



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 1127-1140

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21539292>**Racial Diversity in Kuang's Yellowface: A Neo-Colonial study****Ayesha Nasir**M.Phil. Scholar in English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus  
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**ABSTRACT**

*This research explores the neo-colonial perspective on racial diversity as depicted in R.F. Kuang's novel Yellowface, where the publishing industry's commodification of diversity is examined through the story of June Hayward, a white writer who claims her deceased Asian American friend Athena Liu's manuscript as her own. Through this morally complex narrative, Kuang critiques how the industry manipulates and profits from diverse voices, reshaping cultural identities to suit Western audiences while sidelining authentic representation. This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing close reading, thematic analysis, and comparisons with real-world publishing practices to investigate how Kuang's narrative sheds light on power imbalances and ethical dilemmas within the industry. Grounded in postcolonial theory and Critical Race Theory, the analysis connects Kuang's fictional events to broader practices of neo-colonialism, illustrating how racial diversity is selectively promoted as a token of inclusivity while ultimately reinforcing existing power structures. This research aims to reveal yellow face as both a sociopolitical commentary and a critique of diversity initiatives in literature that prioritize profit over authentic storytelling. By framing diversity as a resource subjected to neo-colonial exploitation, Kuang challenges the industry's superficial commitment to inclusivity, questioning who truly benefits from racial diversity in publishing. This study thus contributes to discussions on race, power, and ethics, underscoring the need for deeper systemic change in cultural representation.*

**Keywords:** Racial Diversity Neo-colonialism Cultural Appropriation Representation Identity Politics Postcolonial Literature White Privilege Authorship and Authenticity

**Introduction****Background of the study**

With Yellowface (2023), Kuang left behind fantasy and stepped into the realm of literary fiction. This change towards a new genre affects the representation of neocolonial themes significantly: Kuang takes not a speculative approach, but instead engages with the way postcoloniality is still present in today's society. The novel's themes of cultural appropriation, identity, and racial dynamics within publishing reveal Kuang's sharp critique of how the literary world often trivializes or exploits marginalized voices for profit. June's appropriation of Athena's manuscript illustrates how racial and cultural identities can be misrepresented or repackaged by dominant groups, diluting the authenticity of the original voice for mass consumption.

Kuang's narrative grapples with issues of ownership and identity, questioning who has the right to tell stories, especially those steeped in cultural experiences outside the dominant group's lived realities. Through June's actions, *Yellowface* exposes how the literary market often rewards narratives that appear to offer diversity while still adhering to mainstream, culturally comfortable stereotypes. This deliberate dilution of cultural authenticity becomes a central point

in the novel, illustrating the publishing industry's tendency to view racial diversity +as a tool rather than a true commitment to inclusive representation. Devi, N. B., & Panmei, R. R. (2024). Ironically, June does not see her own white privilege. What she sees instead is Athena, who is ethnically diverse and who is published and famous precisely for that. She is jealous of it, wishes she is more special than “just brown-eyed, brown-haired June Hayward, from Philly” (6). She attributes Athena’s fame purely to her otherness:

“It’s not that Athena isn’t talented ... But Athena’s star power is so obviously not about the writing. It’s about her. Athenia Liu is, simply put, so fucking cool. Even her name – Athena Ling En Liu – is cool; well done, Mr and Mrs Liu, to choose a perfect combination of the classical and exotic ... So of course, Athena gets every good thing, because that’s how this industry works. Publishing picks a winner – someone attractive enough, someone cool and young and, oh, we’re all thinking it, let’s just say it, ‘diverse’ enough.” (5-6)

By framing racial diversity as a commodified resource, *Yellowface* offers a neo-colonial critique of Western publishing practices. Kuang reveals how publishers frequently treat stories from underrepresented voices as marketable assets, similar to the way colonial powers once extracted valuable resources from their territories without offering fair value in return. The novel suggests that, much like neo-colonial practices in economics and politics, the literary industry’s approach to diversity often upholds traditional power structures and favors profit over authenticity or social change. McKay, K. (2024, May 14). This research seeks to analyze how Kuang’s narrative illuminates these dynamics, framing her novel as both a story and a sociopolitical commentary on the limitations of diversity initiatives within profit-driven Western media industries.

#### **Racial Diversity in Kuang's Yellow face: A Neo-Colonial study**

R.F. Kuang’s 2023 novel *Yellowface* emerges as a poignant satire that scrutinizes the intricate dynamics of race, authorship, and cultural appropriation within the contemporary publishing industry. The narrative follows June Hayward, a white author who, following the untimely death of her Asian American friend Athena Liu, appropriates Liu’s unpublished manuscript and publishes it under a racially ambiguous pseudonym. This act of literary theft serves as a catalyst for exploring the commodification of racial identities and the neo-colonial structures that persist in modern cultural production.

