

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

White-passing is the act of negotiating the fluid color lines between Black and white carried out by African-Americans. The practice was done by altering their location, attire, speech, and background to be recognized as a part of white society (Hobbs 2014, 8). The act of white-passing had been done from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century with evolving reasons and loss. Firstly, African-American slaves passed for white to escape enslavement in the antebellum period, hoping for a more secure living. At that time, the rules applied to slaves were contradictory as the Northern started to abolish slavery while the Southern ‘made the system even more restricting and degrading’ (New York Historical Society Museum and Library n.d.)

White-passing during post-emancipation then is considered as a regretful act for they ‘sold’ their Black ancestry while it is regarded as an abandonment of their family and people to gain white privileges in the Jim Crow era (Hobbs 2014, 6). Jim Crow was originated from a character that was played by a white male, Rice, who imitated Black person by painting his face black to perform a song named ‘Daddy’ at the Park Theater in New York. Through his performance, he strongly influenced the stereotypical representation of Black people as ‘lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and worthy of integration’ (Pilgrim 2000). The term Jim Crow then became the name of the segregated

laws between Black and white people during the 1870s-1960s. Therefore, even until the present day of a more culturally diverse society, the act of white-passing is considered to be “foolish, frivolous, and disloyal” or forced by the racial violence surrounding African-American people (Hobbs 2014, 5). The evolving reasons behind the act of white-passing are rooted in the lives situated for biracial identities.

In America, the treatments received by multiracial people are determined by the “composition of one’s racial background” (Parker, et al. 2015). According to a study published in Pew Research Center entitled *Multiracial in America*, Black background inherited in the multiracial grown-ups caused them to be more vulnerable to racial discriminations, including unsatisfactory service in restaurants, hotels, or other companies (Parker, et al. 2015). Reporting insults and jokes, 55% of multiracial adults having African racial backgrounds are subjected to racist insults and jokes. These were experienced by 55 % of the multiracial adults as recorded in 2015. This illustrated how biracial individuals with Black and white racial background are considered as Black people. However, a recent study scrutinizing the stereotype of biracial individuals revealed that instead of being ‘categorized’ as the lower racial identity, based on the case of racial binaries, they are regarded as “attractive and not fitting in or belonging” (Skinner, Perry and Gaither 2020). These conflicts reflect both the problems of racial binaries and the ambivalent lives of being biracial individuals in America. Concerning Black identities, the

complex history of racial relations between Black and white defined how they are currently perceived by society.

The conflicting racial relations are rooted in the lives situated for Black people and biracial individuals with Black ancestry in 1619, where the first enslavement perpetrated by the Netherlands toward twenty Africans took place. As this involuntary movement constantly developed, it allowed the convoluted variation of cultural contacts and interactions between the colonizers and colonized (Huddart 2006, 1). In 1619, the legislators in Maryland passed the first law of anti-miscegenation as one of the most significant cultural contacts is the interracial marriage between Black and white people. The policies aim to avert women to have children from ‘shameful matches’ as deciding the legal status of their biracial children will be confusing (Rodriguez 2007, 5). Moreover, the legislation was the colonizers’ effort to restrain Black people in bringing changes and growing population in the United States (Rodriguez 2007, 8). These biracial children are often called mulattoes. Mulattoes, or African-Americans, owned the possibility to inherit the physical appearance of their white parents, including having light skin (Pilgrim 2012). This ‘permits’ them to escape slavery by practicing racial passing, or in this case, white-passing. Although white-passing is considered to lose its traces at the end of the 19th century, this phenomenon still happens and is discussed nowadays, chained with its stereotypes.

