



Narrating The Other: Cultural Appropriation and Misrepresentation in Yellowface by R. F. Kuang

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-02 Revised: 2026-08-03 Accepted: 2026-09-06 Keywords: <i>Othering, cultural appropriation; misrepresentation; Asian; representation.</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.10982 Corresponding Author: Angelia Arianti Pratama angeliaprtm@gmail.com English Literature, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang	<i>Cultural representation in literary works is not merely a reflection of reality but also a site where identity, power relations, and social meanings are constructed. This study examines the representation of Asian identity through the concept of yellowface, focusing on how racial stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations are produced and negotiated in literary narratives. Using a qualitative approach with textual analysis, this research analyzes selected literary works that portray Asian characters through racialized representations. The analysis is guided by theories of representation, orientalism, and cultural identity to explore how yellowface operates as a mechanism that reinforces unequal cultural relations. The findings reveal that yellowface representations construct Asian identities through stereotypical visual, behavioral, and cultural markers that reduce diverse Asian experiences into simplified and exoticized images. These representations not only reproduce historical patterns of racial hierarchy but also influence how Asian identities are perceived within dominant cultural discourse. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that yellowface functions as a form of cultural appropriation in which dominant groups maintain representational authority while limiting the agency of marginalized identities. This study contributes to literary and cultural studies by highlighting the importance of examining representation as a political and ideological process rather than merely an artistic choice. By critically analyzing yellowface, this research emphasizes the need for more inclusive and culturally responsible approaches to representing Asian identities in literary works..</i>

1. Introduction

Cultural representation has become one of the central concerns in contemporary literary studies because literature not only reflects social reality but also shapes public understanding of identity, culture, and power. Rather than functioning as an objective reflection of reality, literary representation is socially and ideologically constructed through language, discourse, and institutional power. According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation is the process through which meaning is produced and communicated using language, signs, and cultural practices. Consequently, literary texts do not merely portray individuals or communities but actively construct particular understandings of them within specific cultural and historical contexts. Hall, Evans, and Nixon (2013) further argue that meaning is never fixed but is continually negotiated according to cultural context, social values, and relations of power (Lestari, 2025). This perspective suggests that cultural representation is inseparable from questions of authority, legitimacy, and whose perspective is privileged in constructing a narrative.

While Hall's theory explains how representation produces meaning, postcolonial criticism further demonstrates that representation is also a mechanism through which unequal power relations are maintained. One of the most influential concepts in this regard is Edward Said's concept of *The Other*, which explains how dominant groups construct particular communities as fundamentally different from themselves (Said, 1979). Othering is therefore not merely a process of identifying difference, but a discursive practice that positions certain identities as peripheral, inferior, or culturally "different" from the dominant norm. Within this framework, dominant identities become normalized and universal, whereas marginalized identities are continuously marked by their difference.

This argument is further supported by whiteness studies. Frankenberg (1993) explains that whiteness often functions as an invisible social norm, allowing white identity to remain unmarked while other racial identities become highly visible. Likewise, Dyer (1997) argues that the normalization of whiteness enables dominant perspectives to define legitimacy, authority, and cultural value. Together, these perspectives provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how cultural representation is closely intertwined with power relations in literary texts.

These unequal power relations become particularly significant within the contemporary publishing industry, where decisions concerning publication, authorship, and cultural legitimacy are influenced not only by literary quality but also by market considerations and institutional authority. Although globalization has enabled literary works to circulate across national and cultural boundaries, it has also intensified pressures to simplify or reshape cultural narratives for wider commercial audiences (Narasimharaju, 2021; Sireșteanu, 2024). Publishers frequently seek narratives that emphasize diversity because of their commercial appeal; however, this process may also encourage the commodification of cultural identity and the simplification of complex historical experiences (Marfinda & Istiani, 2026; Saha & Van Lente, 2022).

Within this context, cultural appropriation emerges when individuals or institutions adopt cultural narratives that do not belong to them without adequately recognizing their historical, social, or political significance (Insyira, 2022). Such practices often contribute to cultural misrepresentation, whereby cultures are simplified, stereotyped, or detached from their original meanings, ultimately producing distorted understandings among readers (Hall, 1997; Kendall, 2002). Rather than representing isolated phenomena, othering, cultural appropriation, and misrepresentation frequently operate as interconnected processes shaped by broader structures of cultural power.

Recent scholarship on R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* has examined the novel from various perspectives, including racial identity, psychological conflict, publishing practices, and media representation (Azzahra, 2025a; Dawson, 2025; Devi & Panmei, 2024). These studies consistently demonstrate that the novel critiques contemporary publishing culture and racial politics. Other scholars have also explored power relations, white privilege, and identity negotiation within the novel (Rifqi, 2025; Kaimuddin, 2024; Jannah et al., 2025).