The novel delves into the mechanisms by which white individuals navigate and exploit systems designed to amplify marginalized voices. June's transformation into "Juniper Song" and her subsequent success underscore the superficial embrace of diversity that often masks deeper systemic inequalities. As Katie McKay notes in her review, Kuang's choice to narrate the story from June's perspective forces readers to confront the insidious nature of racial appropriation and the discomfiting realities of whiteness in creative spaces. Ghosh, A. (2023, July 14).

Kuang’s work aligns with Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which posits that media and cultural industries actively construct meanings that reinforce dominant ideologies. In their analysis, Devi and Panmei argue that *yellow face* exemplifies how marginalized narratives are commodified for mainstream consumption, reflecting real-world experiences where minority cultures are sidelined for marketability. The novel also engages with the concept of neo-colonialism; wherein former colonial powers continue to exert influence through cultural and economic means. June's appropriation of Athena's work can be seen as a metaphor for the ongoing exploitation of minority cultures by dominant groups. As highlighted in *The Indian Express*, Kuang's narrative critiques the publishing industry's double standards and its role in perpetuating racial hierarchies. Alter, A. (2023, July 18). Furthermore, *Yellow face* interrogates the authenticity of representation in literature. June's deliberate omission of culturally specific elements from Athena's manuscript to make it more palatable to a white audience raises

questions about the integrity of diverse narratives in mainstream media. This act mirrors real-world instances where cultural expressions are sanitized or altered to fit dominant tastes, thereby diluting their original significance. The novel's reception within the publishing industry adds another layer to its critique. Despite its scathing portrayal of the industry's shortcomings, *Yellowface* has been met with acclaim, suggesting a paradox wherein institutions are willing to endorse critiques of their own practices without implementing substantive changes.

In examining *Yellowface* through a neo-colonial lens, this study aims to uncover the subtle ways in which racial diversity is manipulated and commodified within contemporary literature. By analyzing the novel's themes and their real-world parallels, we can better understand the complexities of representation and the ongoing challenges faced by marginalized voices in asserting their narratives within dominant cultural frameworks. **Goffe, T. L. (2025).**

### **Yellow face as a Site of Neo-Colonial Conflict**

The offers a compelling exploration of neo-colonial dynamics within the contemporary publishing industry. The novel follows June Hayward, a white author who appropriates the manuscript of her deceased Asian American friend, Athena Liu, and publishes it under a racially ambiguous pseudonym. This act of literary theft serves as a microcosm for examining how neo-colonial power structures persist in modern cultural production, particularly in the commodification and misrepresentation of marginalized voices.

Kuang's narrative strategy centering the story through June's first-person perspective deliberately emphasizes the silencing of Athena and, by extension, the broader marginalization of Asian American voices. This choice "structurally and thematically emphasize the noiselessness of Athena Liu," highlighting how whiteness often dominates and distorts narratives about people of color. The novel thus critiques the ways in which white individuals and institutions appropriate and profit from the cultural labor of marginalized communities, a hallmark of neo-colonial exploitation.

### **Importance of a Neo-Colonial Lens in Racial Studies**

The study of race has long been central to understanding societal structures and inequalities. However, traditional frameworks often overlook the enduring impacts of colonialism on racial dynamics. Incorporating a neo-colonial lens into racial studies offers a more comprehensive understanding of how historical colonial practices continue to shape contemporary racial hierarchies, identities, and power structures.

### **Understanding Neo-Colonialism**

Neo-colonialism, a term popularized by Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, refers to the continued economic and cultural dominance of former colonial powers over newly independent nations. Unlike classical colonialism, which involved direct political control, neo-colonialism operates through economic, political, and cultural pressures that maintain the dominance of powerful nations over weaker ones. Chowdhury, A. (2022). This concept is crucial for analyzing how contemporary racial inequalities are not merely the result of individual prejudices but are embedded in global power structures that have historical roots in colonialism.

