

The Politics of Skin: Colourism and the Quest for Belonging in *The Vanishing Half*

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Abstract: *This paper examines colourism as a central social and psychological construct that perpetuates inequality within and beyond racial boundaries. Colourism, defined as the discrimination or prejudice based on skin tone, privileges lighter skin over darker shades, shaping access to power, beauty, and belonging. The study analyzes how this hierarchy functions as both an external and internalized system of control, reinforcing colonial legacies and sustaining social stratification within communities of colour. By exploring the cultural and emotional dimensions of colour-based bias, this research highlights how individuals internalize societal messages that equate lightness with value and darkness with inferiority. Such conditioning influences identity formation, self-esteem, and social mobility, producing lasting psychological effects. The paper further argues that colourism operates through everyday interactions, family dynamics, media representations, and institutional frameworks that normalize inequality. It reveals how colour-based hierarchies intersect with gender, class, and race to maintain systemic imbalance and emotional fragmentation. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that dismantling colourism requires both social awareness and personal decolonization—a process of rejecting inherited standards of beauty and worth. By understanding colourism not merely as a by-product of racism but as an autonomous mechanism of oppression, the research calls for a redefinition of identity that values diversity, equity, and collective empowerment.*

Keywords: Colourism, Identity formation, Colonial legacies

I. INTRODUCTION

Colourism, though often overshadowed by broader discussions of racism, remains one of the most persistent and psychologically damaging social hierarchies within and across racial groups. It refers to discrimination based on skin tone, favouring lighter complexions and marginalizing darker ones. This form of prejudice, deeply rooted in colonial history and perpetuated through modern media, continues to define beauty, success, and belonging. Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) serves as a profound narrative that exposes how skin colour shapes the social and psychological fabric of individuals and communities. Through the lives of the Vignes twins, Stella and Desiree, the novel reveals how deeply embedded colourism affects identity, opportunity, and emotional well-being. In societies shaped by colonialism, lighter skin has long been equated with superiority, refinement, and access to privilege. The ideology of whiteness has not only divided races but has also created hierarchies within racial groups themselves. This hierarchy rewards proximity to whiteness and punishes darker tones, embedding inequality into everyday life. Bennett's narrative draws attention to the lingering legacy of these ideologies, showing how the politics of colour operate across generations and within families. The novel becomes a mirror reflecting how internalized prejudice and societal validation intersect to shape self-worth and relationships.

As Cannan observes, "When skin discrimination takes place at the intraracial level, it is best known as colorism. While it benefits light-skinned non-white subjects, colorism oppresses individuals with a darker skin color, who are defined in pejorative terms, such as 'nonhuman' or 'uncultured' among others" (232). This definition underscores the fact that colourism functions as a social mechanism for reinforcing inequality. It is both an external form of discrimination and an internalized system of value that influences personal choices, psychological well-being, and collective identity. *The Vanishing Half* situates colourism within the broader discourse of race and gender, revealing how the politics of



appearance govern social mobility and acceptance. The Vignes twins' divergent paths serve as a metaphor for the larger societal divide between privilege and exclusion, authenticity and conformity. This introduction therefore lays the foundation for examining how Bennett critiques systemic colour hierarchies, psychological trauma, and the ways individuals navigate the boundaries of race and identity.

II. THE DYNAMICS OF PASSING AND PRIVILEGE

The act of racial passing, where a light-skinned individual assumes a white identity to escape racial oppression—is central to Bennett's narrative. Stella Vignes's decision to pass as white illuminates the double-edged nature of privilege. On the surface, passing grants access to economic stability, safety, and social respectability. Yet beneath this surface lies a profound psychological cost: the suppression of authenticity, community, and familial ties. Stella's new life depends on concealing her heritage, a burden that transforms privilege into isolation. Passing, in this context, becomes a survival strategy shaped by systemic inequality. It reflects how the desire for acceptance and advancement compels individuals to conform to whiteness, even at the expense of identity. Stella's transformation is not only physical but behavioural—she polishes her speech, modifies her mannerisms, and erases traces of her past. This self-erasure highlights the internal violence of colourism: it demands not just social conformity but the reconfiguration of selfhood. Desiree, in contrast, embodies resistance. Her darker skin becomes a reminder of both exclusion and resilience. Her experiences show how colourism operates not only between races but within Black communities, determining desirability, employment, and belonging. Desiree's journey back to Mallard symbolizes a reclamation of selfhood and a rejection of the illusion that whiteness guarantees happiness or moral superiority.

In addition to passing and privilege, colourism significantly influences social perception and interpersonal interaction. Lighter skin often functions as a marker of competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, while darker skin may be associated with undesired stereotypes and suspicion. These biases are not only socially enforced but also internalized, prompting individuals to modify their behaviour, speech, and presentation to conform to societal expectations. Such self-monitoring creates constant psychological tension, where the pursuit of social acceptance comes at the expense of authenticity. Moreover, colourism intersects with class and socioeconomic status, as lighter-skinned individuals are more likely to access higher education, professional networks, and economic opportunities. Consequently, skin tone becomes both a visible and invisible currency, influencing personal and structural mobility in profound ways.