However, most previous studies examine these issues independently, focusing either on racial identity, psychological motivation, or publishing ethics without explaining how othering functions as the initial mechanism that enables cultural appropriation and subsequently produces cultural misrepresentation. Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by integrating Edward Said's concept of *The Other* with the concepts of cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and white superiority to explain how unequal power relations shape narrative ownership and cultural representation in contemporary publishing.

R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* provides a particularly relevant context for examining these issues because the novel explicitly foregrounds questions of authorship, narrative ownership, cultural representation, and publishing ethics within the contemporary literary industry. Rather than portraying cultural conflict solely through interactions between different ethnic groups, the novel critically exposes how publishing institutions participate in legitimizing particular voices while marginalizing others. The narrative follows June Hayward, a white author who appropriates the unfinished manuscript of her deceased Asian colleague, Athena Liu, and subsequently publishes it under her own name (Azzahra, 2025b).

Through this premise, *Yellowface* illustrates that cultural appropriation extends beyond the unauthorized use of another person's work; it also involves the appropriation of cultural authority, historical experience, and the right to narrate marginalized identities. As the manuscript undergoes editorial revision and commercialization, the novel further demonstrates how institutional power contributes to reshaping cultural narratives in ways that privilege marketability over historical and cultural authenticity (Park, 2023).

Although previous studies have examined racial identity, psychological conflict, publishing practices, and issues of authorship in *Yellowface*, limited attention has been given to the sequential relationship among othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation within a single postcolonial analytical framework. Likewise, the role of white superiority in legitimizing particular narratives while marginalizing others remains insufficiently explored. Accordingly, this study argues that these concepts should not be understood as separate phenomena but as interconnected processes through which unequal power relations shape cultural representation in contemporary publishing.

Based on this research gap, the present study addresses the following research questions. 1) How is Asian identity constructed as *The Other* in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface*?, 2) How does the process of othering facilitate cultural appropriation in the novel?, 3) How does cultural appropriation subsequently contribute to cultural misrepresentation within the context of contemporary publishing?

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the sequential relationship among othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* by employing Edward Said's concept of *The Other* as the principal analytical framework, supported by the concepts of cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and white superiority. Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss these issues separately, this research integrates the four concepts within a single analytical framework to demonstrate how narrative ownership, cultural legitimacy, and publishing institutions collectively shape the production and circulation of cultural representation. By doing so, this study extends

existing scholarship on *Yellowface* while contributing to postcolonial literary criticism through a more comprehensive explanation of how power relations influence authorship, representation, and the construction of cultural narratives in contemporary literature.

