is a half-hour distant from the house. Loretta inquires about Stella's family one last summer day. Stella tells Loretta that she is a twin and that Loretta reminds her of Desiree. Stella gets emotional as she thinks of the family she left behind. Stella not only struggles to show herself as a white but also struggles to hide her internal conflicts and worries she has been carrying for these many days.

She has her own internal struggles and external conflicts. She confronts the pressure of conforming to societal expectations and suppressing their cultural heritage, leading to feelings of shame, over thinking and a fractured sense of belonging. It is also portrayed that the achievements and identities are inferior to those of the dominant culture. Stella never forgets her self-identity. She doesn't have a listener to hear them. She dumps every inferior thought within herself and thinks those thoughts are shame to her and her family. She never practices any of the habits from Mallard.

Culture is a thing where not only practices are followed. It is the way of living with the family. The hardships Stella has been carrying for these many days are shared with the help of her black neighbour. Culture has its own way of dealing, where it involves family friends and relations of its own. If culture is broken, family is broken, Stella sought for a marketing position at Maison Blanche after being fired from Dixie Laundry. Stella made the decision to pass for white at the interview in order to get a job as Blake Sanders' secretary.

Stella developed the character of Miss Vignes, her white colleague, while she was employed. Stella fanatically fantasised about living as Miss Vignes outside of the office and enjoying the benefits of white society, rather than discussing her professional life with Desiree at home. To her surprise she got the job of secretary of Blake's eye. All Blake's secretaries would be eager to catch Blake's eye. But Stella stayed calm, which made Blake's eye to turn on her. She found him so handsome, as no any white man has treated her so well. They went for lunch; They spent more and more time together. Stella now often visited Loretta lying to Blake.

The houses association have arranged a get together but have not invited Walkers. Stella is confronted by several of her friends about how much time she has been spending with Loretta throughout the party. They inquire as to whether it is accurate that the two women are friends after observing her cross the street and enter Loretta's home. Everyone is shocked when Stella, put on the position, says it's none of their "goddamn business." Later that evening, when the guests have left, she complains to Blake, who simply asks her why she kept her relationship with Loretta a secret from him. He's worried, not angry. Ultimately, he attributes her concealment to loneliness and begins suggesting other activities for her to engage in.

Stella looks Blake on the bed and feels that she has created life for herself and it would be too late for her to leave everything behind. On the Christmas day, Loretta, Kennedy and Cindy were playing together. All of a sudden Kennedy starts crying and Stella went rushing to them. Loretta explains that she used the racist word to mention Cindy. Stella informs her white friends, a week after Christmas, about an incident in which Reginald Walker assisted her in bringing goods into her kitchen. Stella claims to her pals that Reginald made her feel uneasy, even though he didn't even give her a quick glance before heading out.

A brick is thrown through the Walkers' window by someone three days after she relates this tale. The following week, someone throws a burning paper bag with dog crap on their porch. A few days later, one more brick is thrown into the house. After some day of those incidents the Walker left the house and area. Stella watched Loretta packing their stuff and sees her carrying her secret.

People say humans are valued by heart not by colour gender race culture or family. But in all the places they act as a pass to be valued. Emotions and loyalty are not measured in the first place itself. At the beginning they are valued by the passes then they enter the place of valuing. Stella's friendship has been so valuable but not valued by her. Her fear of being a part of inferior culture makes her think unsecure with the white neighbours.

Conclusion

As Britt Bennett wrote this novel '*The vanishing half*' she not only wrote her fictional minds and the thoughts she had. It can be her experience and the struggles she crossed through her living in many circumstances. She makes out the theme of colouring Self Identity and racism throughout her novel and shows us the impact of it in this. As for the sisters, Stella having

capability of passing as white full heartedly covers the truth of her natural birth and portraits herself as white and does not even had an willing to disclose it to her daughter. On the other hands Desiree failed to pass as white and had no other options than to ask a helping hand from her mother Adele. Stella even passing as white and having a rich and supporting husband still feels a heavy heart of not confessing the truth to her husband and daughter, she struggled covering her self-identity restlessly. Her longing to be a respectable person reflects in her habits and made her act as a white, and to adapt to the new culture to be them is the reason she decided to pass as white.

The identity and the invisibility in the African American literature deals with both the uplift and suppression of their particular society people this novel *The Vanishing Half* deals with both the supportive side of their society and at the same time, Stella worried about disguising her identity as a white and faces the problems in the present life with fear. The novel ends with only Stella's daughter know about mother true identity.

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