

## CONSTRUCTION AND RE-CONCEPTION OF IDENTITY: REJECTING HOMOGENEITY IN AMERICA THROUGH *THE VANISHING HALF* (2020) BY BRIT BENNETT

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### ABSTRACT

Identity shows one's identification in a social context, but in fact social conditions still tend to require citizens to identify themselves based on skin color and sexuality that has been determined and deemed appropriate. Such conditions are seen as homogenizing behavior. The *Vanishing Half* (2020) establishes the identity of its characters as a rejection of the homogeneity of skin color and sexuality in America. By using an analytical descriptive method, this research finds a rejection of homogeneity which is reflected in the identity construction of the characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) which features mulatto people to show that skin color identity is not only black or white but can vary greatly. and presenting transsexual characters to show that a person's sexual identity is not only limited to men and women in nature. The purpose of this study is to redefine the concept of identity in a fluid social society. In addition, the purpose of this research is to interpret the re-conception of identity as an effort to build awareness of the concept of identity which is fluid, layered, changeable and diverse, so it is necessary to carry out legal protection for identity.

**Keywords:** homogeneity, identity, identity construction, identity re-conception

### ABSTRAK

*Identitas menunjukkan identifikasi seseorang dalam konteks sosial, namun ternyata kondisi sosial masih cenderung menuntut warganya untuk mengidentifikasi diri berdasarkan warna kulit dan seksualitas yang sudah ditentukan dan yang dianggap sesuai. Kondisi demikian dilihat sebagai perilaku homogenisasi. The Vanishing Half (2020) membentuk identitas para tokohnya sebagai penolakan terhadap homogenitas atas warna kulit dan seksualitas di Amerika. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif analitis, penelitian ini menemukan adanya penolakan terhadap homogenitas yang tercermin dari konstruksi identitas para tokoh dalam The Vanishing Half (2020) yang menampilkan tokoh orang-orang mulatto untuk menunjukkan bahwa identitas warna kulit tidak hanya hitam atau putih namun bisa sangat bervariasi, dan menampilkan tokoh trans seksual untuk menunjukkan bahwa identitas seksual seseorang bukan hanya terbatas pada laki-laki dan perempuan secara alamiah. Tujuan penelitian ini untuk memaknai kembali konsep identitas dalam masyarakat sosial yang bersifat cair. Selain itu tujuan penelitian ini juga memaknai rekonsepsi identitas sebagai upaya membangun kesadaran akan konsep identitas yang bersifat cair, berlapis, dapat berubah dan beragam, sehingga perlunya untuk melakukan perlindungan hukum atas identitas.*

**Kata kunci:** homogenitas, identitas, konstruksi identitas, rekonsepsi identitas

## INTRODUCTION

Often set in the United States, from contemporary black writers to canon writers write stories of Black groups in literary works. The poet named Maya Angelou produced works that made her the first African-American woman to participate in the inauguration of

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the American president, Bill Clinton, in 1993. Angelou read her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at the inauguration. In McPherson (1986) Angelou states that her work is largely about surviving by grace and faith.

African-American canon prose writers such as James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many others were not absent from writing about the racial problems of their people in literary works. In addition, 21st century contemporary writers such as Roxane Gay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Colson Whitehead and Brit Bennett also contributed literary works about black people. Brit Bennett embodies the theme of skin color and sexuality at the same time. Interestingly, her work entitled *The Vanishing Half* (2020) introduces the lightest skin color (which is considered) from the black group.