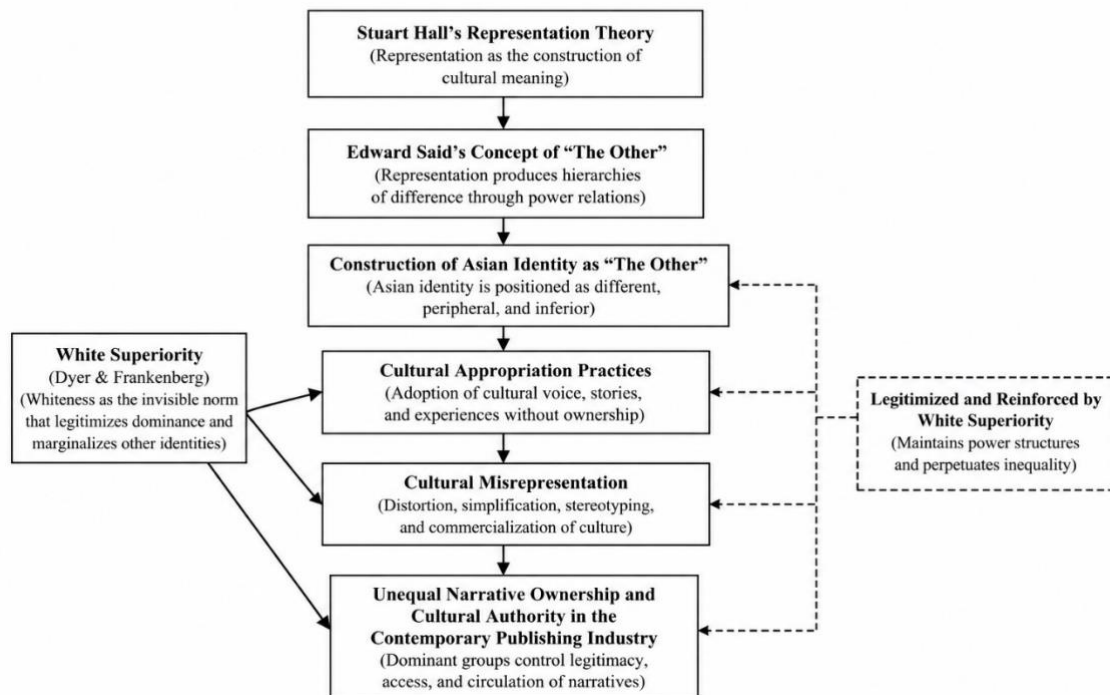


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a postcolonial approach to examine the representation of othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface*. This approach was selected because the study aims to interpret cultural representations, identity construction, and power relations embedded within the novel's narrative rather than to generate numerical findings. Specifically, the research investigates how Asian identity is constructed as "The Other", how cultural appropriation is represented through the protagonist's actions, and how these practices ultimately contribute to cultural misrepresentation. By adopting a postcolonial perspective, the study examines how narrative ownership and cultural representation are shaped by unequal power relations within the contemporary publishing industry.

Data Collection

The primary data source of this study is R. F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface* (2023). The data consist of textual excerpts, including dialogues, narrative descriptions, characterization, and plot developments that are relevant to the representation of cultural identity, relationships between characters, and the appropriation and transformation of cultural narratives. Data were collected using the close reading technique. The novel was read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure and ideological dimensions. Through this process, textual excerpts relevant to the research objectives were identified, highlighted, documented, and organized systematically.

The selection of textual excerpts employed purposive sampling. Only passages that fulfilled the following criteria were included in the analysis: (1) excerpts representing the construction of Asian identity as The Other; (2) excerpts illustrating acts of cultural appropriation; (3) excerpts showing forms of cultural misrepresentation; and (4) excerpts revealing unequal power relations associated with white superiority in the publishing

industry. Passages that did not directly address these analytical categories were excluded to maintain analytical focus and coherence.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through four stages. First, the selected textual excerpts were coded according to the dominant issue represented in each passage. The coding process classified the data into four analytical categories: othering (OTH), cultural appropriation (CAP), cultural misrepresentation (MIS), and white superiority (WS). This initial coding enabled the researcher to organize the textual evidence systematically before interpretation. Second, the coded excerpts were categorized by identifying recurring thematic patterns across different parts of the novel. Rather than examining quotations individually, this stage allowed the researcher to understand how similar representations repeatedly appeared throughout the narrative and how they collectively constructed broader cultural meanings. Third, each category was interpreted using the corresponding theoretical framework. Edward Said's concept of *The Other* was employed to examine how Asian identity is constructed as culturally different and positioned outside the dominant norm.

The concept of cultural appropriation was applied to analyze June Hayward's appropriation of Athena Liu's authorship, cultural voice, and historical experience. The concept of cultural misrepresentation was used to examine how editorial intervention, narrative modification, and historical simplification altered the original cultural meanings. White superiority was not treated as an independent analytical category but as a structural lens explaining why dominant perspectives gained greater legitimacy within the publishing industry and facilitated the processes of othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation.

Finally, the interpreted findings were synthesized to explain the sequential relationship among the three principal analytical themes. This synthesis demonstrates that othering functions as the initial process that enables cultural appropriation, which subsequently produces cultural misrepresentation under the structural influence of white superiority.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the researcher conducted repeated close readings throughout the research process to ensure interpretative consistency. The interpretation of textual excerpts was continuously compared with the selected theoretical framework and relevant previous studies to minimize subjective bias. This procedure ensured that the findings were grounded in both textual evidence and established postcolonial scholarship.

Table 1. Coding Framework

Code	Analytical Theme	Theoretical Concept	Analytical Focus
OTH	Othering	Edward Said (1979)	Construction of Asian identity as <i>The Other</i>
CAP	Cultural Appropriation	Cultural Appropriation	Appropriation of authorship, cultural voice, and historical narrative
MIS	Cultural Misrepresentation	Misrepresentation	Distortion and simplification of cultural narratives
WS	White Superiority	Dyer (1997); Frankenberg (1993)	Structural legitimacy and narrative ownership

3. Result

The findings demonstrate that the representation of Asian identity in *Yellowface* develops through three interconnected processes: othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation. Rather than functioning independently, these processes reinforce one another through unequal power relations embedded within the contemporary publishing industry. This study also identifies white superiority as the underlying ideological framework that legitimizes whose narratives are considered authentic, universal, and commercially valuable. Accordingly, the findings are presented in three analytical themes that explain how Asian identity is first constructed as "the Other," subsequently appropriated, and ultimately transformed into cultural misrepresentation.