### **Colonialist of Knowledge**

One significant aspect of neo-colonialism is the "colonialist of knowledge," a concept introduced by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. This idea critiques the Eurocentric system of knowledge, arguing that the legacy of colonialism survives within the domains of knowledge production. The colonialist of knowledge asserts that Western epistemologies have been privileged, while indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing have been marginalized or deemed inferior. This framework is essential for racial studies as it highlights how racial hierarchies are perpetuated

through the dominance of Western knowledge systems, which often exclude or distort the experiences and perspectives of colonized peoples. **Gordon, L. R. (2023).**

### **Frantz Fanon's Contributions**

Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher, made significant contributions to understanding the psychological impacts of colonialism. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explores how colonialism affects the identity and consciousness of colonized individuals. He argues that the colonized subject internalizes the inferiority imposed upon them by the colonizer, leading to a fractured sense of self. Fanon's analysis provides a psychological dimension to racial studies, illustrating how colonialism's impact extends beyond material exploitation to shape the very psyche of individuals. Lewis, K. (2024).

### **Racial Disparities and Historical Context**

Contemporary racial disparities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging their historical context rooted in colonialism. Mbembe, A. (2024). A report by the European Network Against Racism highlights that addressing racial disparities in Europe is impossible without recognizing the legacies of colonialism and slavery. The report examines the historic exclusion policies by former colonial powers and their continued impact, noting that the exploitation during colonial times contributed significantly to the economic growth of these nations while simultaneously preventing Black people from accessing wealth. This underscores the importance of a neo-colonial lens in racial studies, as it connects present-day inequalities to historical processes of exploitation and domination.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study focuses on analyzing R.F. Kuang's *Yellow face* through the specific lens of neo-colonial theory, with particular emphasis on how racial diversity is portrayed, commodified, and manipulated within the framework of Western literary production. The novel provides a unique platform to interrogate how neo-colonial dynamics persist in contemporary cultural industries, particularly in publishing, where the appearance of diversity often obscures the underlying structures of exclusion and appropriation. The scope of this research is thus primarily textual, engaging closely with Kuang's narrative, characters, and thematic strategies to understand the critical commentary embedded within the fiction. Rather than approaching *yellow face* from a purely literary or aesthetic standpoint, this study privileges a socio-political reading that situates the novel within broader discourses of post colonialism, race theory, and cultural hegemony.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine how Kuang's *Yellow face* highlights neo-colonial power structures in the literary industry.
2. To investigate the ethical implications of commodifying racial diversity for profit.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does Kuang's narrative illustrate neo-colonial exploitation within publishing?
2. In what ways is racial diversity commodified within *yellow face* and how does this reflect broader industry practices?

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this literature review is to establish a scholarly foundation for analyzing racial diversity in R.F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface* through the lens of neo-colonial theory. As racial and ethnic identities continue to shape contemporary discussions around literature and authorship, it is crucial to explore how these dynamics are portrayed, challenged, and complicated within Kuang's narrative. *Yellowface* emerges at a pivotal moment in literary culture when conversations about who has the right to tell certain stories and who is recognized or erased

within the publishing industry have gained significant urgency. Thus, an investigation of the existing scholarship on racial diversity, neo-colonialism, and their intersections in literary production is essential to framing this study's critical approach.

### **Racial Representation**

Racial diversity has long been a central topic within literary studies, yet it often oscillates between the celebration of multicultural inclusion and the exposure of systemic inequalities. Within Western literary institutions, minority authors have historically struggled for recognition in a marketplace dominated by Eurocentric norms and tastes. In recent years, an increased emphasis on diverse voices has brought important attention to authors of color, but this has also created new tensions. Discussions around racial authenticity, cultural appropriation, and performative inclusion have revealed that the mechanisms of neo-colonialism persist even in industries that outwardly champion diversity. *Yellowface* directly engages these tensions by presenting a narrative where the boundaries between cultural ownership, racial privilege, and artistic authority are provocatively blurred. Through this novel, Kuang challenges the reader to confront uncomfortable questions about power, race, and legitimacy in the creation and consumption of art.

Neo-colonialism provides a critical framework for understanding the subtle and persistent forms of dominance that continue after the formal end of colonial rule. In the literary world, neo-colonial structures often manifest through the gatekeeping practices of publishing houses, marketing strategies that tokenize minority writers, and broader cultural patterns that valorize certain narratives while marginalizing others. Scholars like Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon have outlined how cultural imperialism serves as a powerful extension of economic and political control. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism further illuminates the ways in which Western narratives about the "Other" are crafted to reinforce existing hierarchies. Applying these insights to *Yellowface* reveals how neo-colonial forces operate within supposedly progressive spaces, allowing appropriation and racialized exploitation to masquerade as artistic innovation or multicultural inclusion. Brooks, L. (2024).