*The Vanishing Half* (2020) is about twins, Desiree Vignes and Stella Vignes. They come from the mulatto group, a group of Black people who have light skin color resembling white skin. Even though their skin is similar to white skin, it doesn't make them get the same treatment as white people. Desiree has dreams of leaving Mallard, where she lives with the mulattoes. Desiree imagines adventures out there that are so much fun. Until one night the two twins left Mallard quietly. Desiree is ready for the adventure while Stella leaves to bring her traumas while living in Mallard. After a long time together on the adventure, Desiree marries a Black man while Stella is missing. Desiree returned to Mallard with her daughter, Jude, after being abused by her husband. Stella is still missing who secretly decides to passing as white. Fate brought them back together through Jude who recognized Stella because of her identical twin with her mother, Desiree. Jude secretly befriends Stella's daughter, Kennedy, both of whom know each other's mothers' identities. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) does not only present racial issues but also sexuality. Through the character Reese, the problem of sexuality in America is shown. Reese was born as a woman but feels he is a man. When admitting his sexual identity, Reese was physically abused by his father. Reese decides to leave his live in Arkansas and meet Jude. Jude and Reese love each other even though they can't legally marry because America, in the story's time setting, doesn't give legality to changing sexual identity.

According to Reznick (2022) Brit Bennet's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) presents America as a country that is prejudiced against those who are considered to have "deviated" from the norm. The "deviation" can be seen from the mulatto people whose identity cannot be said to be white nor can it be completely black. Not only regarding skin color,

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"deviation" can be seen through the character of Reese who was born as a woman but changed her sexual identity to become a man. According to Reznick (2022), the novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) describes the concept of identity which is performative rather than giving, besides that the novel also looks at minority groups condescendingly, refusing to disturb the boundaries between being and acting.

Discrimination can occur when the state does not protect the identity of its citizens. According to Akbar et al., (2021) the difference in the lives of Desiree and Stella is an illustration of racial differences and American betrayal. Characters such as Desiree and Stella are faced with problems created by a state that does not protect the ethnicity of its citizens. Akbar et al., (2021) recommend conducting research on the importance of the complexities of identity and race in a racist perspective in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Areqi (2022) seems to carry out the research recommended by the three authors (Akbar et al., 2021), namely exploring the importance of race and identity for African Americans through exploring the lives of twins who left their hometowns. Research by Areqi (2022) found that the choice of race and identity made by the twins (Desiree and Stella) early in their lives identified their destiny and set the path for their children.

Brit Bennett tries to illuminate the issues that are happening in America through the novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020). The diversity of the American population does not make a variety of skin color and sexuality acceptable in society. Social conditions that tend to be formed by homogeneity can lead to "colonialization" of individuals or groups that are "different". *The Vanishing Half* (2020) rejects the homogeneity of skin color and sexuality in America by constructing identities in its characters that aim to re-concepting identities.

Based on the explanation above, the problem formulation that can be developed is **how identity construction in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is used as a form of rejection of the homogeneity of skin color and sexuality in America which aims to re-conceptualize identity.** The formulation of the problem is divided into two research questions, first is how does the novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) construct the identities of its characters as a form of rejection of the homogeneity of skin color and sexuality in America? and second is how can the construction of the identity of the characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) as a form of rejection of homogeneity be able to re-conceptualize identity?

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This research can contribute to race and gender studies regarding skin color and sexuality. This research interprets that a person's skin color and sexuality form a fluid, changeable, flexible and diverse identity so that there is no need to categorize people into narrow and rigid boxes. Discussions about the construction of identity in contemporary literary works are important in understanding how an identity can be formed and the need for tolerance towards one's identity in social society.

The homogeneity reflected in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is about skin color and sexuality. According to Schmitt in Bhatti (2009) the logic of homogenization is the basis of the relationship between the ruler and the governed. Schmitt said that the basis for homogenization can vary, namely the most common: religion, race, and skin color. Homogenization according to Schmitt establishes substantial equality as a condition for the conception of democracy, which is also one of the main keys to the formulation of German fascist ideology. In *The Vanishing Half* (2020), homogeneity can be seen from how Americans make a difference between Black and White skin, so they ignore skin tones that are too light to be called black and do not fit into the European concept of whiteness. Homogeneity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) can also be seen from the treatment of transsexual people in American society.