Up to these days, there are two sides to passing for white, including how those who decide to pass for white have the open possibilities of achieving white

privileges while letting go of and deserting their other racial identities. According to a study conducted within immigrants in Utah (Munoz, Valdez and Ayala 2021), one of the ‘whitest’ states in America, immigrants of color face tremendous struggles to fit in while those who appeared as white smoothly assimilated with the citizens. Even though Utah has undergone several changes to accommodate the newcomers, immigrants of color having more white physical features, including light eyes and skin, automatically gained higher racial position, an ‘insider’, as it attracted the citizen to approach and ‘include’ them. This perception of whiteness heavily influences the continuous mistreatments toward the immigrants of color as it is being favored, alienating Blackness which became the base of colorism and racism.

However, passing for white did not only bring advantages to the doers but also generated desolation and anxiety in keeping only one of their racial identities. Through an article published in *The Washington Post*, Gail Lukasik confessed how she has been observing her mother’s act of white-passing which became the core idea of her book entitled *White Like Her: My Family’s Story of Race and Racial Passing* (*The Washington Post* 2017). According to her statements and experiences, Lukasik’s mother’s decision to pass for white develops difficulties into having a close relationship with her mother as she must keep the act in secrecy. Although the decision was to benefit her white identity, she ended up encountering daily ordeals of racism toward the other half of her racial identity, cutting ties with her Black family and scattering her

identity of becoming a white person which Lukasik described as the irony of white-passing.

In the sphere of literature, according to Hobbs, the representation of biracial individuals in the late nineteenth-century literature was commonly addressed as “tragic mulattos”, which referred to how they were depicted as liminal figures undergoing racially motivated mistreatments viewed from white people perspectives and remained unacceptable. The tragedy of being mulattoes is that even though they were born with both Black and white racial identities, they are still recognized as Black, remarking them as “slaves along with their darker kinsmen” (Pilgrim 2012). Nevertheless, Harlem Renaissance remarked as a significant turning point in American modern literature as African-American intellectuals and authors can finally speak on their experiences of enslavement ‘as people’ through their works (Rodriguez 2007, 373). At that time, the representation of mixed-race people encountered huge changes that “opened the strategy for achieving racial wholeness, which dispensed with the tragic mulatto figure and allowed for the recognition of mixed-race identities” (Hobbs 2014, 177). A huge enthusiasm then emerged within the keen spectators of racial passing literature, including novels and plays written by Black and white authors in the 1920s and 1930s.

The development of passing narratives was generated by how Black artists began to embrace their blackness and racial dignities (Hobbs 2014, 178). There are numerous literary works regarding ambiguous racial identities. In examining the selected novel, the study will refer to three prominent passing

novels of the 20th century, including Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). Ultimately, the authors moralized the act of white-passing by ending the novels with the main characters who passed as "tragic mulattoes". The illustration of "tragic mulattoes" is often represented through women characters who are often regarded as "a selfish woman who will give up all, including her Black family, to live as a white person" (Pilgrim 2012). Those who chose to embrace more of their white ancestry are considered betrayers, having done a shameful deed. As the practice of passing is considered to be ending in the 20th century, some authors in the 21st century still brought up the issue into their literary works. One of the works is a novel titled *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett.

The Vanishing Half is a historical fiction novel addressing the issue of white-passing through the main character named Stella Vignes. The novel gained its popularity by winning the Goodreads Choice Awards Best Historical Fiction 2020 (Goodreads 2020). Set in between the 1950s and 1990s, the novel talked about the lives of identical twin sisters named Desiree and Stella Vignes who live as biracial individuals in America. The novel consists of six unchronological parts with a third-omniscient narrator. Addressing the issue of white-passing, it provides another meaning of passing for white as a 'fun and tragic' experience with a complex and personal approach. According to Hobbs, the recent higher tolerance of hybridity does not play a significant role toward multiculturalism, as stated in her book, "the friendly embrace of hybridity in the twenty-first century neither signals the achievement of a "postracial" age nor

supports the colorblind thesis race no longer matters” (Hobbs 2014, 277). This reflects how *The Vanishing Half* shed the light on the conversation of the troubled racial binary in America and its implications toward African-Americans by discussing the act of white-passing.

