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**AUTHORSHIP, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: A  
PSYCHO-CULTURAL STUDY OF YELLOWFACE BY R. F. KUANG**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang as a significant contemporary text that interrogates the complexities of authorship, cultural appropriation, and identity within the modern publishing industry. Through the character of June Hayward, the novel presents a compelling narrative of literary theft, exposing the ethical dilemmas and psychological conflicts associated with creative ownership. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concepts of defense mechanisms proposed by Sigmund Freud, with cultural identity theory to analyze the protagonist's behavior and the broader socio-cultural context. The analysis reveals how denial, rationalization, and projection operate as psychological strategies that enable the protagonist to justify her actions, while also highlighting the role of institutional structures in shaping narratives of success and authenticity. Furthermore, the paper critiques the commodification of marginalized voices and the performative nature of identity in a media-driven society. By situating the novel within contemporary debates on race, representation, and ethics, the study demonstrates that *Yellowface* transcends its narrative framework to offer a critical commentary on the politics of storytelling. The paper argues that the novel exposes the fragile boundaries between creativity and exploitation, emphasizing the need for ethical accountability in literary production.

**Keywords:**Cultural Appropriation, Identity, Psychoanalysis, Defense Mechanisms, Publishing Industry, Ethics, Narrative Identity

**Introduction**

Contemporary literature has increasingly engaged with complex questions of authorship, identity, and representation, particularly in the context of globalization and digital media. *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang emerges as a provocative and timely text that

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interrogates the ethics of storytelling within the modern publishing industry. The novel narrates the story of June Hayward, an unsuccessful white author who, following the sudden death of her friend Athena Liu, a celebrated Asian American writer, steals her unpublished manuscript and publishes it under her own name. This act of appropriation sets the stage for a compelling exploration of ambition, morality, race, and identity.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on how *Yellowface* reflects contemporary debates surrounding cultural appropriation and the commodification of marginalized voices. In an era where diversity and representation have become central to literary discourse, the novel exposes the contradictions inherent in a system that simultaneously promotes and exploits cultural narratives. The text not only critiques institutional practices but also delves into the psychological processes that enable individuals to justify unethical actions. This research addresses the following questions: How does the novel represent authorship and cultural ownership? What psychological mechanisms shape June's behavior? How does the publishing industry influence identity construction and representation? These questions are crucial in understanding the intersection of individual agency and systemic power structures.

Existing scholarship on contemporary literature has explored themes of race, identity, and representation through frameworks such as postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Thinkers like Stuart Hall have emphasized the fluid and constructed nature of identity, while postcolonial critics have examined the politics of voice and representation. However, there is a notable gap in integrating psychoanalytic perspectives with cultural critique, particularly in the analysis of modern publishing narratives. Most studies focus on external structures rather than internal psychological processes.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining psychoanalysis, cultural theory, and literary analysis. By examining defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, and projection, the study provides a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate ethical dilemmas within a competitive cultural economy. This approach not only enhances the analysis of the novel but also contributes to broader discussions on identity and authorship in contemporary literature.

### **Theoretical Framework And Research Design**

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates psychoanalytic theory, cultural identity theory, and postcolonial criticism. The psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud play a central role in understanding the psychological dimensions of the protagonist's behavior. Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, particularly denial, repression, and rationalization, provides a lens through

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which June's actions can be interpreted. These mechanisms function as strategies employed by the ego to protect the individual from anxiety and guilt, thereby enabling the justification of morally questionable actions.

In addition to psychoanalysis, the study draws upon the cultural identity theory of Stuart Hall, who conceptualizes identity as a dynamic and constructed process. According to Hall, identity is not a fixed essence but is continuously shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing how June constructs and performs her identity within the publishing industry, adopting different personas to align with market expectations. Postcolonial theory further informs the analysis by addressing issues of representation, power, and cultural appropriation. It highlights the asymmetrical relationships between dominant and marginalized groups, emphasizing how narratives are often controlled by those in positions of power. This framework allows for a critical examination of the ethical implications of June's actions, situating them within broader socio-political contexts.

The research design of this study is qualitative and interpretative, focusing on close textual analysis of *Yellowface*. The primary data source is the novel itself, while secondary sources include theoretical texts and scholarly articles on psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and literary criticism. The analysis is structured around key themes such as authorship, identity, appropriation, and psychological conflict.

