

A LITERATURE STUDY OF RACIAL CAPITALISM AND REPRESENTATION IN R. F. KUANG'S *YELLOWFACE*

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection of racial capitalism and representation in R.F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface* (2023), which offers a powerful critique of the publishing industry's commodification of minority voices. This research investigates how capitalist structures shape the way racial and cultural of East Asian identities are represented, appropriated, and exploited in contemporary literary production. This research uses a qualitative approach with textual analysis as the main method, applying theories of racial capitalism, identity, and representation to examine the novel's portrayal of power dynamics, performative allyship, and white fragility. The novel centers on June Hayward, a white author who steals a manuscript from her late Asian American friend, Athena Liu, and publishes it under an ambiguous pseudonym to benefit from the diversity trend. Through this act, Kuang critiques the exploitation of marginalized experiences by dominant (white) institutions and individuals in pursuit of profit and legitimacy. The analysis reveals several major issues: first, the fetishization of exotic cultural identity as a marketable commodity; second, the silencing of subaltern voices by dominant power structures; and third, the prevalence of symbolic diversity and superficial inclusion within the creative industries. This research concludes that *Yellowface* not only exposes how race and cultural trauma are used as tools for economic gain in the publishing world, but also challenges the ethical boundaries of authorship, authenticity, and allyship in a racially stratified capitalist system. The novel encourages readers and cultural institutions to reflect on how they may contribute to injustice while appearing to support inclusion and representation.

Keywords: *Yellowface*, Racial Capitalism, Representation, Cultural Appropriation, Subaltern

INTRODUCTION

Exoticism in literary works from the East has long been a real form of orientalism as conceptualized by Edward Said, where "The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness... first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental..." (Said, 1978, p. 15). Said explained that by minimizing the cultural diversity of the people of Southwest Asia and North Africa, Orientalists transformed them into contrasting images that made the



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West superior. This phenomenon is exploited by the Western world which adheres to capitalist values as a source of profit. One of the people who is often marginalized in racial capitalism is people of Chinese descent who experience exploitation both from orientalist exoticism and as victims of an economic structure that racializes identity in the interests of capital accumulation. This marginalization is demonstrated in how representations of Chinese culture and identity are constructed, commercialized, and distributed in the western literary and media industry, creating narratives that exploit the diasporic Chinese experience into products sold to audiences hungry for Eastern exoticism.

Yellowface (2023) raises important issues related to how the publishing industry exploits diversity narratives for financial gain alone. The protagonist, June Hayward, who is a white author, steals her friend's Asian-based novel manuscript and then publishes it using her own name. Kuang uses June's narrative as a criticism of practices in the industry that are often unfair to writers from minority groups, where the stories and experiences of people from minority groups can be considered commodities that white writers can exploit for commercial gain. Readers can also see how the industry promotes works based on market trends rather than the quality or authenticity of the story.

The study of *Yellowface* in the context of capitalism and social representation is important because global attention to issues of justice is increasing, especially in the cultural and creative industries. In the midst of efforts to expand diversity of voices in the publishing industry, various contradictory responses have also emerged, including criticism of diversity practices which are considered only symbolic or performative. This shows the tension of the demands of the capitalist market with the quest for representational justice. In the context of globalization which accelerates the circulation of culture and ideas, the capitalist system which not only influences the production and distribution of literary works, but also shapes identity and authenticity itself is important to study. Therefore, the study of this novel provides an understanding of how economic structures and ideology are related to processing contemporary racial representations.

This article aims to examine how the capitalist system that dominates the publishing industry helps shape the way racial groups are represented in literary works, with R.F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface* as the primary object. Through this analysis, the author seeks to reveal various forms of structural injustice, unequal cultural appropriation practices, and the tendency toward performative identity that often

appears in popular literature. In addition, this study is also expected to provide important insights about the urgency of representational justice and inclusivity in contemporary global literary discourse.