1. *The Representation of the Othering Process of Asian Identity in the Novel*

The analysis shows that the process of othering is primarily constructed through June Hayward's perspective, where Asian identity is consistently positioned as culturally different rather than socially equal. Instead of appearing through explicit racial discrimination, othering operates subtly by normalizing unequal assumptions about cultural value and identity. Athena Liu is repeatedly represented through racialized labels, cultural symbolism, and commercial appeal rather than being recognized solely for her literary ability. This reflects Edward Said's concept of *The Other*, whereby dominant groups define minority identities through difference while simultaneously maintaining authority over how those identities are represented.

"Athena's star power is so obviously not about the writing... a perfect combination of the classical and exotic." (Kuang, 2023, p.4)

Rather than recognizing Athena's literary competence, June attributes her success to the racialized image attached to her identity. The word *exotic* is particularly significant because it transforms cultural difference into an aesthetic and commercial asset. From Said's perspective, this illustrates how minority identities are appreciated primarily for their difference rather than accepted as equal. Consequently, Athena's identity becomes valuable because it satisfies dominant expectations of cultural diversity instead of being appreciated on its own terms.

"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—." (Kuang, 2023, p.4)

This quotation demonstrates that othering extends beyond interpersonal perception into institutional practice. Diversity is presented less as genuine recognition of marginalized identities than as a commercial strategy that increases market appeal. Consequently, cultural difference becomes a form of symbolic capital within the publishing industry. Rather than challenging unequal power relations, diversity is commodified, allowing publishers to benefit from minority identities while maintaining dominant standards of legitimacy.

"Athena a beautiful, Yale—educated, international, ambiguously queer woman of color—has been chosen by the Powers That Be." (Kuang, 2023, p.4)

Athena's identity is constructed through multiple intersecting categories, including race, gender, education, and sexuality. Rather than functioning as neutral descriptors, these labels position her within a hierarchy determined by institutional power. The phrase "chosen by the Powers That Be" further indicates that legitimacy is granted by dominant cultural institutions rather than emerging naturally from literary merit. This illustrates that identity itself becomes regulated through systems of cultural authority.

"Meanwhile, I'm just brown-eyed, brown-haired June Hayward, from Philly—and no matter how hard I work, or how well I write, I'll never be Athena Liu." (Kuang, 2023, p.4)

This passage illustrates that othering depends not only on marking minority identities but also on leaving dominant identities unmarked. June perceives herself as "ordinary" because whiteness functions as the implicit social norm rather than as a visible racial identity. This finding is better understood through Dyer's (1997) concept of white superiority, which explains how whiteness acquires authority by presenting itself as neutral and universal while positioning other identities as culturally specific. Athena's identity therefore becomes highly visible because it is continuously racialized, whereas June's identity remains invisible precisely because it occupies the dominant position.

"...I can only take so much pungent Chinese food and old people who can't or won't speak in English." (Kuang, 2023, p.19)

Othering is further normalized through everyday cultural practices. June's negative response to Chinese food and language reflects an ethnocentric perspective in which English-speaking Western culture is treated as the standard of normality. The adjective pungent does not merely describe food but implicitly associates Chinese culture with discomfort and unfamiliarity. Likewise, June's criticism of non-English speakers demonstrates how linguistic difference is interpreted as cultural deficiency rather than cultural diversity. This passage therefore illustrates how everyday assumptions reproduce unequal cultural hierarchies without requiring explicit racial hostility.

"... 'If anything, it's easier now than ever to be Asian in the industry'..." (Kuang, 2023, p.69)

"... 'Diversity is what's selling right now. Editors are hungry for marginalized voices. You'll get plenty of opportunities for being different, Emmy...' (Kuang, 2023, p.69)

These statements reveal that othering is reinforced by the commercial logic of the publishing industry. Asian identity is recognized not solely because of increased cultural inclusivity but because diversity has become economically valuable. The novel therefore portrays identity as a market commodity whose legitimacy depends on its commercial potential. Although this creates greater visibility for marginalized writers, such visibility remains conditional because acceptance is determined by market demand rather than by equal cultural recognition. Consequently, diversity functions simultaneously as an opportunity and a mechanism of commodification.