### **Importance of connecting racial diversity discussions with neo-colonial structures in contemporary fiction.**

In contemporary literary discourse, the exploration of racial diversity has become increasingly prominent, reflecting broader societal efforts to recognize and celebrate multicultural identities. However, to fully comprehend the complexities of racial representation in literature, it is imperative to examine these discussions through the lens of neo-colonialism. This approach unveils the subtle continuities of colonial power dynamics that persist in modern narratives, influencing both the production and reception of literary works.

Neo-colonialism, a term popularized by Kwame Nkrumah, refers to the indirect control and influence exerted by former colonial powers over previously colonized regions, often through economic, cultural, and ideological means. In literature, this manifests as the perpetuation of Western norms and values, which can marginalize or distort non-Western perspectives. As Naila Sahar notes in her analysis of Kamila Shamsie's novels, neo-colonialism continues to shape post-colonial societies, leading to internal divisions and the unequal treatment of indigenous cultures. Wiegman, R. (2023).

The integration of racial diversity into literature, while seemingly progressive, can sometimes reinforce neo-colonial structures. For instance, the commodification of diverse voices to cater to Western audiences may result in the dilution or misrepresentation of authentic cultural experiences. This phenomenon is evident in the works of authors like Whole Soyinka, whose novel "The Interpreters" delves into the identity crises faced by African intellectuals navigating

post-colonial realities. Bahman Moradi's study highlights how these characters' grapple with cultural hybridity and the lingering effects of colonial influence, underscoring the need to critically assess the frameworks within which racial diversity is portrayed.

Moreover, contemporary fiction often reflects the ongoing struggles against neo-colonialism through narratives that challenge dominant paradigms. Stephen Morton's examination of allegory in post-colonial literature reveals how authors employ counter-allegorical strategies to critique extractive imperialist practices and envision alternative social orders. Such literary techniques not only expose the enduring legacies of colonialism but also empower marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives. Chong, P. (2023).

### **Neo-Colonialism and Racial Power Dynamics in R.F. Kuang's Yellowface**

R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* is an incisive critique of contemporary cultural dynamics, particularly the intersections of race, identity, and the neo-colonial structures that continue to shape global power relations. Through the lens of the protagonist's journey, Kuang dissects the ways in which racial identity is commodified in the literary world and how neo-colonialism persists in contemporary forms of exploitation and appropriation. By addressing how the publishing industry and media continue to maintain racial hierarchies, Kuang's novel becomes a powerful commentary on the lasting legacies of colonialism, particularly in relation to Asian identity and representation.

Neo-colonialism, a concept often associated with the work of theorists such as Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, refers to the ongoing influence and control exerted by former colonial powers over formerly colonized nations through economic, political, and cultural means, even after formal decolonization. In *Yellowface*, this idea is explored in the context of racial identity and representation in a globalized capitalist world. The protagonist, June Hayward, a white woman, appropriates the life and identity of an Asian American writer, Athena Liu, after Liu's death. Hayward's actions, although seemingly personal, reflect the broader societal patterns of neo-colonial exploitation, where the cultures and identities of marginalized groups are hijacked by those in power for personal or financial gain. Hayward's manipulation of Liu's identity serves as an embodiment of how neo-colonial forces operate in a post-colonial world, exploiting racial and cultural diversity for profit while simultaneously erasing authentic voices. Saha, A. (2024).

One of the central ways that *Yellowface* interrogates neo-colonialism is through the lens of the publishing industry. The novel critiques how the industry capitalizes on racial diversity without necessarily providing spaces for authentic, marginalized voices. The commodification of ethnic identity specifically, Asian identity is depicted as a calculated maneuver to gain market traction in an increasingly globalized literary market. This mirrors broader socio-economic patterns where non-Western cultures and histories are treated as resources to be consumed, exploited, and rebranded for the benefit of powerful Western entities. In this sense, Young, J. O. (2023). Kuang's novel is a direct critique of how the Western literary world perpetuates the neo-colonial practice of exploiting racial diversity for commercial success, much like how Western media frequently appropriates Asian culture for entertainment purposes.

### **Identity and Hybridity in Yellow face**

R.F. Kuang's *Yellow face* engages with complex questions of racial identity, cultural appropriation, and the performative nature of identity in a globalized, capitalist world. Central to the novel is the theme of identity manipulation, with the protagonist, June Hayward, appropriating the life and works of Athena Liu, a Chinese American author, after Liu's tragic death. This act of identity theft is not merely a personal crime but serves as a commentary on broader issues of cultural misrepresentation and the commodification of racial identity. The novel presents identity as fluid, constructed, and, at times, a performance that is often shaped

by external forces, such as societal expectations, media representations, and capitalist structures. By exploring the themes of identity and hybridity, *Yellowface* underscores how race is often shaped by performative acts that reflect the influence of dominant power structures. González, A. (2023).