To support the findings of this research, the author reviewed previous studies that explored similar topics. The first study research is conducted by Felicia Chan in 2019, titled “Cosmopolitan Pleasures and Affects; or Why Are We Still Talking About *Yellowface* in Twenty-First-Century Cinema?” examined the persistence and function of *Yellowface* and whitewashing practices in contemporary cinema due to a deep-rooted commodification of “Asianness,” which is consumed aesthetically rather than engaged with as lived subjectivity, despite of advancements in intercultural theory and diversity discourse. While both studies share critique of how capitalist structures commodify racial identities, particularly Asianness, in ways that erase, distort, or exploit authentic subjectivity for profit. The object or media used in this research is in form of literary work (novel) rather than movies.

The second research for our literature review is a research article conducted by Devi and R. Panmei in 2024 titling “Media Representation and Cultural Appropriation in R. F. Kuang’s *Yellowface*” which argue that *Yellowface* exposes how authentic voices are altered and packaged to align with dominant group, in this case Western, tastes and turning racial identity into a consumable product. Both studies share the same research object, which is R. F. Kuang’s novel *Yellowface*. Devi and R. Panmei’s used cultural theory, cosmopolitanism, and postcolonial critique as theoretical framing while this article uses capitalism, race and identity theory.

Another relevant study, conducted by Saha and van Lente in 2022, titled “Diversity, Media, and Racial Capitalism: A Case Study on Publishing” with its main finding that revealed diversity in publishing functions as a mechanism of racial capitalism, where race is commodified to serve the interests of the white culture. While both articles aim to expose how capitalism exploits racial identity, this study uses literary analysis that is different with the usage of empirical research of UK trade publishing and how diversity is enacted in Saha and van Lente’s study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Western Fetishization of Exoticism and Uniqueness

We often associate racial capitalism with the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial welfare (Melamed, 2015: 77). The contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of human differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders. Looking at this condition, racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other. Capitalism causes racialization in the markets. Racialization in markets refers to the way in which market values get differentially marked by race (Julian, 2024: 13). The capitalist markets consist of differential valuations of commodities that intersect with racial hierarchies, creating “the racialized markets”. In many markets, race is an important component in the valuation of commodities or consumers. White is often viewed as superior than nonwhite. However, the irony is racial capitalism often manifests itself in the real world under the guise of “embracing others,” which results in non-white people losing their cultural legitimacy and identity because they have to conform to white people's doctrines and expectations regarding the concept of diversity.

This case is portrayed in *Yellowface* through Athena Liu in (Kuang, 2023: 320), who is reduced to a token figure. She is permitted to write only about her experiences as an immigrant and the historical traumas of her family and community, under the pretext that narratives of diversity are highly marketable within the literary markets. Racial trauma, in particular, is treated as a profitable theme. Several of Athena's works have even been adapted into series in online streaming platform. The publishing industry operates by silencing and marginalizing subaltern voices, while rewarding white who perpetuate stereotypes about these communities. The novel offers a sharp critique of how nonwhite cultures, especially Asian cultures, are commodified and consumed as entertainment for white audiences. Media representation often elevates individuals like Athena, whose unique and combined possession of cultural backgrounds and physical features are seen as assets (Devi and Panmei, 2024: 3012). Even her name, Athena Ling En Liu, is a perfect combination of the classical and exotic (Kuang, 2023: 11). This emphasizes how her identity is presented as desirable due to its ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’ elements, representing a common practice where media monetizes and elevates non-Western elements, valuing them for their imagined perceived rarity and charm.

A 2016 article published by Vice, written by Matthew Salesses titled *Immigrant Authors Are Making American Literature Great Again*, implicitly highlights the Western literary market's strong interest in non-Western authors, particularly those perceived as having an "exotic," "different," or "unique" background. There is a high demand for works that explore themes of identity conflict and the experiences of marginalized groups, and publishing institutions view this as an opportunity for substantial profit. Authors operating under the pressures of Western capitalism are often compelled to do whatever it takes to achieve financial success and recognition. This critique is reflected in *Yellowface* through June Hayward, who adopts the pen name "Juniper Song," a deliberately ambiguous name that could be mistaken for Chinese. Beyond the exceptional quality of the stolen manuscript itself, one of the factors that draws significant public attention is June's new pen name, which appears more appealing and distinctive than her previous, overly white-sounding pseudonym.