The concept of homogeneity seen in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) requires the characters to choose an identity that is considered not "deviant" and clear, as stated by Fanon & Markmann (1986) *A man was expected to behave like a man. I [Fanon, Black skin] was expected to behave like a black man.* (p. 114). Black people are required to "behave like black people" namely obedient and not showing off. The homogeneity in America in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) makes this thought also apply to mulatto people and transsexual people. The mulattoes in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) are required to identify as Black people. Transsexual people are also required to behave according to their identity from birth and are not justified in changing their sexual identity.

According to Barnard (1999) people who consider their identity to be single, who are unable to understand the layers of subjectivity in other people, and who experience only one layer of oppression, tend to universalize their limited understanding by "colonizing" other subjects. The identity of the characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is in a gray area which forces the characters to choose their own identity due to pressure from homogeneity which demands binary distinctions such as black and white and/or male and female.

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However, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) rejects the homogeneity of skin color and sexuality by constructing identities for its characters which aim to re-conceptualize identities.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative research. The research method used is descriptive analytical method. The research was conducted using close reading which pays attention to the literary devices used in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) so that issues of skin color and sexuality can be found. After doing a close reading, data collection is carried out to then be dissected in the form of analysis. Dissecting the data is done by using an analytical tool in the form of a theory or approach that focuses on skin color and sexuality.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through *The Vanishing Half* (2020), Brit Bennett tries to present the diversity of skin color and sexuality by constructing the identities of the story's characters, time settings and places that reflect American social conditions. The purpose of identity construction is to re-conceptualize the meaning of American identity. Identity construction is carried out as a form of rejection of homogeneity in America in terms of skin color and sexuality. This attitude of refusal is displayed through the decision of each character on their identity.

### Identity Construction of the Characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020)

Out of various skin colors, Brit Bennett in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) chooses mulatto people as the main characters in her novel. Mulattoes as described by Thompson (2015) are a group of people who maintain their light skin color. The choice of mulatto people in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) brings the issue of skin color further, not only between black and white but also involving colors that are considered ambiguous, namely the skin color of mulatto people.

He'd [Decuir, male, light skin] married a **mulatto** even **lighter than himself**. She was pregnant then with their first child, and **he imagined his children's children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before.** (Bennett 2020, p. 5-6)

By comparing the skin color gradations of black people "Negro", Bennett seems to identify mulattoes, namely people who maintain their light skin color and consider their

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group the most perfect Negroes. The construction of skin color identity is built to emphasize that there is a skin color gradation problem. Reiterated, *In Mallard* [where Mulattoes live], *nobody married dark*. (Bennett 2020, p. 5), that there are rules from generation to generation that must be obeyed, namely mulatto people do not reproduce offspring from black people who are dark. *A town for men like him* [Decuir], *who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes*. (Bennett 2020, p. 5) Through these quotations one can also see the distinction between light and dark. The identification of light and dark skin color shows that there is an identity problem with skin color in America in *The Vanishing Half* (2020), especially when mulatto people refuse to be treated as black/dark skin and will not be accepted as white. The identity of mulattoes in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is ambiguous because they are neither black nor white.

Not only skin color, another identity featured in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is sexuality. Reese's character, white, represents the problem of sexual identity in America. Reese was born a female but identifies himself as a male. Various attempts were made by Reese to form his identity as a man. Set between 1968 and 1988, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) still depicts the impartiality of trans-sexual people. Although in the 1960s, according to Barbee (2002) many gender clinics were opened throughout North America and Europe. Reese's character has succeeded in changing her identity, but in law she is still identified as a woman. *Therese Anne Carter* [Reese] *was only a name on a birth certificate in the offices of Union County Public Records. No one could tell that he'd ever been her, and sometimes, he could hardly believe it either*. (Bennett 2020, p. 104). Changes in sexual identity encourage transsexuals to move from their origin place. Reese moved from Arkansas to Los Angeles, this is a sign that transsexual people like Reese are looking for protection in a new place, a place where people do not know their birth identity, because family and social society judge these changes to the point of endangering people's physical transsexual people. The protection that is obtained is not legally provided by the state, but due to the struggle of transsexuals to avoid being judged by society. Reese's identity is part of the identity problem in America in *The Vanishing Half* (2020).

