



**Mimicry and Hybridity: Application of Homi K. Bhabha's Theory to Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half***

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**Abstract:**

*The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett explores the complexities of lineage, individuality, and acceptance through the lives of Desiree and Stella, who are members of the Black community. Stella passes as white, while on the other hand, Desiree continues to identify with her Black community. This paper examines the novel through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's 'Postcolonial Theory of Mimicry and Hybridity', and his concept of 'almost the same but not quite', which investigates the disintegration of one's native identity and the distorting of its rigid boundaries. Stella's decision to hide her identity elucidates the 'ambivalence' of Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry' as it empowers her with the privileges enjoyed by the whites. At the same time, it deprives her of freedom, creating a 'third space' between the two cultures. The paper also emphasises that this concept of 'hybrid identity' is intergenerational and that racial and cultural aspects are not rigid but can be constructed.

**Keywords:** lineage, individuality, acceptance, mimicry, hybridity, third space.

**Introduction:**

“White folks kill you if you want too much, kill you if you want too little. White folks only like Black people who are humble and grateful, who don't try to be equal. You think they like you now, but as soon as you ask for something, they'll turn on you. They'll kill you over a whiff of insult, and then say you were the one who was wrong.”  
(Bennett, 35)

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) highlights the racial disparity, obsession with white-skin colour and the adverse effect it has on the psychological health of Black Americans. Bennett is best known for her unique writing style, which encapsulates emotional depth with clarity and precision. The differences among people and the hierarchical issues prevalent in her environment profoundly influenced her, which further shaped her emotional intensity. Her lucid writing style enables readers to connect with the emotions and internal conflicts of her characters. At the same time, it makes the readers understand the social issues and their impact on an individual's life.

The novel, *The Vanishing Half*, is a story of two identical twin sisters, Desiree Vignes and Stella Vignes, inseparable since childhood, who lived in Mallard, a fictional town in Louisiana. The people here were light-skinned Black people who used to boast about their complexion and used to trouble those who differed from them because of their typical Black skin. This light-skin obsession of the people of Louisiana led the twin sisters, at the age of sixteen, to leave their hometown for an independent, happy and peaceful life. After reaching New Orleans, Stella decided to flee, leaving her twin sister, Desiree and her past behind. She chose to pass as white, taking advantage of being light-skinned. On the other hand, Desiree, completely devastated by her sister's disappearance, continued to live her life as Black and moved with it.

Bennett has divided the novel into six sections, showcasing different periods of her characters' lives from 1968 to 1986. It is intergenerational as she has intermingled the stories of Desiree and Stella, as well as their next generation, namely their daughters, Jude and Kennedy. The author has highlighted that the results of actions and decisions of one generation are not limited to their lives but carry forward to future generations. It is not only the twin sisters who bear the burden of their past decisions; their daughters are similarly affected.

### **Literature Review and Scope of the Study:**

The literature review reveals that Bhabha's concepts have been studied and analysed in terms of culture, power and identity, largely within colonial texts. The researchers have applied the concepts of mimicry and hybridity, particularly to narratives highlighting racial passing influenced by social and cultural pressures. Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and J. C Young have focused on highlighting the notion of hybridity important in the spheres of cultural practices, subalternity and identity. Traditionally, scholars have incorporated Bhabha's notions into political and sociological perspectives. By conducting an intense literature review, this study suggests that relatively less research has examined the application of Homi K. Bhabha's concepts in literature. With respect to the application of these notions to the novel, *The Vanishing Half*, some earlier research initiatives are as follows:

Research conducted by Shahid, Laiba Gul, et al., titled, *Navigating Hybrid Identities: A Comparative Analysis of The Vanishing Half and Passing*, compares the novel's thematic elements with hybrid identity. It does not include Bhabha's other concepts and the novel's perspectives, like their impact on relationships and future generations. Another research paper published by Rashad Al Areqi, entitled, *Race and Identity in Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half*, traces the significance of race and identity in the Afro-Americans. It aims at other postcolonial theories rather than Bhabha's theory for the application. *In Defying the Binaries of Passing in*

*Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half*, *Maaike Siemes's* research article analyses Stella's racial passing in the novel. It focuses only on Stella, overlooking the other characters in the novel, and considers only the concept of mimicry, ignoring Bhabha's other notions.

The present research aims to provide a new perspective on the existing research by introducing new insights within the field. With the study of racial identity and cultural pressures, this study emphasises the extreme impact such strong decisions have on an individual's mental being. It also broadens the scope of the application of Bhabha's concepts by highlighting their intergenerational nature. It continues to affect generations. It also brings a postcolonial viewpoint into the research field. This connects postcolonial issues with modern literature. This connectivity highlights the enduring relevance of Bhabha's notions in the contemporary era and asserts that they function effectively beyond colonial contexts.

