

Research Article

# Colorism and Identity Formation in African American Literature

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of colorism in shaping identity formation in African American literature, with particular attention to the works of *Nella Larsen*, *Delores Phillips*, and *Brit Bennett*. While racism has been widely studied, colorism, defined as intra-racial discrimination based on skin tone, remains an underexplored yet deeply influential social and psychological phenomenon. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, cultural studies, and theories of identity construction, this study analyzes how literary narratives represent the complex interplay between social hierarchies, family dynamics, and personal identity. Through a close reading of *Passing*, *The Darkest Child*, and *The Vanishing Half*, the article highlights how characters negotiate their identities within systems structured by both racial and intra-racial inequalities. The analysis reveals that colorism operates as both a structural and internalized system, shaping access to social mobility while producing psychological fragmentation, insecurity, and tensions in belonging. The phenomenon of racial passing further illustrates the paradox of identity, where proximity to whiteness provides privilege but often results in alienation and loss of self. By foregrounding literary representations of colorism, this study contributes to broader debates on race, identity, and cultural representation in African American and diasporic contexts. It argues that African American literature not only reflects the realities of color-based hierarchies but also critically interrogates the processes through which identity is constructed, negotiated, and transformed.

## Keywords

Colorism, Identity Formation, Critical Race Theory, Black Diaspora, Racial Passing, African American Literature, Cultural Representation

## 1. Introduction

Colorism, defined as discrimination based on variations in skin tone within the same racial or ethnic group, remains a deeply embedded yet often overlooked dimension of racial experience in African American communities. While the broader structures of racism have received sustained scholarly attention, colorism operates as a more subtle, internalized, and pervasive system of hierarchy that shapes not only social relations but also individual identity formation.

Historically rooted in the legacy of slavery and colonial ideologies of racial classification, colorism has contributed to the development of intra-racial stratification based on proximity to whiteness. Lighter skin has often been associated with beauty, intelligence, and social privilege, whereas darker skin has been stigmatized and marginalized. These hierarchies have been reproduced across generations, influencing access to education, economic opportunities, and social mobility,

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while also shaping intimate spheres such as family structures and interpersonal relationships.

In African American literature, colorism emerges not merely as a social condition but as a powerful narrative force that exposes the psychological and emotional complexities of identity negotiation. Literary texts provide a unique space in which the lived experiences of color-based discrimination are articulated, questioned, and reimaged. Through characterization, symbolism, and narrative structure, authors reveal how individuals navigate systems of visibility, invisibility, and belonging within racially stratified societies.

The phenomenon of racial passing, for instance, illustrates the tensions inherent in colorism. Characters who “pass” as white may gain access to social privilege, yet they often experience profound psychological fragmentation, fear of exposure, and loss of cultural belonging. This paradox highlights the unstable and constructed nature of racial identity, as well as the emotional cost of navigating hierarchical systems based on appearance.

This article examines how colorism shapes identity formation in African American literature by focusing on the works of Nella Larsen, Delores Phillips, and Brit Bennett (Larsen [4]; Phillips [6]; Bennett [5]).

These authors, writing across different historical periods, offer nuanced representations of how color hierarchies operate within both public and private spheres. Their narratives illuminate the ways in which identity is negotiated at the intersection of race, family, memory, and social expectation.

Drawing on Critical Race Theory, cultural studies, and interdisciplinary approaches to identity and representation, this study argues that colorism functions not only as a legacy of systemic racism but also as an internalized structure that profoundly influences self-perception and interpersonal dynamics. By analyzing literary representations of colorism, this article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of identity in African American and diasporic contexts [3].

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Critical Race Theory, cultural studies, and theories of identity construction in order to analyze the representation of colorism in African American literature.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) [1] provides a foundational lens through which to understand the structural and systemic dimensions of race and racism. Emerging from legal studies, CRT emphasizes that race is not a biological reality but a socially constructed category embedded within power relations and institutional practices. Scholars such as Derrick Bell and Kimberle Crenshaw [1] have argued that racism is not an aberration but a normalized and enduring feature of society. Within this framework, colorism can be understood as an extension of racial hierarchy, operating within racial

groups and reproducing forms of inequality based on proximity to whiteness.