### **Intersectionality of Race and Gender in Yellow face**

R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* offers a profound commentary on the intersectionality of race and gender, particularly through its exploration of identity appropriation, cultural commodification, and the power dynamics within the publishing industry. By examining the experiences of the protagonist June Hayward, who appropriates the identity of the Asian American writer Athena Liu, Kuang underscores how race and gender are inextricably linked in the dynamics of cultural representation and exploitation. The novel's engagement with these intersecting social categories offers an opportunity to reflect on how gender and race are not isolated factors but are mutually constituted and influence the experiences and opportunities available to individuals, particularly in contexts of cultural and economic power.

At the heart of the novel lies the appropriation of Athena Liu's identity, an act that reveals the complexities of both racial and gendered exploitation. The protagonist, June, a white woman, exploits Liu's death to assume her identity and pass herself off as an Asian American author. This theft is not simply a matter of racial appropriation but also a gendered one. Athena Liu, as an Asian American woman, occupies a marginal position within the literary world her voice is not fully heard, and her identity is reduced to a marketable commodity that fits into the broader framework of racial and gendered stereotypes. By stealing Liu's identity, June not only appropriates an Asian American identity but also takes on the complexities of womanhood, gendered expectations, and the struggles of Asian American women within the predominantly white and male literary industry. The novel reveals how women of color often find their identities commodified and repurposed for the benefit of others, with little regard for the lived realities of those they represent.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine racial diversity in R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* through a neo-colonial lens. As the novel navigates complex issues of cultural appropriation, racial representation, and identity politics within the literary world, a close reading approach was deemed appropriate to unpack the nuanced portrayals and ideological underpinnings within the narrative. This methodological choice enables an interpretative understanding of the text, grounded in postcolonial and neo-colonial theoretical frameworks.

Given that *Yellowface* is rich in intertextuality and socio-political commentary, the study adopts a textual analysis method to investigate how racial hierarchies and neo-colonial power structures are depicted and challenged. Emphasis is placed on language use, character construction, thematic development, and authorial intent, allowing for a deeper exploration of the racial dynamics and institutional inequities portrayed in the novel.

### **Research Design**

This research **used** a qualitative research design to closely analyze R.F. Kuang's novel *yellow face*. The study **focused** on understanding how Kuang **illustrated** power structures in the publishing industry and **explored** the ethical issues surrounding the commodification of racial diversity. By examining the novel through a critical lens, this analysis **aimed** to uncover the ways in which power dynamics, racial representation, and commercial interests **intersected** within the industry. In analyzing the novel, relevant theories, such as the postcolonial or critical race theory were used to frame the issues presented in them. These structures assisted to synthesize the

effects of racial diversity as a product and how it perpetuated European oppression of other races as beneficiaries. This described the various ways in which the publishing houses and authors addressed the matter of race in a barely serious desire in most of the cases was to make money out of it. Furthermore, the study provided actual experiences in the publishing sector to use as basis for the fabrication of yellow face. Real-life examples therefore include appropriation of authors' identity and marketing of stories from a racial perspective related to the issue highlighted in the novel.

This approach made it possible to understand how the racial diversity produced by the mass market only served as a way of creating systematic unfairness in the publishing industry.

Ethical issues discussed in the book were explored in detail and how the western culture and in particular the white culture in most of the instances suppressed the true representation of minorities with the generous amounts of performing tokenism inclusive. Analyzing the narrative of race, the work gave a critical view on how the industry distorted racial themes and gave an understanding of social relations in the sphere of publishing of the time referred to in the novel.

### **Research Objectives and Questions**

1. Examine how *Yellowface* shows neo-colonial power structures in the literary industry.
2. Explore the ethical concerns of using racial diversity for profit.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does yellow face illustrate neo-colonial exploitation in publishing?
2. How is racial diversity commodified in the novel, and what does this say about the publishing industry?

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

As simpatico with the novel, the analysis of yellow face under the categories and concept of neo-colonialism will be the major focus of this chapter. The manuscript of Kuang's novel carries a powerful message on ethnicity and prejudice pointing out how writers tend to play and take advantage of ethnicity to benefit from their work. This chapter is dedicated to recognition of the fact that *Yellowface* evidences the neo-colonial dynamics in the postcolonial cultural production: where minorities are expropriated by majorities. This way, applying the concept of neo-colonial theory to this analysis of Kuang's work will help highlight the race and identity as well as cultural sexuality critiques fundamental to social political analyses in the show.