### **Homi K. Bhabha's Notions of Mimicry, Hybridity, Third Space and Ambivalence:**

One of the most renowned postcolonial literary critics, Homi K. Bhabha, in his 'Theory of Mimicry and Hybridity', introduced the concepts of *mimicry*, *hybridity*, *third space*, and *ambivalence*. Bhabha's beliefs challenged the age-old notion of cultural and racial rigidity and belonging and presented it as a flexible concept. In his seminal work, *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha has transformed the rigid boundaries of the colonised into flexible identities based on social norms, interests, and interactions. According to him, the colonised should not just be treated as victims of the colonisers but should be taken as gainers too. Post the colonisation period, the colonised inherit the cultural practices, traditions and ethics from the colonisers based on their requirements. Moreover, intermingle them with their hereditary practices and beliefs, and build a third space for themselves. As he says in his work,

‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (Bhabha 1-2)

Although Bhabha introduced his concepts within the colonial culture, his ideas can also be applied to social issues like race and identity crisis. His idea of mimicry refers to the exchange between the colonial and postcolonial era, in which the colonised mimic or emulate the culture, language and practices of the coloniser. However, according to Bhabha, this colonial mimicry or imitation is “almost the same but not quite” (89). The colonisers force the colonised people to learn and adopt certain behavioural practices, like their language and way of living, for their advantage. Nevertheless, it is only to a specific limit because the colonisers fear equalisation with the colonised subjects, as it will destroy their reign in the colonised land. Therefore, they attempted to bring a change in the colonised people by incorporating their cultural nuances into the behaviour of the colonised. However, the difference between the original and the mimicry should always be visible. For example, when the British ruled in India, they made Indians learn their language and culture, only to benefit themselves by making Indians serve under them. They never gave them any higher authoritative positions to ensure that they did not prove to be a threat to the colonial rule on the Indian land. Homi K. Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as,

*Almost the same but not quite*: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the

rules and within them. The question of the representation of difference is therefore always a problem of authority. (89)

Explaining his concept of hybridity, Bhabha argues that the amalgamation of two different cultures creates a new space, especially when one culture is more powerful than the other. A hybrid identity is constructed when certain aspects, such as language, etiquette, customs, and ways of living from the colonised culture intermingle with those of the coloniser, changing their original form. This new hybrid identity is a mix of both cultures, neither replicating one nor resembling the other, but emerging as something new and different. According to Bhabha, this hybridity results in the creation of a third space, which is a space between the two distinct cultures. The third space is an in-between space that allows individuals to adapt aspects of both their hereditary and the foreign culture, creating a new version of both. Moving further, Bhabha enunciates that hybridity, which leads to the creation of a third space, cannot be assumed to be a peaceful blend, but rather a space that incorporates tension. This happens because the people in the third space do not belong to any of the cultures, i.e., neither are they a part of their base culture nor do they find the coloniser's culture to be their own. Though the colonised have elements of both cultures in their personality, they are unable to fully incorporate all, creating a sense of displacement. According to Bhabha, this is a space of both freedom and alienation. Therefore, this third space is like a space of both gain and loss. Bhabha terms it as a space where identity is ever-changing and never fixed.

In this notion of hybridity and third space, Bhabha also enunciates his idea of ambivalence. He says that this hybrid third space can act as a means of control for the coloniser's culture and, at the same time, as an empowering tool for the colonised, leading to duality and ambivalence. Ambivalence in hybridity lies in the hybrid identity; it is about living between the two worlds without fully belonging to either. In Bhabha's words, "The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process,

destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code.” (37)

### **Application of Bhabha’s Concepts to the Novel, *The Vanishing Half*:**

In the novel *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett portrays Stella, one of the twins, as the character who mimics white society, their values and culture. When she runs away from her hometown, Louisiana, to California, leaving her Black identity behind, she decides to pass as white. This passing of Stella as a white person illustrates Bhabha’s concept of mimicry. She starts imitating the culture, behavioural etiquette and traditions of the whites to create a space for herself in their society. She takes this strong decision of hiding her identity to have a peaceful life as a white person, which is not accessible to her in her roots as a Black person. Her transformation is not just geographical; it is much more than that. It enunciates the transition in her identity from Black to white. Her mimicry as a white person is so persuasive that she enjoys all the privileges of a white person. She marries a rich white man, lands a kind of job only permissible for a white person, attends their social gatherings, etc. “All there was to being white was acting like you were... There was nothing to being white except boldness. You could convince anyone you belonged somewhere if you acted like you did” (Bennett 75,149). Stella’s performance, like a white person, challenges the racial rigidity and proves it to be a flexible aspect that can be created. It is not an innate aspect limited to birth or blood, but rather something that can be taught and created based on requirements and social aspects. She switches from being Black to white efficiently, challenging the presupposed esteemed stature of whites. As she enunciates, “Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half. She could become whichever woman she decided, whichever side of her face she tilted to the light” (Bennett 188-189). But Stella’s mimicry as a white is never complete, following Bhabha’s concept of “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 89). She has access to all the privileges of

being white, but only with a fear of losing them and always being terrified of the idea of getting exposed.