In a previous study conducted by Allison Daniel (2021), two novels were analyzed to scrutinize the continuous and conventional representation of trauma in narratives written by Black women. It focused on applying narrative theory in analyzing Britt Bennett’s writing style on *The Vanishing Half*, constructing a different type of empathy. Instead of delving into the traumatic events experienced by the characters, the author stated that Bennett strengthened racial issues by mixing an omniscient third-person narrator which allowed a limited approach to the characters’ consciousness, opposing the idea of how “a perceived white audience can know or understand Desiree and Stella’s pain.” The difference between this previous and this study lies in the theory applied and how the issue of white-passing is discussed.

As the issues of racial binaries and passing for white rooted from colonialization and lingered onto the postcolonial period, postcolonialism theory is considered to be a fitting theory in analyzing the racial relations and acts of white-passing. Postcolonialism, referring to the book entitled *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007), is a study examining the aftermath of colonization affecting cultures and societies of both the colonizers and colonized, including European invasion, forms of colonialism, deviating movements of empire, and the nuance of resistance of

those who accept or clash the system in pre-, during, and post- European colonization. As the focus of the study will be exploring Stella's passing for white, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry will be applied as both practices are sharing aligned purposes of the colonized, constructing "creative liberational migrant strategies" as a response to the West power dynamics and forces (Lahiri 2003).

According to Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), mimicry is an act of imitating the colonizers' ways of living, done by the colonized, to reshape their racial identities so that they can provide the imitators the recognition of Other, representing mimicry as an "ironic compromise" (122). Applying Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories, the study will delve into the racial relations in the 1950s-1990s between the colonizer and colonized in America illustrated in *The Vanishing Half*. Moreover, the study will also scrutinize Stella's acts and motivations of white-passing as a part of mimicry and a 'fun and tragic' experience in mirroring white people to the endless lies in covering her real self, a tragedy of deserting her black line, estranged from herself and both families. The study expects mainly two results: the representation of racial discrimination, criminals, and stereotypes in America during the 1950s-1990s in the novel and Stella's decision of white-passing as mimicry, supporting her decision as a personal decision of exploring her identity.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

After reading Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, the interesting issue addressed in the novel then provoked several questions. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How does the novel entitled *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett provide information regarding racial relations between the colonizer and the colonized in America during the 1950s-1990s?
2. How are Stella's acts and motivations of mimicry through white-passing is portrayed in the novel entitled *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

According to the problems stated, constructing comprehensive and scientific results is the goal of the study. Furthermore, the objective of the study can be formulated as followed:

1. To explore the information concerning racial relations between the colonizer and colonized in America during the 1950s-1990s illustrated in the novel.
2. To examine Stella's acts and motivations of mimicry portrayed through white-passing and how it transforms her identity in the novel

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is a contribution in comprehending a deeper nuance of racial discrimination of African-American people which has been going from the era of enslavement to the present day, raising the awareness of problems

surrounding racial binary. Providing information regarding racial passing, this study will be useful for the readers who are compelled in exploring the phenomenon and the view of it from a different angle. As passing is usually perceived as a selfish and dreadful practice, claiming them for being opportunistic, the practice tends to seek recognition as a ‘full’ human being. In the novel, unlike previous passing literature that captured “tragic-mulatto”, *The Vanishing Half* depicted the practice as a part of Stella’s life choice with underlying complicated motivations. Another significance of this study is to guide other English Department students who are intrigued by postcolonial literature in Universitas Airlangga, especially to delve into the cultural phenomena in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1. White-passing: The act of African-Americans imitating White people physical appearances and inheriting their values as an attempt to pass the blurry color lines of biracial identity and is accepted in the White society.
2. Mimicry: The colonized adapt to the colonizers’ lifestyle, including values, attire, language and behavior as an attempt to obtain identification of self.
3. Postcolonialism: Approaches and theories to study the past and

present effects of colonialism within the
cultures of colonizers and colonized.