### **Homogeneity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020)**

Identity issues over skin color and sexuality are driven by homogeneity in America. Starting from a very long and heartbreaking history, Europeans came to America and carried out colonialization which in the end created the standard for human skin color to be

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white. The homogeneity that occurs in America places identity into narrow boxes or conceptions.

Stella became white and Desiree married the darkest man she could find.

(Bennett 2020, p. 4)

“My daddy [Reese’s father] had one of those belts with the big silver buckle,” he [Reese] said. **“He told me if I wanted to be a man, he’d treat me like one.”** (Bennett 2020, p. 135)

In *The Vanishing Half* (2020) the differences in identity regarding skin color, and sexuality, are clearly visible. Homogeneity forces the characters to identify themselves into identities that are considered clear and narrow. Whereas according to Barnard (1999), race and sexuality are both constructed and unstable, the notion of 'race' in science states that race does not exist, but history says that the rule of law in America determines a person's race based on the proportion of 'black blood' in oneself. , and that these proportions are very arbitrary. Homogeneity leads to arbitrary behavior.

Leon Vignes [Stella and Desiree’s father], lynched twice, the first time at home while his twin girls [Stella and Desiree] watched through a crack in the closet door, hands clamped over each other’s mouths until their palms misted with spit... the white men stomped on his hands, broke every finger and joint, then shot him four times. He survived, and three days later, the white men burst into the hospital and stormed every room in the colored ward until they found him. This time, they shot him twice in the head, his cotton pillowcase blooming red. (Bennett 2020, p. 33-34)

Social conditions in America that demand differentiation based on skin color cause subjects to "colonize" other subjects. Torture based on skin color was unavoidable for mulattoes even though their skin color was light. According to Berg (2011) white supremacists in the South (America), even lowly whites, enjoy a higher social status than affluent and educated blacks and mulattoes. Homogeneity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is another form of colonialism by whites against blacks or people with a proportion of black in their blood. In addition, the homogeneity of transsexuals makes their existence not officially recognized by the state.

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She [Desiree, Jude's mother] did not know that Jude and Reese had talked, once or twice, about marriage. **They wouldn't be able to, not without a new birth certificate for Reese.** (Bennett 2020, p. 337-338)

Homogeneity over skin color and sexuality results in social injustice. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) tries to present the "victims" of homogeneity, both black (mulattoes) and white (through the character Reese). In the parameters of social injustice, both of them experience torture and discrimination, but the homogeneity of skin color causes death in *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Homogeneity over sexuality is looser towards white people like Reese's character. So it can be predicted that if problems of skin color and sexuality occur in an individual, the impact of homogeneity on that individual's identity will accumulate, for example black and gay. Barnard (1999) argues that if people of a particular 'race' are homogenized (by both people within and outside that race), then queer people of color are imagined by some members of that race as a threat (to a "fictitious" group). gay, or simply claimed not to exist.

### **Rejection of Homogeneity of Skin Color and Sexuality**

Even though homogeneity forces the characters to choose one identification for their identity, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) shows an attitude of rejecting this homogeneity. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) rejects the presence of homogeneity in America. The rejection of homogeneity can be seen from the identities of the characters, mulatto and transsexual people. Bennett's construction of the identities of the characters is placed in a gray position which aims to show the diversity of identities in America, not only black and white and also not only men and women. The rejection of homogeneity can also be seen from the racial passing carried out by Stella and Desiree as well as mulattoes.