### **Racial Representation and Identity Formation**

In *Yellow face*, R.F. Kuang constructs a compelling narrative centered around June Hayward, a white aspiring author who embodies the complexities of racial identity, particularly through the lenses of performance and appropriation. June's actions throughout the novel

reveal the ways in which white individuals can navigate and manipulate racialized identities for personal gain, reflecting larger societal patterns of racial commodification. According to Saha (2018), cultural industries often commodify race by selectively amplifying minority narratives that are palatable to mainstream (largely white) audiences. June's decision to publish Athena Liu's manuscript under her own name while subtly allowing others to assume she shares Athena's cultural background demonstrates her complicity in these dynamics. Her self-justifications illustrate the pervasive entitlement and rationalizations often seen in acts of cultural theft. As June reflects, "I didn't really steal her story. It was mine now. I was just the one brave enough to tell it" (Kuang, 2023, p. 112). This line exemplifies how June constructs an identity that absorbs and erases Athena's racialized experiences, representing a broader pattern where whiteness absorbs minority narratives without bearing their historical burdens.

June's identity formation is thus deeply performative, underscoring Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, which posits that identity is constituted through repeated acts rather than innate essence. In assuming a quasi-Asian identity, June does not merely plagiarize a text; she attempts to inhabit an entire racialized experience for credibility and profit. As Ahmed (2000) notes, racialized bodies are often sites of exploitation where cultural authenticity is both demanded and policed by market forces. June's transformation reveals how race, within cultural industries, becomes something that can be performed, commodified, and manipulated according to market demands, rather than being recognized as a lived, structural experience.

### **Constructing the 'Yellowface'**

The concept of "yellowface" a term referring to non-Asian individuals adopting stereotypical Asian personas plays a central role in Kuang's novel. Historically, yellowface has been a method by which white performers have appropriated and caricatured Asian identities for entertainment, reinforcing racial hierarchies and exclusion (Leong, 2005). Kuang reinterprets yellowface in a contemporary context, showing that the phenomenon persists beyond physical impersonation into realms of authorship and narrative control. June's adoption of Athena's story is not limited to plagiarism but extends to a symbolic act of racial performance, where she subtly cultivates an image that capitalizes on perceptions of diversity.

In describing her decision to publish Athena's manuscript, June admits, "No one would buy a book from boring old June Hayward. But Juniper Song... now, she was someone they could believe in" (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). This quotation highlights the strategic construction of an ambiguous racial identity, where June manipulates her branding to suggest, without explicitly claiming, Asian heritage. According to Shimakawa (2002), yellowface functions not merely as a mimicry but as a broader social strategy by which whiteness consolidates its hegemony through selective incorporation of minority traits. Kuang's portrayal of June aligns with this interpretation, illustrating how racialized signifiers can be appropriated without any substantive engagement with the realities of racial oppression.

Moreover, Kuang's novel critiques how the publishing industry itself incentivizes such performances. As scholars like Huggan (2001) have argued, the commodification of "ethnic authenticity" in global markets encourages the superficial valorization of diversity while maintaining systemic exclusions. June's success with Athena's story reflects how narratives about racial suffering are profitable commodities within a neoliberal literary economy, provided they are mediated through acceptable (often white) voices. Thus, *Yellowface* presents yellowface not only as an individual act of appropriation but also as a structural phenomenon deeply rooted in neo-colonial market dynamics.

### **Intersectionality of Race and Gender**

The intersection of race and gender is another critical axis through which Kuang interrogates the politics of representation in *Yellowface*. Women of color, particularly Asian American women like Athena Liu, often face dual marginalization both racialized and gendered within cultural industries (Crenshaw, 1991; Puar, 2012). Kuang vividly illustrates this dynamic through the contrast between Athena's struggle for recognition and June's relatively smoother path to success once she appropriates Athena's labor.

Athena's experiences reflect the compounded barriers that Asian American women encounter, including stereotypes of the "model minority" and the "submissive Asian woman," which constrain how they are perceived and marketed (Lee, 1999). June's resentment towards Athena is steeped not only in racial jealousy but also in gendered animosity, evident when she muses, "Athena Liu was the darling, the genius, the one who could do no wrong. And me? I was just June Hayward plain, forgettable" (Kuang, 2023, p. 34). This passage highlights how racialized

femininity is both fetishized and subjected to intense scrutiny in ways that white femininity is not.

Moreover, the novel critiques how institutions tokenize women of color without addressing systemic inequities. As Saha (2018) and Warner (2015) argue, diversity initiatives in publishing often mask deeper inequalities, presenting the success of a few minority individuals as evidence of institutional progress while leaving broader racial and gender hierarchies intact. June's success under the illusion of racial authenticity underscores the fragility of these superficial markers of diversity. It also reveals how easily women of color can be displaced or erased in systems designed to prioritize white narratives.