Taken together, these textual examples demonstrate that othering in *Yellowface* extends beyond interpersonal prejudice to become an institutional mechanism governing cultural legitimacy. Asian identity is constructed as visible, marketable, and culturally distinct, while whiteness remains the unmarked norm against which difference is measured. This unequal positioning subsequently creates the conditions that enable cultural appropriation, discussed in the following section.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that othering in *Yellowface* extends beyond individual prejudice to become an institutional mechanism through which cultural legitimacy is produced. Asian identity is consistently constructed as visible, marketable, and culturally distinct, while whiteness remains the invisible norm against which difference is measured. This unequal positioning creates the conditions under which June later assumes the authority to appropriate Athena's narrative. Accordingly, the process of othering becomes the foundation upon which cultural appropriation subsequently develops.

2. *Cultural Appropriation Practices by the Main Character*

The findings indicate that cultural appropriation in *Yellowface* extends beyond the unauthorized use of another author's manuscript. June appropriates not only Athena Liu's literary work but also her cultural authority, historical perspective, and narrative ownership. Rather than recognizing the boundaries between authorship and cultural experience, June gradually constructs the belief that she possesses the legitimacy to reinterpret and publish a story rooted in experiences that are not her own. The analysis therefore demonstrates that cultural appropriation in the novel involves the transfer of narrative authority from the original cultural subject to a more socially privileged narrator.

"I know you won't believe me, but there was never a moment when I thought to myself, I'm going to take this and make it mine." (Kuang, 2023, p.21)

June initially frames her actions as accidental rather than intentional, allowing her to distance herself from the ethical implications of appropriation. This self-justification reflects a common characteristic of cultural appropriation, whereby dominant subjects reinterpret acts of cultural possession as legitimate participation rather than unauthorized ownership. Consequently, the narrative demonstrates that appropriation often begins through moral rationalization rather than explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

"...—it felt natural, like this was my calling, like it was divinely ordained. Once I got started, it felt like it was the most obvious thing in the world that I should complete, then polish Athena's story." (Kuang, 2023, p.21)

By describing the appropriation as "natural" and even "divinely ordained," June transforms an act of unauthorized possession into a morally acceptable responsibility. The language of destiny enables her to replace Athena's authorship with her own while avoiding ethical accountability. This finding suggests that cultural appropriation is frequently legitimized through narratives of entitlement, in which privileged individuals perceive themselves as more capable of preserving or improving another group's cultural narrative.

"...I don't have written evidence that Athena wanted me to finish the book—though I'm sure that's what she would have preferred, since what writer wants their work to languish in obscurity?" (Kuang, 2023, p.22)

The absence of Athena's explicit consent does not prevent June from assuming interpretive authority over the manuscript. Instead, she constructs a hypothetical justification that benefits her own interests. This illustrates how cultural appropriation frequently relies on speculative legitimacy rather than genuine authorization. Narrative

ownership is therefore redefined according to the appropriator's assumptions instead of respecting the intentions of the original creator.

"And so what if it was stolen? So what if I lifted it wholesale?" (Kuang, 2023, p.26)

This quotation marks a significant shift from denial to normalization. Rather than rejecting the accusation of theft, June minimizes its ethical significance by treating ownership as secondary to literary success. The normalization of unauthorized possession demonstrates how unequal power relations enable dominant individuals to redefine ethical boundaries according to their own interests.

"And fuck it, I'll just say it: taking Athena's manuscript felt like reparations, payback for the things that Athena took from me." (Kuang, 2023, p.28)

June further legitimizes appropriation by reframing it as personal compensation for perceived professional injustice. This rhetorical strategy shifts attention away from Athena's ownership and toward June's own frustrations. The novel therefore demonstrates that cultural appropriation is sustained not only by unequal power but also by narratives of victimhood that allow privileged individuals to justify the acquisition of marginalized voices.

The appropriation portrayed in the novel extends beyond textual copying to include the transformation of cultural meaning. By revising Athena's manuscript according to her own perspective and editorial expectations, June gradually replaces the original historical and cultural context with interpretations that better align with dominant publishing preferences. This process demonstrates that cultural appropriation involves not only the transfer of authorship but also the transfer of interpretive authority.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that this appropriation is institutionally enabled. Editors and publishers prioritize marketability over narrative authenticity, thereby legitimizing June's authority while overlooking the cultural origins of the story. June's position as a white author provides greater institutional credibility, illustrating how white superiority operates not simply as individual prejudice but as a structural mechanism that determines whose narratives are considered legitimate. Consequently, cultural appropriation in *Yellowface* emerges as both an individual action and an institutional practice supported by unequal cultural power.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that cultural appropriation in *Yellowface* is inseparable from unequal systems of narrative authority. Once June acquires the power to reinterpret Athena's experiences, the original cultural perspective is gradually displaced by a dominant interpretation that appears more legitimate within the publishing industry. This transfer of narrative authority subsequently produces cultural misrepresentation, which is examined in the following section.

