

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

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Abstract: *Colour remains a key factor shaping women's experiences. While feminism traditionally focuses on gender inequality, women's lives are also shaped by race, skin colour, class, culture, and social expectations. This paper examines skin colour and feminism in contemporary literary works, focusing on discrimination, identity struggles, social exclusion, and unequal opportunities due to appearance. It argues that literary colour cannot be separated from gender and power structures. The paper explores how texts represent preference for lighter skin and assumptions linked to beauty, respectability, femininity, and status. Darker skinned women face negative stereotypes, while lighter skin is associated with beauty, privilege, acceptance, and mobility. Such representations link colour prejudice to patriarchal expectations. Colour is treated not as a physical trait but as a social construct shaping female identity. The study investigates how female characters respond to colour discrimination and restrictive beauty standards. Some face internal conflict and hide parts of their identity to gain acceptance. Others resist by developing self-awareness, rejecting conventional beauty ideals, recovering cultural identity, and accepting their appearance. Literature thus questions systems that determine how women are valued. The paper considers colour intersects with class, family background, culture, and social position, adopting a feminist perspective that recognizes diverse women's experiences rather than a uniform group. Through close reading, colour representations raise questions about power, identity, beauty, belonging, and female agency. The paper concludes that contemporary literature challenges colour prejudice and expands feminist discussions beyond gender, encouraging a more inclusive understanding of female identity and resistance.*

Keywords: Colour, Feminism, Skin colour, Female identity, Discrimination, Patriarchy, Resistance, Race

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of colour feminism, often articulated through the framework of intersectionality, challenges the notion that gender is the sole or primary axis of women's oppression. Instead, it asserts that race, skin colour, class, and other social markers interlock to create distinct and compounded experiences of discrimination. This perspective directly contests female essentialism, the idea that all women share a uniform set of experiences and attributes. The experience of being a woman is fundamentally shaped by the social meanings attached to skin colour, which can determine access to beauty, respectability, and social mobility. This paper examines this dynamic in three contemporary novels: Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface*, and Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind*. Each text reveals how colour based prejudice operates within and beyond patriarchal structures, shaping female identity, agency, and resistance.

II. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF COLOUR AND BEAUTY

In each novel, colour is not a neutral physical trait but a social construct that carries profound consequences for female identity. In *The Vanishing Half*, the town of Mallard is founded on a hierarchy of colour, where lighter skin is prized as



a form of social capital. The Vignes twins, Stella and Desiree, internalize this logic from childhood, with Stella's ability to pass for white becoming a path to economic liberation and social acceptance. However, this mobility comes at the cost of psychological entrapment in a continuous lie about her identity, burdened by guilt for abandoning her racial legacy. The novel reveals how colour based prejudice becomes inseparable from patriarchal expectations of femininity, where a woman's worth is tied to her proximity to whiteness.

Yellowface shifts the lens to the publishing industry, where the commodification of racial authenticity reveals a different facet of colour based prejudice. The novel's protagonist, June Hayward, appropriates the manuscript of her deceased Asian American friend, Athena Liu, and publishes it under the racially ambiguous name Juniper Song. The industry's hunger for diverse stories, as Kuang portrays it, is not a genuine commitment to racial justice but a market driven appetite for pain that can be marketed as authentic and educational. Athena, in life, was boxed in by her racial identity, treated by publishers like a museum of her own trauma. The novel exposes how the publishing landscape, with its overwhelmingly white gatekeepers, enables cultural appropriation while maintaining existing hierarchies of power. Here, colour and race are not merely personal identities but commercial products, and the women who navigate this landscape must confront a system that values their appearance and background only insofar as they can be sold.

Stone Blind transports these questions into the realm of myth, reimagining the story of Medusa through a feminist lens. The novel critiques the way traditional narratives punish women for their beauty and vulnerability. Medusa, originally a beautiful priestess, is transformed into a monster by the goddess Athene as punishment for being raped by Poseidon. The fact that Athene chooses to deprive Medusa of her most beautiful feature, her hair, as punishment for an assault she did not choose, proves that the goddess is looking to shame rather than lift up another woman. This punishment reflects a patriarchal logic that blames women for their own victimization and weaponizes female appearance as a tool of control. Haynes delves into the patriarchal structure of society that reduces Medusa to nothing more than the monster she is remembered as, challenging the inherited ideas of beauty and monstrosity that have been used to justify violence against women.

III. INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AND RESISTANCE

The three novels further explore how female characters respond to colour based discrimination and restrictive standards of beauty, demonstrating that feminist resistance can take multiple forms. In *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree's return to Mallard with her dark skinned daughter, Jude, represents a refusal to be confined by the colorist environment she once fled. Her assertion, "Mama, we're not stayin," reflects a firm declaration of personal choice and a rejection of maternal and community expectations. From a liberal feminist perspective, this action asserts a woman's right to determine her own path and pursue fulfillment according to her own aspirations. Yet the novel also insists on an intersectional reading: Jude's struggles emerge from the intersection of race, colour, and gender, as she faces both racial prejudice from the broader society and severe colorism within her own community because of her darker skin tone. Her experience demonstrates that feminist resistance cannot be reduced to a single axis of oppression.

Yellowface presents a more ambivalent form of resistance. June Hayward is not a sympathetic protagonist; she is a casually racist, entitled white writer whose actions are driven by envy and opportunism. Yet the novel's satirical form itself constitutes a feminist argument about how the shiftiness of narrative can be used and abused in imbalanced power relations. By writing from the perspective of an unlikeable narrator, Kuang forces readers to confront the uncomfortable ways in which white women can perpetuate racial hierarchies even while claiming to be marginalized by gender. The novel does not offer a clean model of resistance but instead reveals the complicity of white feminism in maintaining systems of racial privilege.

Stone Blind offers perhaps the most explicit model of feminist resistance through its narrative structure. The novel gives Medusa a history and personality of her own, challenging the traditional and silenced identity of the Gorgon. Haynes effectively uses Medusa's head as the novel's narrator, alluding to the common equation of beauty with silence and monstrosity with voice. Medusa's choice to sacrifice herself to protect other women in the temple stands in stark contrast to Athene's decision to punish women for being victims. This portrayal enhances the complexities and nuances



of feminism, drawing conscious parallels to modern day society and the challenges that many women face on a daily basis. Resistance, in this novel, involves the recovery of a voice that has been historically suppressed and the rejection of a beauty standard that defines women by their appearance rather than their agency.

IV. SUMMATION

Through close readings of *The Vanishing Half*, *Yellowface*, and *Stone Blind*, this study has demonstrated that representations of colour can expose deeper questions about power, identity, beauty, belonging, and female agency. Colour, as these novels reveal, is never merely a physical characteristic; it is a social construct that operates in intimate connection with gender, class, and race to shape women's lives in profound and unequal ways. The preference for lighter skin, the commodification of racial authenticity, and the punishment of female beauty all reveal how colour based prejudice becomes closely connected with patriarchal expectations. Yet literature also becomes an important space for questioning the social systems that determine how women are valued. By bringing colour and feminism together, these texts challenge inherited ideas of beauty and encourage a more inclusive understanding of female identity and resistance. Contemporary literature thus plays a significant role in expanding feminist discussions beyond gender alone, insisting that the fight for women's liberation must also confront the hierarchies of colour that have too often gone unnamed.

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