In Mallard, you grew up hearing stories about folks who'd pretended to be white. Warren Fontenot, riding a train in the white section, and when a suspicious porter questioned him, speaking enough French to convince him that he was a swarthy European; Marlena Goudeau becoming white to earn her teaching certificate; Luther Thibodeaux, whose foreman marked him white and gave him more pay. Passing like this, from moment to moment, was funny. Heroic, even. Who didn't want to get over on white folks for a change? But the *passee blanc* were a mystery. You could never meet one who'd passed over undetected, the same way you'd never know someone who successfully faked her own death; the act could only be successful if no one ever discovered it was a ruse. Desiree only knew the failures: the ones who'd gotten homesick, or caught, or tired of pretending. But for all Desiree knew, Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that

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long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so. (Bennett 2020, p. 69)

The rejection of homogeneity is seen through changing identity. The rejection of homogeneity through changing identity creates stereotypes about skin color. In *The Vanishing Half* (2020), being White can change one's life for the better. Meanwhile, passing as Black brings bad luck. *Playing white to get ahead was just good sense. But marrying a dark man? Carrying his blue black child? Desiree Vignes had courted the type of trouble that would never leave.* (Bennett 2020, p. 59). Passing as White and Black earned judgment from mulattoes, but passing as White seemed more condoned than passing as Black. Desiree's character represents a mulatto person who passes as Black, in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) passing as Black has various bad luck, this includes the creation of stereotypes against dark and light skin colors by mulatto people themselves. *Of course that dark man beat you. What do you expect? A spite marriage do not last.* (Bennett 2020, p. 17) The rejection of homogeneity through changing identity is considered a failure because it creates an internalization of stereotypes about skin color and shows partiality towards skin color, namely white or light. In addition, the lack of White characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) makes the text seem to raise the prejudice of mulatto (and black) people against white skin, even though white skin plays a role in forming the identity of mulatto people's skin color.

The rejection of homogeneity over sexuality is also shown in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by presenting sexual identity through the character Reese, a transsexual. Homogeneity of sexual identity indeed forces a person to choose a clear sexual identity, namely sexual identity from birth. However, the text shows a rejection of the homogeneity of sexual identity by showing partiality to white transsexual men.

“You’re a transsexual,” Barry said. “I know exactly what you are.” Reese had never heard the word before—he hadn’t even known that there was a word to describe him. He must have looked surprised because Barry laughed. “I know plenty boys like you,” he said. (Bennett 2020, p. 139)

A person's sexual identity can be seen physically but can be covered up by camouflage (changing appearance) and hormone injections. Although the injection that Reese got illegally, changing sexual identity is easier than changing skin color identity. And it should be remembered that Reese is white, which influences the success of the rejection of homogeneity of sexual identity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Rejection in this section is considered successful, apart from showing partiality to transsexual people, also

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because the text can romanticize Reese's character. Even though Reese has to keep her real identity hidden, several characters like Barry and Jude know and accept his true identity so he doesn't have to hide it when he's with them. In contrast to the denial of homogeneity of skin color, this section shows that it is easier to construct a white sexual identity so that it can be romanticized.

### **Identity Re-conception**

The discussion of identity re-conception is seen from how skin color and sexuality identities are finally described in *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Re-conception of identity is Bennett's stance regarding the redefinition of identity of skin color and sexuality in America which can be seen through his characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020). The reinterpretation of identity shows the partiality of the text towards certain skin colors, which is black people, in contrast to the findings on the rejection of homogeneity which shows partiality for white skin both in the context of skin color and sexuality. Below is Bennett's depiction in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) of black existence in white life.

If dating Frantz [Kennedy's boyfriend] had been some type of experiment, then it had failed terribly. **Loving a black man only made her** [Kennedy, female, Stella's daughter] **feel whiter than before.** (Bennett 2020, p. 277)

Fanon (2008) revealed that black people must not only be black but also black in relation to the existence of white skin. In re-conceptualize or re-defining the concept of identity, Bennett no longer emphasizes the gradations of mulatto people's skin color but displays a binary opposition between black and white. Through the characters of Kennedy and his lover, Frantz, the skin colors are contrasted and compared. The existence of black skin is only a benchmark for how white or how light a person's skin color is. Through the character Stella, the binary opposition between black and white is shown again.

