



Systemic Racism and Racial Identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

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Abstract. This article explores the representation of systemic racism in Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half*, using Joe R. Feagin's Systemic Racism Theory and a sociological approach to literature. The study analyzes how racism is portrayed not just as individual prejudice but as a multidimensional system embedded in institutions, cultural norms, and personal identity. The novel follows the diverging paths of twin sisters, Desiree and Stella, who make drastically different choices about their racial identities choices that influence their families across generations. Through textual analysis, the article identifies four key forms of racism depicted in the novel: structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized. Structural racism appears in the town of Mallard's colorist ideology; institutional racism manifests in unequal education and employment; interpersonal racism is evident in microaggressions and exclusion; while internalized racism is portrayed through Stella's rejection of her Black identity. The study reveals how these forms of racism shape the characters' identities, relationships, and life opportunities. By combining literary analysis with sociological theory, the article argues that *The Vanishing Half* serves not only as a powerful narrative but also as a critique of enduring racial inequality in American society. It highlights literature's role in exposing and resisting systemic oppression through storytelling.

Keywords : *Systemic Racism, Racial Identity, Sociology of Literature, Brit Bennett, The Vanishing Half*

INTRODUCTION

Racism continues to shape global social structures, cultural narratives, and individual experiences. In the United States, it no longer functions solely as overt discrimination but as a deeply rooted system embedded in institutions, ideologies, and everyday practices. According to Feagin (2014:13), systemic racism is a material and ideological system of oppression, embedded in the foundational institutions of society. This system influences access to education, employment, housing, and health care, often without explicit racist intent. Despite civil rights advancements, racial inequality persists, sustained through both visible and invisible mechanisms.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) offers a compelling exploration of how systemic racism constructs and influences racial identity. The novel follows twin sisters, Desiree and Stella Vignes, who escape their racially segregated hometown but choose contrasting paths one embracing her Black identity, the other passing as white. These choices not only

affect their personal identities but also the lives of their daughters, creating a multigenerational reflection on race, trauma, and belonging.

The research problem lies in understanding how racism is represented not only as individual prejudice but as a comprehensive and generational system. Previous literary studies often focus on overt discrimination or isolated experiences. However, there remains a gap in analyzing how literature portrays the complex interplay of structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized racism as interconnected systems. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing *The Vanishing Half* through Joe R. Feagin's systemic racism theory.

The state of the art in this field includes works by Chairi (2020), Ardinang (2023), and Diba (2019), who examine racism in different literary contexts. While these studies demonstrate that racism functions within societal systems, they do not fully address its internalized and intergenerational impact as portrayed in Bennett's novel. Thus, this study offers a new perspective by combining literary analysis with sociological theory to expose the continuity and evolution of racism across generations.

The aim of this research is to identify how systemic racism is represented in *The Vanishing Half* and to explore how it shapes characters' identities, relationships, and life opportunities. By doing so, the study demonstrates how literature can serve as both a mirror and a critique of social injustice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies have discussed racism in literature. Chairi (2020) explored racial discrimination in *A River in Darkness*, Ardinang (2023) analyzed systemic racism in *Between the World and Me*, and Diba (2019) examined racial segregation in *The Help*. These studies demonstrate that racism operates not only at the individual level but also within broader social systems and structures. However, this study offers a different perspective by focusing on Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half*, which examines racism in a more complex and multidimensional way. It specifically explores four forms of racism: structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized.

To analyze these aspects, the study applies Joe R. Feagin's Systemic Racism Theory (2014:13). Feagin argues that racism is not merely about personal prejudice, but a deeply rooted system embedded in institutions, laws, and everyday practices. He outlines four key types of racism. Structural racism refers to long-standing historical systems, such as slavery and segregation, that continue to influence social inequality today. Institutional racism occurs through rules, policies, and practices that result in unequal outcomes for racial minorities, even if unintentionally. Interpersonal racism is found in daily interactions, including microaggressions and social exclusion. Finally, internalized racism happens when marginalized individuals adopt negative stereotypes or beliefs about their own racial group. According to Supsiadji (2011:38) One of the views of genetic structuralism is that there are parallels between the structure of literary works and the social structure of society. This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand how *The Vanishing Half* portrays the complexities of racial identity and systemic oppression.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive research design, focusing on textual analysis. Primary data is derived from Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020), while secondary sources include scholarly literature on systemic racism and literary theory. Excerpts from the novel are categorized and analyzed according to their thematic relevance to the four dimensions of systemic racism. The sociological literary approach facilitates a contextualized reading that links fictional representation to real-world systems of racial inequality.