The methodological approach includes thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and psychoanalytic interpretation. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring motifs and ideas within the text, while narrative analysis examines the structure and perspective of the story, particularly the use of an unreliable narrator. Psychoanalytic interpretation provides insights into the protagonist's internal conflicts and motivations. The study does not involve empirical data collection but relies on textual evidence and theoretical frameworks to support its arguments. This approach is appropriate for literary research, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the text's meanings and implications. However, the study acknowledges the potential limitations of this method, including its reliance on subjective interpretation.

### **Discussion**

The narrative of *Yellowface* offers a complex exploration of authorship as both a creative and ethical construct. June Hayward's appropriation of Athena Liu's manuscript serves as the central events that drives the narrative, raising fundamental questions about ownership and authenticity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, June's actions can be understood as manifestations of defense mechanisms that enable her to cope with feelings of inadequacy and failure. Her initial denial of wrongdoing reflects an unconscious attempt to

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protect her self-image, while her subsequent rationalizations illustrate the ego's effort to justify her behavior.

As the narrative progresses, June's psychological state becomes increasingly unstable. Her growing paranoia and anxiety reveal the internal conflict between her actions and her moral conscience. This aligns with Freud's concept of the superego, which represents the internalized moral standards that regulate behavior. June's inability to reconcile her actions with these standards leads to a *постепенное* disintegration of her identity, highlighting the psychological consequences of ethical transgression.

The theme of cultural appropriation is central to the novel's critique of the publishing industry. June's decision to publish a story rooted in Asian history raises important questions about representation and voice. The novel suggests that cultural narratives cannot be divorced from their creators, as they are shaped by lived experiences and historical contexts. By appropriating Athena's work, June not only erases her friend's voice but also perpetuates a system that marginalizes minority perspectives. The publishing industry is depicted as a space where identity is both constructed and commodified. The demand for diverse narratives creates opportunities for marginalized voices, but it also leads to the exploitation of these narratives for commercial gain. June's success is facilitated by her ability to navigate these dynamics, adopting an identity that aligns with market expectations. This reflects the performative nature of identity in contemporary culture, where authenticity is often secondary to marketability.

The role of social media further complicates the narrative, as it amplifies both support and criticism. June's public persona is constantly scrutinized, highlighting the tension between private identity and public image. The digital sphere becomes a site of both validation and exposure, illustrating the power of collective judgment in shaping individual narratives. This aspect of the novel underscores the importance of visibility in contemporary culture, where success is often determined by public perception.

In comparison with existing literature, *Yellowface* offers a unique contribution by integrating psychological analysis with cultural critique. While previous studies have focused on issues of representation, Kuang's novel provides a deeper exploration of the internal conflicts that accompany acts of appropriation. This dual focus enhances the complexity of the narrative, making it a valuable text for interdisciplinary research. However, the study is not without limitations. The analysis is primarily based on textual interpretation and does not incorporate empirical data or reader-response perspectives. Future research could explore how readers perceive the novel's themes or compare it with other

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contemporary works that address similar issues. Additionally, further studies could examine the role of digital media in shaping literary culture and identity.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of *Yellowface* demonstrates that the novel is a significant cultural text that engages with complex issues of authorship, identity, and cultural appropriation. Through the character of June Hayward, the narrative explores the psychological mechanisms that sustain unethical behavior, revealing the interplay between individual desire and systemic structures. The study revisits its research questions by establishing that authorship in the novel is depicted as a performative and contested construct, shaped by both individual agency and institutional dynamics. Psychological defense mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping the protagonist's actions, highlighting the importance of internal processes in understanding ethical behavior. The publishing industry is critiqued as a space of both opportunity and exploitation, reflecting broader societal tensions.

The implications of this research are significant for contemporary literary studies, as it emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychological and cultural analysis. The study contributes to ongoing debates about representation and ethics, offering new insights into the complexities of modern storytelling. In conclusion, *Yellowface* serves as a powerful commentary on the dynamics of contemporary literary culture, challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions about creativity, ownership, and identity. Its relevance extends beyond literature, reflecting broader societal concerns about race, privilege, and authenticity.

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