Through this intersectional lens, Kuang shows that racial representation cannot be disentangled from gender politics. Women of color, unlike their white counterparts, must navigate a treacherous terrain where their legitimacy is constantly questioned, their success perceived as conditional, and their narratives commodified by others. *Yellowface* powerfully exposes these injustices, making the case that genuine diversity must be more than a branding exercise it must challenge the very structures of neo-colonial exploitation that sustain white supremacy.

### **Quote/Example Analysis**

Throughout *Yellowface*, Kuang uses powerful quotes and narrative moments to critique the performance of racial identity. One particularly striking passage occurs when June reflects on her public image:

"I didn't have to say I was Asian American. I just had to let people *think* it." (Kuang, 2023, p. 143).

This admission captures the insidious nature of racial performance in the novel, where June consciously exploits racial ambiguity for career advancement without facing any of the systemic disadvantages attached to racial minority status.

Another key moment arises when June confronts accusations of theft and racism, defensively stating, "It's not *racist* if I just happen to tell a good story better than someone else could." (Kuang, 2023). This rationalization epitomizes the way privilege blinds individuals to the structural dimensions of racism. June perceives her actions as individual merit rather than understanding them as part of a larger system of racial exploitation, aligning with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) concept of "color-blind racism" where racial inequalities are obscured by appeals to meritocracy. These examples reinforce how *Yellowface* critiques both individual complicity and structural forces in the reproduction of racial hierarchies. Kuang's sharp narrative voice ensures that readers are constantly aware of the ethical violations at play, even as June remains largely oblivious to them.

### **Neo-Colonialism and Cultural Appropriation**

#### **The Neo-Colonial Framework in *Yellowface***

Neo-colonialism, first conceptualized by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), describes the continuation of colonial dynamics after the end of formal imperial rule, primarily through economic, cultural, and ideological domination. In literary and cultural studies, neo-colonialism manifests through the appropriation and commodification of marginalized cultures by dominant powers for financial or social gain. As Huggan (2001) argues, cultural products representing the "exotic" are frequently marketed to satisfy Western desires for difference, often stripping them of political context and authenticity.

R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* situates itself within this critical framework by exposing how racialized narratives, particularly those associated with Asian cultures, are co-opted and exploited by white individuals and industries. The novel's central plot June Hayward's theft and publication of Athena Liu's manuscript serves as a direct allegory for neo-colonial cultural exploitation. Through June's actions and the complicity of the publishing industry, Kuang critiques how power structures persistently capitalize on minority narratives while silencing genuine minority voices.

As Kuang portrays, neo-colonialism today does not always involve overt violence or conquest but instead operates through subtler mechanisms like narrative control, cultural appropriation, and the commodification of diversity. When June rationalizes her theft by claiming she is simply ensuring Athena's story "reaches the world," she echoes the paternalistic justifications colonial powers once used to "civilize" non-Western peoples a telling reproduction of neo-colonial ideology.

### **Exploitation of Asian Culture**

In *Yellow face*, Kuang vividly illustrates the appropriation of Asian specifically Chinese culture by white characters seeking to enhance their professional profiles. June's appropriation of Athena's manuscript, *The Last Front*, which narrates Chinese laborers' experiences during World War I, is particularly significant. June does not merely plagiarize a story; she exploits a history laden with trauma, sacrifice, and erasure for her own advancement.

According to Young (2010), cultural appropriation under neo-colonial conditions involves the dominant culture selectively adopting elements of marginalized cultures while ignoring or distorting their political and historical realities. June's superficial engagement with Chinese history is emblematic of this phenomenon. She does not meaningfully engage with the historical suffering her novel narrates but instead treats it as raw material to be reshaped for her own gain. As June herself admits:

"I didn't even know about Chinese laborers before Athena told me. But now it's my story too, right?" (Kuang, 2023,). This casual assumption of ownership underscores the entitlement that underpins cultural appropriation in neo-colonial contexts.

Furthermore, Kuang's novel critiques how such acts of appropriation often occur without the necessary accountability. June's whiteness shields her from scrutiny even when accusations of theft arise. As Huggan (2001) points out, the global cultural market prizes the appearance of authenticity but rarely questions its production, allowing false claims of cultural belonging to flourish unchecked.