3. *Cultural Misrepresentation in Narratives*

Cultural misrepresentation in *Yellowface* does not occur through direct falsification alone, but through a gradual process of narrative transformation. After acquiring Athena Liu's manuscript, June Hayward does not merely complete the unfinished work; she modifies its historical context, character portrayals, and cultural meanings according to her own perspective and the expectations of the publishing industry. Therefore, misrepresentation in the novel operates through the alteration, simplification, and

commercialization of cultural narratives, causing the original experiences represented in Athena's manuscript to lose their historical and cultural significance.

One significant form of cultural misrepresentation appears through the simplification of historical narratives. The novel demonstrates that removing historical contexts from marginalized experiences can alter readers' understanding of the cultural and political conditions underlying those experiences.

"The pacing really flags here, reads Daniella's comment. Do we need all this context about the Treaty of Versailles? Seems out of place—focus is not Chinese geopolitics, surely?" (Kuang, 2023, p.32)

This editorial comment illustrates how historical knowledge connected to marginalized experiences is treated as excessive rather than essential. Although the Treaty of Versailles provides important historical context for understanding the experiences of Chinese laborers, the editorial process positions this background as unnecessary for the narrative. Through this modification, the novel reveals how publishing practices may prioritize narrative accessibility and commercial appeal over preserving historical complexity. In terms of representation, removing such context does not simply shorten the story; it changes the meaning attached to the cultural experience being represented.

The removal of historical context consequently produces a fragmented representation of Chinese laborers' experiences. Readers encounter the consequences of historical events without access to the social and political conditions that produced them. Although such simplification may make the narrative more accessible to broader audiences, it reduces the complexity of the represented culture and weakens the connection between individual experiences and their historical circumstances. Therefore, misrepresentation occurs not only through inaccurate portrayals but also through the absence of essential cultural meanings.

"The last forty pages read more like a history paper than a gripping wartime narrative...Athena did always have such a didactic streak." (Kuang, 2023, p.32)

This statement demonstrates how Athena's attempt to preserve historical explanation is interpreted as a narrative weakness. The description of her writing as "didactic" reflects the assumption that historical depth reduces literary effectiveness. However, Athena's detailed explanation functions as a strategy to maintain historical awareness and cultural memory. By removing these elements, June transforms a historically grounded narrative into a more commercially acceptable story, resulting in the reduction of cultural specificity.

Cultural misrepresentation also occurs through changes in character relationships, particularly when complex historical conflicts are transformed into more simplified interpersonal narratives.

"Athena's original draft didn't include the kiss. In her version, Annie was a sheltered, fidgety girl who thought the laborers were dirty, frightening thugs. Athena's Annie told the men a frigid "Merry Christmas" and left the biscuits at the edge of the barbed-wire enclosure, then skirted timidly away like the men were dogs that would break free of their leashes and maul her to death if given the chance" (Kuang, 2023, p.73)

In Athena's version, the relationship between Annie and the Chinese laborers reflects the social tensions and racial hierarchy of the historical period. Although the portrayal presents uncomfortable aspects of prejudice and inequality, these elements are significant

because they represent the historical conditions experienced by marginalized groups. Therefore, the removal of such tensions changes not only the tone of the narrative but also the cultural meaning attached to the historical relationship.

"Annie Waters—a character I'd expanded from Athena's draft, the seventeen-year-old daughter of YMCA missionaries—visits the laborers' camp alone to hand out Bibles and Christmas biscuits. The men, who haven't seen their wives or any women of their kind in months, understandably ogle over her. She's blonde, slim, and pretty; of course they can't get enough of her. One asks if he can kiss her on the cheek, and since it's Christmastime, she bashfully permits it." (Kuang, 2023, p.73)

However, when June changed this part, the tone of the story changed completely. The relationship, which had before felt tense, became warm and took on a 'romantic' tone. While this change certainly makes the story feel lighter, it also causes a key conflict in the narrative to disappear. Consequently, readers cannot see the social inequalities of that time, because June makes it the relationship between the Chinese laborers and the white people is perfectly fine. The same also applies to the portrayal of the other white characters.

"We also soften some of the white characters. No, it's not as bad as you think. Athena's original text is almost embarrassingly biased; the French and British soldiers are cartoonishly racist. I get she's trying to make a point about discrimination within the Allied front, but these scenes, are so hackneyed that they defy belief. It throws the reader out of the story. Instead we switch one of the white bullies to a Chinese character, and one of the more vocal Chinese laborers to a sympathetic white farmer. This adds the complexity, the humanistic nuance that perhaps Athena was too close to the project to see." (Kuang, 2023, p.31)

A character who was initially portrayed clearly as a racist is now seen as an exaggeration. Yet, in reality, such things have actually happened in history. While toning down the character does make the story seem more 'balanced', it can actually obscure the truth.