Unveiling Racism towards The Subaltern

In *Yellowface*, the dynamics of the relationship between June Hayward and Athena Liu reflects how people often use status-indicating affiliations as proxies for independent judgments about the relevant characteristics of individuals or institutions (Podolny, 2001; Leong, 2013: 179). As what Leong has stated, a white person or institution who engages in an exchange with a nonwhite person gains status as a nonracist and cross-culturally competent actor by *signaling* those attributes through affiliation. If the person or institution were racist, the reasoning goes, they would not want to participate in the exchange with the nonwhite person, and the nonwhite person would not agree to participate with them. This means if one has close nonwhite friends, one cannot be racist or prejudiced against those groups.

After Athena's death, June stole Athena's manuscript and published the work as her own. People did not immediately label June as a racist for writing a novel that contained the history and culture of the Chinese people who were marginalized in the West. Instead, she was first perceived as a grieving friend mourning Athena's death simply because the public knew they were close friends. People sympathized with her and considered June to be kind-hearted. Her actions were deemed appropriate and respectful to the late Athena by creating a novel that was closely related to Athena's identity as an Asian-American writer. They regarded June as a hero because she helped

amplify subaltern voices or silenced narratives. In the midst of her popularity as a rising author, some criticism and hate speech also directed at June. However, most of those who dislike her work are of Chinese descent or people with Asian blood. This can be seen in the following quote:

The most widely circulated hate piece is an essay review in the Los Angeles Review of Books by a critic named Adele Sparks-Sato... "In The Last Front, Juniper Song misses an excellent opportunity to excavate a forgotten history and instead uses the suffering of thousands of Chinese Laborers as a site for melodrama and white redemption," she writes (Kuang, 2023: 109).

The Silencing of Subaltern Voices

Another Asian American character named Candice Lee is also facing injustice in the industry. She is dismissed from the publishing house that represents June, simply because she suggests for them to hire a sensitivity reader to review June's novel before it is released to the market. Sensitivity readers are readers who provide cultural consulting and critiques on manuscripts for a fee (Kuang, 2023: 72). Thus, professionals in this field can be regarded as "racial editor". The use of sensitivity readers has become increasingly prevalent in the publishing industry over the past decade (Withers et al., 2024: 201). Cultural authenticity becomes a very interesting discourse lately. Readers nowadays tend to be suspicious of someone who writes outside their culture, and sensitive readers can minimize the chance of racism in narrative content before they could accuse or attack the writer on the internet.

June, as the representation of white holds a general belief that anyone should be able to write about any subject, regardless of their racial or cultural background. Her perception is shaped by capitalist ideology, as she believes that she has the right to write about marginalized subjects as long as she is willing to put in the work. As a creative worker, she feels entitled to profit from her writing. The interaction between June, the publishing house, and Candice serves as a sharp critique of how the (white) superstructure silences minority voices, and how the West continues to practice a new form of imperialism in the contemporary era by discriminating against the East.

Asian American are racialized as successful foreigners and are often seen as a potential threat to U.S security and the economic success of "real Americans" (Pyke and Dang, 2003: 150). Candice is a threat to June and the publisher. They would risk losing

significant profit if they followed her suggestion. Due to her continued confrontations and outspoken views, the publisher ultimately dismissed Candice, leaving her powerless to resist any further. In page 51 (Kuang, 2023) June even softens several white characters created by Athena throughout the manuscript, arguing that Athena's depictions were "too racist" and "doesn't make any sense". Through the power they hold, June and the publishing house are thus able to manipulate subaltern narratives to better suit the tastes of the dominant society.