The passing of Stella as white also connects the plot to Bhabha's notion of hybridity. Bennett, in her novel, highlights this concept of hybridity through different characters, the most prominent being Stella. When Stella passes as white, she constructs a new world for herself, a world which neither belongs to the Blacks nor the whites. It draws on the new identity as a white person and the memories of originally being Black. She is in a state of in-betweenness, leading to the creation of a dual but fragmented identity. Stella explicates, "At first, passing seemed so simple, she couldn't understand why her parents hadn't done it. But she was young then. She hadn't realised how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you." (Bennett 169) She is caught between the two worlds, i.e., one of attaining all the privileges of being a white person and, on the other hand, betraying her roots as a Black. This is evident in numerous instances in the novel when she is reminiscing about her past, her hometown, parents and especially her twin sister, Desiree. Although she is enjoying all the privileges of a white, in the back of her mind, she always lives in guilt and conflict of leaving her real identity. Stella's life exemplifies that the created third space through a hybrid identity can lead to ambivalence, creating a complex condition of both gain and loss, simultaneously.

Desiree's life can also be taken as a reflection of third space, though it differs from Stella's, as it is not racial passing. When Desiree returns to her hometown, Mallard, with her daughter, she exists between two distinct worlds. She belongs to Mallard yet also exists beyond it, having lived for years in the outside world. Her return as the native of Mallard makes her an insider, but defying the light-skinned colour obsession of Mallard by bringing back a dark-skinned child from a dark-skinned man makes her an outsider. These complexities make her live in her third space of being both an insider and an outsider, dwelling in Mallard.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybrid identity, third space and ambivalence are not just effective in the lives of the colonised or the directly affected individuals, but they also pass to future generations. These concepts are intergenerational. As in the novel *The Vanishing Half*, Brit Bennett reveals the lasting impact of one generation's decisions on future generations. Stella's decision to pass as a white person and mimic them, leaving her native origin behind, significantly affects her daughter, Kennedy. As seen in some instances in the novel, Kennedy questions her maternal roots.

“Where are you from, Mommy?” Kennedy asked her once during bath time. “A little town down south,” Stella said. “You won't have heard of it.”

“But where?” Kennedy asked... “It's just a little place called Mallard, darling,” she said. “It's nothing like Los Angeles.” (151-152)

Kennedy grew up as a white child in Los Angeles, completely unaware of her Black roots and unconsciously mimicking them, just like her mother. Kennedy's unintentional mimicry as a white person shows how a strong decision of a generation can pass and affect future generations. When Kennedy meets Jude and learns the reality of her original identity as a Black, she is in a state of ambivalence. She feels caught between the privileges she enjoys by being white and the burden of the betrayal and lies she has lived with her entire life. When Kennedy understands and accepts her relationship with Jude, she constructs her third space, where she confronts her hybrid identity as a white. Her third space, as rightly said by Bhabha, is full of tensions and negotiations, for she is caught between refusal and acceptance of her Black roots. Through Kennedy, Bennett has shown that when hybridity and mimicry are enforced, if left unchosen, they lead to complexities in life.

Desiree's daughter, Jude Winston, is the only character in *The Vanishing Half* who considers her hybridity and third space as a place of empowerment and takes it affirmatively. While

growing up in Mallard, she faced frequent criticism for her dark skin, including being called “blueback” (3). However, because of it, she never questioned herself or her identity and tried to transform, unlike the other characters in the novel. When she moves to Los Angeles and gets in a relationship with a transgender man, Reese, it highlights her acceptance of herself and how she challenges the rigid boundaries. Her hybrid identity and third space are not for secrecy, but something rather for providing her with strength in accepting her roots. As Bhabha says, “...by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.” (39) Although she accepts herself as she is, in some instances in the novel, it is visible that she is in an ambivalent state. She is sometimes seen thinking and feeling the pain about the racial complexities she faced while living in Mallard. As seen in one of her conversations with Kennedy, “What’s it like? she said. Mallard. But Jude just laughed. Awful, she said. They only like light Negroes out there. You’d fit right in” (Bennett 295). However, among all the characters of the novel, Desiree proves to be the most confident character in affirming her originality and identity.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, Homi K. Bhabha’s notions of mimicry, hybridity, third space and ambivalence integrate effectively into Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*. All her characters tend to explicate Bhabha’s notions. Stella’s passing as white and mimicking the whites is an excellent example of Bhabha’s concept of “almost the same, but not quite” (86). She is stuck in an ambivalent state of hybrid identity, creating her Third Space between her original Black roots and new White life. On the other hand, Desiree’s Third Space portrays the tensions and negotiations of fighting with the racial hierarchies present in it. For Jude and Kennedy, this state of ambivalence in mimicry and hybridity shapes their lives automatically because of their mothers’ choices and decisions, presenting them as intergenerational notions.

Thus, the present research bridges the gap between postcolonial notions and contemporary literature. It asserts the significance of Bhabha's concepts concerning colonialism and its impact on people's lives, which remains relevant in the contemporary era.

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