In the context of African American literature, CRT allows for an analysis of how narratives reflect and critique the social structures that sustain both racism and intra-racial discrimination. It also provides tools to examine how characters internalize and resist these structures, revealing the psychological and emotional consequences of living within systems of racial stratification.

Cultural studies further enrich this analysis by emphasizing the role of representation in the construction of meaning and identity. From this perspective, literature is not merely a reflection of reality but an active site where cultural values, social norms, and power relations are produced and contested. Scholars such as Stuart Hall [2] have highlighted that identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through discourse, representation, and historical context. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how literary texts negotiate the complexities of colorism and identity.

In addition, theories of identity construction provide a framework for analyzing how individuals develop a sense of self in relation to social categories such as race, gender, and class. Identity is understood as dynamic, relational, and often fragmented, especially in contexts marked by inequality and exclusion. In narratives shaped by colorism, identity formation becomes a process of negotiation between external perceptions and internal self-understanding.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, this study examines how African American literature represents colorism not only as a social phenomenon but also as a deeply internalized structure that shapes identity, belonging, and self-perception. The interdisciplinary nature of this framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which literary narratives articulate the complexities of race and identity in both individual and collective dimensions.

## 3. Literary Representation of Identity

African American literature provides a critical space for exploring the complexities of identity formation within color-stratified societies. Through narrative techniques, characterization, and symbolism, authors reveal how individuals negotiate their sense of self in environments shaped by both racial and intra-racial hierarchies.

In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, the phenomenon of racial passing illustrates the psychological tensions associated with colorism and identity (Larsen [4]). Clare Kendry’s decision to pass as white grants her access to social privilege, yet it also produces a profound sense of instability and fragmentation. Her identity becomes performative, constantly negotiated and threatened by the possibility of exposure. This dual existence reflects the paradox of colorism: proximity to whiteness offers social mobility while simultaneously eroding a stable sense of belonging.

Similarly, Irene Redfield’s character embodies a different

response to colorism. Unlike Clare, Irene chooses not to pass, yet she remains deeply invested in maintaining social respectability and racial boundaries. Her internal conflicts reveal how colorism operates not only externally but also within the psyche, shaping perceptions of self and others. Through Irene, Larsen exposes the subtle ways in which color-based hierarchies influence behavior, relationships, and identity formation.

In Delores Phillips's *The Darkest Child*, colorism is represented as a deeply ingrained familial and social structure (Phillips [6]). The protagonist's experiences highlight how darker skin is associated with marginalization and exclusion, even within the family unit. Here, identity formation is shaped by rejection, violence, and the internalization of inferiority. The novel reveals the long-term psychological consequences of color-based discrimination, emphasizing how identity is constructed through both personal experience and social conditioning.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* offers a contemporary re-examination of colorism and identity through a multi-generational narrative (Bennett [5]). The Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, embody divergent paths shaped by skin tone and personal choices. Stella's decision to pass as white reflects a desire for social mobility and security, yet it also results in alienation and a disconnection from her past. Desiree, on the other hand, remains within the Black community but continues to confront the implications of colorism through her daughter's experiences.

Bennett's narrative extends the discussion of colorism by incorporating themes of memory, inheritance, and intergenerational identity. The novel demonstrates how colorism is not only experienced individually but also transmitted across generations, shaping collective identity and familial relationships.

Across these texts, identity emerges as a dynamic and often fragmented construct, shaped by the tension between external perception and internal self-definition. Literary representations of colorism reveal the emotional and psychological costs of navigating hierarchical systems based on appearance, while also highlighting the resilience and agency of individuals in redefining their identities.

By examining these narratives, it becomes evident that African American literature does not merely reflect the realities of colorism but actively interrogates and challenges the structures that sustain it. Through complex characters and layered storytelling, these authors offer critical insights into the processes of identity formation within contexts of inequality and social constraint.