Performative Allyship and White Fragility in Creative Industries

In her novel *Yellowface*, R.F. Kuang explores the performative nature of certain displays of support for social causes particularly racism, commonly referred to as performative allyship. Performative allies often engage in actions driven more by self-promotion than genuine support, such as posting on social media without real-world engagement (Kalina, n.d.). Kuang illustrates this through the character of June Hayward, who claims to be "honoring" the work of her late friend Athena Liu by publishing her manuscript under her own name, rather than returning it to Liu's family or community. This act, framed as solidarity, is in fact a form of cultural appropriation.

Performative allyship can contribute to the silencing of marginalized communities by diverting attention from their actual needs and experiences (Patterson, 2023). June often rationalizes her actions through a sense of entitlement, portraying herself as a struggling writer left behind by the rise of "diversity publishing." From her perspective, she believes she is paying tribute to Athena: "I'm not stealing. I'm saving. This manuscript would've gone nowhere. I'm giving it life." (Kuang, 2023, p. 38).

Yellowface presents a sharp critique of how performative allyship manifests in the modern publishing industry, where diversity is often leveraged as a branding tool rather than a sincere commitment to inclusion. June embodies this dynamic by positioning herself as an ally to marginalized voices while simultaneously appropriating and profiting from the work of a deceased Asian American author.

As stated in the online article Identifying and Dismantling Performative Allyship, performative allies are "people who say they support social justice movements or legislation until it inconveniences them." Through this lens, Kuang's novel reveals how white authors and institutions may superficially endorse diversity while retaining control over whose voices are elevated and whose are silenced.

When the public begins to question her authenticity as the author of “Asian stories,” June’s reaction exemplifies white fragility, the emotional defensiveness that arises when white individuals are confronted with racial critique: “Why can’t they see I’m one of the good ones? I’m not a racist. I’m trying to do the right thing.” (Kuang, 2023, p. 217).

Robin DiAngelo defines white fragility as a state in which even minimal racial stress becomes intolerable, prompting defensive responses such as anger, fear, guilt, argumentation, silence, or withdrawal (DiAngelo, 2018). This concept is vividly portrayed in *Yellowface* through June Hayward’s inability to confront the racial implications of her actions without resorting to denial, defensiveness, or self-victimization. Instead of responding with reflection or accountability, she reacts with resentment and self-justification. This aligns with DiAngelo’s framework, where such defensive moves serve to reassert innocence and re-center whiteness as the moral norm.

In *Yellowface*, R.F. Kuang represents how capitalist forces within the publishing industry influence the portrayal of racial groups by transforming minority identities into profitable products. The novel shows that East Asian cultural elements and histories of trauma are often commercialized as exotic content, catering to Western consumer interests and turning authentic lived experiences into market-driven commodities. This profit-driven system frequently sidelines authentic voices from marginalized communities while promoting those, like June Hayward, who appropriate and modify these stories to suit dominant tastes. Acts of performative allyship further obscure these injustices, allowing white individuals and institutions to profit under the appearance of promoting diversity. The industry also upholds existing racial hierarchies, selectively amplifying non-white identities only when they are profitable, while preserving whiteness as the cultural standard. Kuang critiques this system by revealing how capitalist priorities distort representation and sustain racial inequities beneath a surface of inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study found that *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang indicates a sharp critique of how capitalist structures within the publishing industry shape and distort the representation of racial groups, particularly East Asian identities. The novel exposes how authentic

cultural experiences and racial trauma are commodified to meet market demands, transforming them into profitable products for predominantly white audiences. Through the character of June Hayward, the narrative illustrates how genuine subaltern voices are marginalized while appropriative, marketable versions of these stories are elevated. Additionally, Kuang critiques the prevalence of performative allyship and white fragility, which serve to obscure the systemic injustices perpetuated by the industry. Overall, this research highlights how capitalist logics not only drive the production and circulation of literary works but also reinforce racial hierarchies and distort concepts of identity and authenticity. *Yellowface* challenges readers and cultural institutions to reflect critically on their roles in sustaining or resisting these inequities within the global literary market.

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