Colourism also dictates relationships, shaping trust, desirability, and friendship. Lighter-skinned individuals often receive immediate acceptance, while darker-skinned individuals must prove their worth or navigate suspicion. Such dynamics create emotional hierarchies in which affection, respect, and visibility are distributed according to shade. Bennett's portrayal of these tensions reveals the invisible yet powerful social codes that dictate human interaction. The novel's exploration of passing ultimately exposes the paradox of privilege: the closer one gets to social acceptance, the further one may drift from authenticity. Stella's material comfort cannot mask her internal alienation. The privileges of whiteness, once obtained, become a cage of silence and performance. Through Stella and Desiree, Bennett unravels how colour operates as both opportunity and burden, shaping not just what society sees but what individuals believe about themselves.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF COLOURISM

The psychological consequences of colourism are far-reaching. It shapes self-perception, ambition, and emotional development from childhood. Lighter-skinned individuals often internalize entitlement or confidence, while darker-skinned individuals experience chronic self-doubt and the pressure to overperform to gain recognition. These internalized hierarchies are learned early, often within families and reinforced by media that glorify Eurocentric beauty ideals. Phonexis and Craddock observe that "while families can be an important buffer against racism, children are often exposed to colourism by family members. Dark skin can be seen as negative and a potential source of familial shame" (5). Bennett's depiction of family dynamics reflects this truth: Kennedy and Jude's experiences demonstrate how children inherit beliefs about worth linked to complexion. Thus, colourism becomes intergenerational, a quiet inheritance of bias disguised as protection or affection. The intersection of gender further intensifies these experiences. Lighter-skinned women often receive greater romantic attention and professional favour, while darker-skinned women are subjected to hypervisibility or invisibility. Their beauty, intellect, and character are frequently evaluated through the lens of shade.



This intersectional experience exposes the dual burdens of gendered and racialized expectation. The societal demand that women maintain both physical beauty and social conformity reinforces emotional labour and psychological fatigue. Colourism also impacts emotional and familial dynamics across generations. Children learn from early interactions how skin tone affects perceived value, often internalizing family and community attitudes toward lighter and darker complexions. This intergenerational transmission reinforces hierarchical thinking, shaping aspirations, self-esteem, and social behaviour from a young age. The psychological weight of such hierarchies can manifest as anxiety, self-doubt, or hypervigilance in social settings. Additionally, media representation and cultural narratives perpetuate colourist ideals, constantly validating lighter skin while marginalizing darker shades. These factors collectively maintain structural inequality and emotional strain, demonstrating that colourism is both a personal and societal force that shapes identity, relationships, and opportunities.

In professional and social contexts, colourism manifests as a determinant of access. Opportunities flow naturally toward those whose appearances align with dominant beauty standards. This creates an implicit hierarchy of “marketable” bodies, where lighter skin signifies competence or civility. The darker one’s skin, the more they must perform respectability and intelligence to counter prejudice. Colourism thus extends beyond aesthetics into economic and political life, influencing employment, education, and even safety. Beauty standards, driven by media and colonial legacy, further perpetuate this bias. Global industries from film to advertising continue to equate fairness with success. Skin-lightening products and cosmetic industries exploit these insecurities, commodifying self-hatred under the guise of aspiration. Bennett’s text subtly critiques this phenomenon, showing how characters internalize commercial ideals of whiteness that disconnect them from their roots. Bell Hooks’ reflections on internalized racism provide a framework for understanding this cycle. She asserts that individuals must actively recognize and dismantle their own learned prejudices to achieve liberation: “Our ability to see and appreciate difference is rooted in our capacity to love and care for one another” (20). Bennett’s characters embody this struggle, as both Stella and Desiree must confront internalized hierarchies that distort their sense of worth and belonging. Ultimately, the novel exposes colourism as both a personal trauma and a collective affliction. It operates not merely through institutions but through everyday interactions—family conversations, romantic choices, and self-reflection. Its psychological grip persists even in moments of defiance, making healing a process of continual self-awareness and resistance.

IV. SUMMATION

The Vanishing Half demonstrates that colourism is not a superficial issue confined to appearance; it is a social system that governs opportunity, behaviour, and emotional experience. The privileging of lighter skin infiltrates every dimension of life, shaping identity formation, relationships, and aspirations. Through the Vignes twins, Bennett portrays how individuals navigate the competing demands of acceptance and authenticity in a world structured by visual hierarchies. Stella’s life reveals the cost of assimilation: her privilege depends on silence, secrecy, and erasure. Desiree’s return to Mallard, on the other hand, represents reclamation, a conscious choice to define self-worth beyond societal validation. Their contrasting journeys embody two responses to systemic oppression: conformity and resistance.

Colourism, as revealed in Bennett’s narrative, extends beyond personal prejudice. It is a mechanism of social control that reproduces inequality across generations. Yet within this system lies the potential for transformation. By acknowledging and confronting internalized bias, individuals and communities can begin to dismantle the psychological and cultural foundations of colourism. The novel thus functions as both social critique and psychological study. It urges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about how beauty, worth, and humanity are measured. Bennett’s work ultimately calls for empathy, a reimagining of identity not as a product of shade but as a reflection of shared humanity.

In summation, colourism in *The Vanishing Half* operates as a mirror for the real world, reminding us that liberation requires unlearning inherited hierarchies and embracing diversity without hierarchy. The journey toward equality is not only societal but deeply personal, requiring self-examination, collective awareness, and the courage to redefine what it means to belong.



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