#### 4. Symbolism and Psychological Fragmentation in Colorism

In African American literature, symbolism plays a crucial role in revealing the underlying structures of colorism and its

psychological impact on identity formation. Authors employ recurring images, spatial metaphors, and bodily representations to convey the tensions associated with skin-tone hierarchies and the instability of identity.

One of the most significant symbolic elements in narratives addressing colorism is the use of space and movement as metaphors for social mobility and identity transition. In works such as *The Vanishing Half* and *Passing*, movement between spaces whether geographical, social, or psychological often reflects the characters' attempts to navigate color-based hierarchies. The act of "passing," in particular, can be understood as a symbolic crossing of boundaries, where identity becomes fluid yet precarious.

The metaphor of elevation and descent, for instance, can be interpreted as representing the illusion of upward mobility within a racially stratified society. While proximity to whiteness may offer temporary access to privilege, it also reinforces the fragility of such advancement. The constant negotiation of identity in these spaces produces a sense of instability, as individuals must continuously perform and maintain identities that are not fully authentic.

Psychological fragmentation emerges as a central consequence of colorism in these narratives. Characters who navigate between different racial or social identities often experience a division of the self, where internal identity conflicts with external presentation. This fragmentation is not merely individual but reflects broader social contradictions embedded in systems of racial hierarchy.

In *Passing*, Clare Kendry embodies this fragmentation through her dual existence, which requires her to suppress aspects of her identity in order to sustain her social position. Her life becomes a performance marked by tension, anxiety, and the constant threat of exposure. Similarly, in *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's transformation and reinvention illustrate how identity can be reshaped through denial and erasure, leading to long-term psychological consequences.

Symbolism thus serves as a powerful narrative device that allows authors to explore the intangible dimensions of colorism—those that cannot be fully expressed through direct description alone. Through metaphor, imagery, and narrative structure, these texts reveal how identity is not only socially constructed but also emotionally and psychologically negotiated.

By examining these symbolic representations, it becomes evident that colorism produces not only external inequalities but also internal divisions that profoundly affect the formation of selfhood. Literary narratives, in this sense, offer critical insights into the invisible yet deeply felt consequences of living within hierarchical systems based on appearance.

#### 5. Colorism and Gender Dynamics

The impact of colorism cannot be fully understood without considering its intersection with gender. In African American literature, women are often at the center of narratives dealing

with color-based discrimination, revealing how beauty standards, desirability, and social value are deeply intertwined with skin tone.

Colorism operates differently across genders, but its effects are particularly pronounced for women, whose identities are frequently shaped by societal expectations related to appearance. Lighter skin is often associated with femininity, beauty, and social acceptance, while darker skin is subjected to stigmatization and exclusion. These standards are reinforced through cultural representations, including literature, media, and social practices.

In *The Darkest Child*, Delores Phillips vividly portrays the gendered dimensions of colorism within the family structure. Female characters experience direct and often violent forms of discrimination based on skin tone, highlighting how colorism is embedded in both patriarchal and racial systems. The novel exposes the ways in which darker-skinned women are marginalized not only socially but also within intimate and familial spaces.

Similarly, in *The Vanishing Half*, the experiences of female characters illustrate how colorism shapes life choices, relationships, and identity. Stella's decision to pass as white is influenced not only by the desire for social mobility but also by the pressures of conforming to dominant standards of beauty and femininity. Her transformation reflects the intersection of race and gender, where identity becomes a strategic negotiation within a system of expectations.

The gendered nature of colorism also extends to perceptions of motherhood, inheritance, and generational identity. Women often play a central role in transmitting values, beliefs, and biases related to skin tone, making them key figures in the reproduction of color hierarchies. At the same time, they can also act as agents of resistance, challenging and redefining these norms.

From an intersectional perspective, colorism reveals how multiple systems of oppression, race, gender, and class interact to produce layered experiences of inequality. This intersectionality underscores the importance of analyzing colorism not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a broader framework of social power relations.