Kuang also shows how the broader culture, including readers and critics, colludes in this exploitation. June is celebrated not for genuine insight into Chinese history but for packaging trauma into a consumable, marketable product a process mirrored in the real-world marketing of "multicultural" literature primarily for white audiences (Saha, 2018).

### **The Role of the Publishing Industry**

The publishing industry in *Yellowface* operates as a neo-colonial apparatus, reinforcing structures of racial exploitation under the guise of promoting diversity. Kuang portrays the industry as eager to capitalize on minority narratives but only when those narratives can be controlled and filtered through acceptable (white) intermediaries.

June's success with *The Last Front* is not simply an individual moral failing but a systemic one. Her publisher eagerly promotes her work, subtly encouraging the ambiguity surrounding her racial identity. As June notes:

"They never said I was Asian American. But they never corrected anyone, either" (Kuang, 2023). This complicity reveals how the publishing industry, like neo-colonial enterprises, profits from the exploitation of racial difference while maintaining the structures that privilege whiteness. As Huggan (2001) and Warner (2015) argue, the cultural industries' pursuit of "diversity" often leads to the commodification of racial narratives, transforming them into marketable goods stripped of political substance. In this context, racialized stories become exotic products designed for white consumption rather than instruments of empowerment for marginalized communities. Kuang's depiction of the publishing industry aligns with this critique, illustrating how superficial gestures toward diversity perpetuate, rather than dismantle, neo-colonial power structures.

Moreover, *Yellowface* shows how the industry's interest in minority voices is conditional and strategic. Athena Liu's success is celebrated largely because her identity as an Asian American woman makes her "marketable" in an industry hungry for multicultural authenticity (real or imagined). However, the industry's failure to protect Athena's legacy after her death allowing June to co-opt her story reveals the hollowness of its professed commitment to diversity.

### **Analysis of Specific Scenes or Interactions**

Several key scenes in *Yellowface* powerfully illustrate the dynamics of neo-colonial cultural appropriation.

One critical moment occurs during the initial publication of *The Last Front*. At the book launch, June is confronted with the uncomfortable reality that many readers and reviewers assume she is Asian American. Yet rather than correcting these assumptions, June leans into them, recognizing their marketing value:

"I realized quickly that no one cared about me. They cared about the story I could sell" (Kuang, 2023). This scene underscores how easily racial narratives can be manipulated for profit within a neo-colonial market structure.

Another important interaction involves June's conversations with her editor and marketing team, who express no concern about the authenticity of her authorship but are instead focused on the optics of diversity. Their primary concern is managing "the narrative" to avoid backlash, not ensuring ethical engagement with marginalized histories. This reflects Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work, where institutions adopt the appearance of inclusion while maintaining exclusionary practices.

Finally, June's social media experiences further reveal the neo-colonial commodification of racial identity. When accusations about her authenticity begin to surface, June is coached to frame her narrative carefully, emphasizing her dedication to "amplifying underrepresented voices" a strategy that ultimately centers herself rather than the marginalized communities she claims to support. As Kuang reveals, even the language of social justice can be co-opted into the service of neo-colonial exploitation.

These scenes collectively demonstrate that cultural appropriation in *yellow face* is not merely an individual moral failure but a systemic issue, embedded within broader neo-colonial structures of power, consumption, and profit.

### **Conclusion**

R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* masterfully critiques the enduring neo-colonial dynamics within the cultural industries, focusing particularly on the commodification of racialized identities and the exploitation of minority narratives. Through the character of June Hayward, the novel highlights how race and identity, especially within Asian American contexts, are performed, manipulated, and commodified for white audiences. June's appropriation of Athena Liu's manuscript not only illustrates individual moral failings but also exposes the broader, systemic exploitation within the publishing industry. This exploitation is framed through a neo-colonial lens, where cultural items from marginalized communities are extracted, sanitized, and sold for profit, perpetuating cycles of racial domination even after the formal end of colonialism.

The novel effectively critiques the ways in which racial and cultural identities are reshaped and repackaged by dominant groups to fit their own agendas. By highlighting the themes of racial performance, cultural appropriation, and the superficial nature of diversity initiatives, Kuang emphasizes the persistence of inequality within seemingly progressive spaces. The publishing industry, in particular, is depicted as complicit in these dynamics, where narratives of racial suffering are commodified to meet market demands, while genuine inclusion remains elusive. The racial and gendered exploitation faced by Asian American women, exemplified through

Athena's marginalization, further underscores the intersectionality of race and gender within cultural industries. Through *Yellow face*, Kuang calls for a more nuanced and accountable engagement with diversity, one that goes beyond tokenism and challenges the neo-colonial structures that continue to shape cultural production.

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