Through this modification, June alters the structure of historical responsibility by shifting the representation of violence away from dominant groups and toward marginalized characters. This change affects readers' interpretation of power relations because it obscures the historical position of victimhood and oppression experienced by Chinese laborers. Consequently, misrepresentation occurs through the rearrangement of narrative power relations rather than through simple factual inaccuracy. This is not just a minor change; instead, it will have a significant impact on the shift in meaning throughout the entire story.

"In the original draft, several laborers are driven to suicide by their mistreatment at the hands of the British, and one man hangs himself in the captain's dugout. The captain, upon finding the body, tells an interpreter to order the rest of the laborers to hang themselves in their own dugouts if they must, for "We don't like such a mess in ours." This whole scene, apparently, was lifted straight from the historical record—Athena's copy had handwritten notes in the margin emphasizing: COMMENT ON IN ACKNOWLEDGMENTS— CAN'T MAKE THIS SHIT UP. MY GOD." (Kuang, 2023, p.31)

This scene is actually based on historical facts, which means it is important to preserve it. However, these scenes are once again misrepresented, with the story that should have been presented to readers being omitted instead.

"It's a powerful scene, and I felt a curdle of horror when I read it for the first time. But Daniella thinks it's too over the top. I get that they're army men, and they're uncouth, but this feels like tragedy porn, she comments. Cut for pacing?" (Kuang, 2023, p.32)

The term 'tragedy porn' here implies that if a scene is considered too heavy for readers, then the suffering does not need to be shown. However, this is actually the part that illustrates the severity of the conditions experienced by Chinese laborers at that time. When this part is removed, the historical and emotional impact that readers should experience is also lost.

"The new version is a universally relatable story, a story that anyone can see themselves in."
(Kuang, 2023, p.33)

Finally, misrepresentation emerges through June's attempt to create a "universally relatable story." Although universalization may increase accessibility, the process often requires reducing culturally specific experiences into generalized narratives. In *Yellowface*, this strategy removes elements that define the historical and cultural uniqueness of Athena's manuscript. As a result, a narrative rooted in a particular Asian historical experience is transformed into a broader story designed to appeal to dominant readership expectations.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation operate as interconnected processes rather than independent phenomena. The representation of Asian identity in *Yellowface* is not produced solely through the content of the narrative but also through the unequal distribution of authority over who is allowed to represent a particular culture. As Hall, Evans, and Nixon (2013) explain, representation involves the production of meaning through cultural and social processes. Therefore, when Asian identity is positioned as "the Other," its cultural experiences become more vulnerable to reinterpretation by dominant groups. In the novel, this condition enables June Hayward to assume authority over Athena Liu's manuscript and reconstruct a cultural narrative that does not originate from her own experience (Frankenberg, 1993).

Furthermore, this study reveals that cultural misrepresentation is not solely produced through individual decisions but is also supported by institutional structures. June's position as a white author provides her with greater cultural legitimacy within the publishing industry, allowing her modified version of Athena's narrative to receive recognition despite substantial changes to its original meaning. This finding corresponds with Dyer's (1997) argument that whiteness often operates as an invisible norm through which authority and universality are constructed. Similarly, Frankenberg (1993) explains that whiteness functions as a social position that provides privileges in defining knowledge and cultural value. Therefore, June's appropriation is not successful merely because she takes Athena's manuscript, but because institutional structures allow her interpretation to appear more acceptable and marketable (Devi, N. B., & Panmei, 2024).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research examining racial representation in *Yellowface*, particularly studies demonstrating that Asian identity is frequently constructed through notions of difference, uniqueness, and exoticism (Azzahra, 2025). However, this study extends previous discussions by demonstrating that such representations do not stop at the level of identity construction. Instead, the production of

Asian identity as “different” creates conditions through which cultural narratives become vulnerable to appropriation and transformation.