This study also applies the sociology of literature approach, which views literature as a reflection of society. According to Laurenson and Swingewood (1972:17), literature is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. In *The Vanishing Half*, racial identity, colorism, and life choices are shaped by systemic racism. This approach helps reveal how the novel not only tells a story but also criticizes racial injustice in society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the systemic and impact of racism in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* through the theoretical lens of Joe R. Feagin's systemic racism theory and the sociology of literature approach. The novel centers on the lives of the Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, who grow up in the small, Black community of Mallard, Louisiana a fictional town founded on the belief that light-skinned African Americans should marry lighter to eventually "pass" into whiteness. After fleeing Mallard as teenagers, the twins choose radically different paths: Desiree returns to her Black identity and raises her dark-skinned daughter, Jude, in Mallard, while Stella abandons her past and passes as white, eventually marrying a white man and raising her daughter, Kennedy, in a wealthy white suburb. The narrative unfolds across several decades and multiple settings Mallard, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and New York tracing how race, identity, and trauma shape each character's choices and relationships. Through its complex characters and multigenerational plot, *The Vanishing Half* offers a nuanced exploration of the enduring legacy of racism in America. In this chapter, the analysis is structured into four main sections based on Feagin's categorization of racism: structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized. Each section illustrates how these forms of racism manifest in the lives of the characters and are embedded within the systems and social norms that govern their world. Additionally, the chapter explores the sociological significance of the narrative and the intergenerational trauma that results from racial passing, rejection, and systemic exclusion. By combining literary analysis with sociological theory, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how Bennett's novel functions as both a powerful story and a critical reflection of America's racialized social order.

4.1 Structural Racism

Mallard, the town where the Vignes twins are born, embodies structural racism through its valorization of light skin. The founder's vision of a community where each generation would be "lighter than the one before" (Bennett, 2020,:9) is rooted in internalized white supremacist ideals. Structural racism in Mallard is subtle yet powerful, shaping who is considered desirable, respectable, or successful. Stella's decision to pass as white is not

just a personal act but a response to the structural incentives attached to whiteness—better housing, education, employment, and safety. As Feagin (2014:13) argues, such choices are embedded in broader social structures that reward racial passing while punishing racial authenticity, particularly among darker-skinned individuals.

4.2 Institutional Racism

Institutional racism in the novel is evident in education, law enforcement, and housing. Jude experiences exclusion at her predominantly white college, where she is rendered both invisible and hypervisible due to her race (Bennett, 2020:173). Stella, by contrast, gains access to institutions of privilege by concealing her Blackness. When a Black family moves into her white neighborhood, the collective response is one of resistance and exclusion, supported by homeowners' associations and neighborhood meetings. These forms of institutional control mirror real-life mechanisms such as redlining and discriminatory zoning policies that maintain racial segregation (Feagin, 2020:74).

4.3 Interpersonal Racism

Jude's everyday experiences of ridicule in Mallard, where she is labeled "Tar Baby" and "Mudpie," exemplify interpersonal racism (Bennett, 2020:124). These interactions enforce colorist norms and psychological trauma, especially when normalized within community behavior. Stella's avoidance of her Black neighbors and fear of being "discovered" highlight how whiteness is maintained through vigilance and distancing (Bennett, 2020:210). Interpersonal racism thus reinforces systemic patterns by reproducing prejudices in intimate and informal settings (Feagin, 2020:74).

4.4 Internalized Racism

Stella's rejection of her racial identity represents the most profound example of internalized racism. Her belief that Blackness equates to limitation (Bennett, 2020:169) reflects internalized oppression. By raising her daughter Kennedy in complete racial ignorance, Stella transmits her denial across generations. Kennedy's disbelief when confronted with her Black ancestry ("That's impossible. I'm white.") illustrates how racial denial becomes inherited (Bennett, 2020:270). Feagin (2014:13) notes that internalized racism is dangerous precisely because it aligns the worldview of the oppressed with that of the oppressor, often invisibly and involuntarily.

4.5 Racial Trauma and Generational Impact

The novel's multi-generational arc reveals how trauma, secrecy, and racial identity are passed from mother to daughter. While Desiree chooses authenticity and nurtures Jude's racial awareness, Stella chooses concealment, resulting in Kennedy's identity crisis. Jude's resilience and eventual empowerment contrast sharply with Kennedy's confusion and detachment. This juxtaposition affirms Feagin's (2020:74) claim that the psychological consequences of systemic racism persist across generations and influence not only external opportunities but also inner self-concept and familial cohesion.

CONCLUSION

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* provides a compelling narrative through which to examine systemic racism in its various forms. Feagin's theoretical framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how racism is perpetuated not only through overt policies or actions, but also through internalized ideologies and interpersonal dynamics. Through the intertwined stories of Stella, Desiree, Jude, and Kennedy, Bennett critiques racial hierarchies while also showing how literature can resist, expose, and challenge systemic injustice. The novel underscores how systemic racism is lived, inherited, and resisted. Stella's internalized racism and decision to pass erase not only her heritage but also distort the identity of her child. Jude, in contrast, represents resistance, truth, and healing. This contrast emphasizes that racial identity is not simply a matter of appearance or choice, but a negotiation of history, trauma, and social structure. Conclusion of the study affirms that literature remains a vital medium for sociocultural critique. By bringing systemic injustice to the surface, *The Vanishing Half* deepens readers' understanding of race, identity, and the possibility of liberation through truth and recognition.

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