She [Stella] hadn't wanted to be a mother at first. The idea of pregnancy terrified her; she imagined pushing out a baby that grew darker and darker, Blake [Stella's husband] recoiling in horror. She almost preferred him thinking that she'd had an affair with a Negro. **That lie seemed kinder than the truth, momentary unfaithfulness a gentler deception than her ongoing fraud.** (Bennett 2020, p.151)

Pretending to be white is seen as deception. Stella in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) has to pretend all her life to hide her birth identity. By showing the character Stella as someone who commits identity "fraud", the text forms prejudice against people with light skin and judges passing as white as a grave sin. Apart from that, in *The Vanishing Half* (2020), the

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character Stella is not given the opportunity to express her opinion about passing as white, the dialogues that arise are only between herself and her own thoughts. When she met Desiree to attend the funeral of Adele Vignes, her mother, she was also not "given" the chance to convey how her life changed for the better when she "turned white". Stella only left a note when she left Desiree *Sorry, honey, but I've got to go my own way.* (Bennett 2020, p. 61), a message that seems very selfish even though there are various important reasons in Stella for passing as white. The re-conception of identity on skin color failed because it only sided with one skin color, which is dark/black, which was emphasized again at the end of the story:

“Sometimes I [Desiree] think I should’ve left sooner. For you [Jude] and for me [Desiree]. We could’ve been anywhere. I could’ve been like Stella, lived a big life.” “I’m glad you’re not like her,” her daughter [Jude] said. “I’m glad I ended up with you.” (Bennett 2020, p. 341)

*The Vanishing Half* (2020) attempts to redefine the concept of identity can also be seen in the character Jude, who is the daughter of Desiree, black, smart and studying medicine. Whereas according to Ogbu (2004) black children experience learning difficulties in education because being smart is like behaving like white people. Jude's identity is constructed in this way to show that *The Vanishing Half* (2020) is on the side of black people in re-conceptualize identity. The emergence of *The Vanishing Half* (2020) in the 21st century with a story set in the 20th century, indicates that there is still a problem of skin color identity in America. Meanwhile, the problem of diversity of sexual identities is more acceptable.

The sun was beginning to set, and under the tangerine sky, Reese tugged his undershirt over his head. The sun warmed his chest, still paler than the rest of him. In time, his scars would fade, his skin darkening. She [Jude] would look at him and forget that there had ever been a time he'd hidden from her. (Bennett 2020, p. 343)

Re-conception of sexual identity can be seen through the characters Jude and Reese. Jude's interest in Reese is constructed to create an attitude of empathy for trans sexual people. *The Vanishing Half* (2020) tries to re-concept identity by constructing the identities of the characters, namely identities that are fluid, changeable, and diverse. Re-conception of identity through Reese's character is considered successful, this can be seen when Reese finally shows parts of his body, parts that can be identified for sex differentiation. Although Reese only opens up to Jude and Barry, the narrative at the end of the story shows that there is an opportunity for transsexual people to admit their identities.

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## CONCLUSION

The problems of identity in America from the 20th to the 21st centuries seem still unresolved, especially the problems of skin color. Through the construction of the identity of the characters in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) it is hoped that the problem of identity regarding skin color and sexuality can be resolved by redefining the concept of identity, but *The Vanishing Half* fails to redefine the concept of identity towards skin color because it shows partiality only to one skin color i.e. black or dark. This attitude is unfair considering that the gradation of skin color is presented in the novel to reject the homogeneity of skin color. This redefinition of the concept of identity is not something new but the problems caused by ambiguous identities are still happening, especially in America. Meanwhile, the construction of sexual identity that is carried out in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) to reject the homogeneity of sexuality raises hope for trans sexual people in an effort to openly declare their identity. Re-conceptions of identity in *The Vanishing Half* (2020) can be interpreted as an effort to accept individual identities that are fluid, layered, and diverse and can also change in a fluid social context, so that the need for legal protection for identity groups that are considered ambiguous.

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