Thus, othering functions not only as a representational process but also as a mechanism that enables unequal control over cultural narratives. Previous studies have also examined June’s psychological motivations, emphasizing factors such as ambition, insecurity, and the desire for recognition (Dawson, 2025). While these motivations contribute to understanding June’s actions, this study argues that her appropriation cannot be explained solely through individual psychology. The broader issue lies in the cultural and institutional conditions that enable her actions to gain legitimacy. By focusing on structural power relations, this study demonstrates that appropriation becomes possible when dominant subjects possess greater authority to define, modify, and circulate narratives belonging to marginalized groups (Dawson, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands Said’s concept of *The Other* by demonstrating how othering influences not only the perception of identity but also the control of cultural representation. In *Yellowface*, Asian identity is simultaneously valued and marginalized: it is considered attractive within diversity-oriented publishing markets, yet remains positioned as culturally different from the dominant norm. This contradictory position illustrates that visibility does not necessarily guarantee equal representation. Instead, marginalized identities may become commercially valuable while still lacking authority over how their experiences are narrated.

This study demonstrates that ‘othering’ is not only about the labelling of identities, but can also develop into appropriation and misrepresentation (Abbas, A., Mehmood, A., & Anwar, 2025). The concept of white superiority further explains why June’s version of the narrative receives greater acceptance than Athena’s original account. Because whiteness often operates as an unmarked standard of universality (Dyer, 1997), June’s perspective is perceived as more accessible and commercially appropriate. Consequently, the publishing system does not merely evaluate narratives based on literary content but also through existing assumptions regarding whose voices are considered universal, credible, and marketable. This condition contributes directly to cultural misrepresentation because narratives from marginalized communities are adjusted according to dominant expectations. This is precisely why Asian cultural experiences are often changed when narrated by those in a more dominant position (Jannah, M. S. R., Devi, R., & Ferdinal, 2025).

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that cultural representation is shaped not only by what stories contain but also by who possesses the authority to narrate them. In *Yellowface*, the transformation of Athena’s manuscript illustrates that changing a narrative perspective can also transform its historical meaning, cultural context, and representation of marginalized experiences.

Therefore, othering, cultural appropriation, and misrepresentation should be understood as interconnected processes produced through unequal relations of narrative power. This study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by showing that contemporary publishing practices may reproduce cultural inequalities even while promoting diversity and inclusion. Consequently, this study emphasizes that othering, cultural appropriation and misrepresentation are not isolated phenomena, but are interrelated and influenced by power dynamics (Kaimuddin, 2024). This study also demonstrates that diversity in literature does not always receive fair representation, as in some cases diversity is only used as part of a market strategy without a genuine understanding of the experiences of that culture.

5. Conclusion

Cultural representation in literature is never entirely neutral because it is shaped by the author's perspective, relations of power, and institutional structures involved in the production and circulation of narratives. This study demonstrates that questions of representation are not limited to what a story depicts, but also concern who possesses the authority to construct, modify, and distribute cultural narratives. Through R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface*, this research shows that narrative legitimacy within contemporary publishing is influenced by unequal power relations that determine which voices are recognized as authentic and valuable.

This study reveals that othering functions as the initial mechanism through which Asian identity is constructed as different, distinctive, and commercially valuable within the publishing industry. However, such visibility does not necessarily result in equal recognition. Instead, Asian identity remains positioned as an object of interpretation controlled by dominant perspectives. Consequently, othering creates the conditions that allow marginalized cultural experiences to become vulnerable to appropriation by individuals who possess greater social and institutional authority.

The study further demonstrates that cultural appropriation in *Yellowface* involves more than the unauthorized acquisition of Athena Liu's manuscript. June appropriates not only literary ownership but also cultural authority and the right to determine how another group's historical experiences should be represented. Her belief that she has improved or "saved" Athena's work illustrates how appropriation can be justified through assumptions of superiority and interpretive entitlement. Therefore, cultural appropriation operates through unequal relations of power, where dominant individuals gain the ability to redefine marginalized narratives according to their own perspectives.

Moreover, this study finds that cultural appropriation subsequently produces cultural misrepresentation through the transformation of narrative meaning. After acquiring Athena's manuscript, June modifies historical contexts, character relationships, and representations of oppression to create a version that aligns with dominant publishing expectations. These changes do not merely affect the form of the story but also alter the cultural meanings attached to the experiences being represented. Therefore, misrepresentation does not only emerge through inaccurate descriptions; it can also occur through gradual processes of simplification, omission, and commercialization that remove the complexity of marginalized histories.

Overall, this study concludes that othering, cultural appropriation, and cultural misrepresentation constitute a connected process through which unequal power relations shape cultural representation in *Yellowface*. The novel illustrates that dominant groups may obtain greater authority to narrate and redefine marginalized experiences, particularly when institutional systems provide legitimacy to their interpretations. By examining the relationship between identity construction, narrative ownership, and representation, this study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by demonstrating that diversity in literature does not automatically guarantee equitable representation. Instead, meaningful representation requires attention to whose voices are authorized, whose histories are preserved, and whose perspectives shape cultural narratives.

6. References

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