By foregrounding gender dynamics, African American literature offers a more nuanced understanding of how colorism operates in everyday life. It highlights the ways in which identity is shaped not only by race but also by gendered expectations, ultimately revealing the complexity of navigating multiple forms of social constraint.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of colorism in African American literature reveals that identity formation is neither stable nor autonomous but deeply shaped by social structures, cultural expectations, and historical legacies. The works of Larsen, Phillips, and Bennett demonstrate that colorism operates simultaneously at structural, interpersonal, and psychological

levels, producing complex and often contradictory experiences of identity.

One of the central findings of this study is the extent to which colorism functions as an internalized system of hierarchy. Characters do not merely experience discrimination from external forces; they also reproduce and negotiate these hierarchies within their own communities and personal relationships. This internalization reflects the broader insights of Critical Race Theory, which emphasizes the persistence and normalization of racial structures in everyday life (Bell [1]; Crenshaw [3]).

These dynamics also resonate with earlier reflections on double consciousness and racial identity articulated by Du Bois, as well as the psychological dimensions of racial alienation explored by Fanon (Du Bois [7]; Fanon [8]; hooks [9]).

Furthermore, the literary representations examined in this article highlight the paradoxical nature of identity within color-stratified societies. While lighter skin may provide access to social privilege and mobility, it often comes at the cost of psychological fragmentation, loss of cultural belonging, and existential insecurity. Conversely, darker-skinned characters, though more visibly marginalized, may retain stronger connections to communal identity, even as they face systemic exclusion.

Another important dimension that emerges from this analysis is the role of family as a primary site of identity formation and reproduction of color hierarchies. In the selected texts, family relationships function as both spaces of reinforcement and resistance. Through generational transmission, colorism becomes embedded in everyday practices, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others from an early age.

The comparative approach adopted in this study also underscores the evolution of colorism across different historical and literary contexts. While Larsen's work reflects early twentieth-century anxieties surrounding racial passing and social respectability, Phillips exposes the violent and oppressive dimensions of colorism within familial structures. Bennett, in turn, offers a contemporary perspective that integrates memory, inheritance, and the long-term effects of identity negotiation across generations.

These findings suggest that colorism should be understood not only as a legacy of racism but also as an ongoing cultural and psychological process that continues to shape identity in both African American and diasporic contexts (Adaha & Azon [10]; Adaha & Azon [11]). By foregrounding the literary representation of colorism, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how narratives can reveal, challenge, and reconfigure systems of inequality.

Ultimately, the discussion highlights the importance of examining identity as a dynamic and relational construct, shaped by the interaction between individual agency and structural constraints. African American literature, in this regard, serves as a powerful medium for interrogating the

complexities of race, identity, and belonging in contemporary society [2].

## 7. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of colorism in shaping identity formation in African American literature, highlighting its significance as both a social structure and a deeply internalized process. Through the analysis of works by Nella Larsen, Delores Phillips, and Brit Bennett, it has been demonstrated that colorism operates across multiple levels—structural, interpersonal, and psychological—producing complex and often fragmented identities.

The findings of this study reveal that identity within color-stratified societies is not fixed but continuously negotiated in relation to external perceptions, social expectations, and historical legacies. The phenomenon of racial passing, in particular, underscores the paradoxical nature of identity, where access to privilege is often accompanied by alienation and instability. At the same time, the persistence of color-based hierarchies within family structures highlights the role of intimate spaces in reproducing and challenging systems of inequality.

By situating colorism within an interdisciplinary framework that combines Critical Race Theory, cultural studies, and literary analysis (Hall [2]; Crenshaw [3]), this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how African American literature engages with issues of race, identity, and representation. It demonstrates that literary texts not only reflect social realities but also provide critical insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of identity formation.

Future research could extend this analysis by exploring representations of colorism in other diasporic contexts, including African and Caribbean literatures, as well as in visual and popular culture (Adaha & Azon [10]). Such approaches would further illuminate the global dimensions of colorism and its impact on identity in diverse cultural settings.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of examining colorism as a central component of identity formation and as a critical lens through which to understand the complexities of race and belonging in contemporary society [2].

## Abbreviations

CRT Critical Race Theory

## Author Contributions

**Kodjo Adaha:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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