
Applying Critical Race Theory to Racially-Mixed Asian-Americans Depicted in Kevin Kwan's *Sex and Vanity*

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ABSTRACT

Michele Yeoh, being the first Asian actress to win an Oscar, might be taken as the model minority, despite Asian immigrants receiving inhumane treatment suspending them from citizenship. Marriage was encouraged to be a US citizen, giving birth to Eurasian children, who can be confused by their parents' racial differences. They neither have a connection to their parents nor acceptance from either of their parents' races. This in-between dynamic is explored in Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* through Lucie Churchill, whose mother is Asian and father was white. Her life is filled with biracial discrimination. This article was researched by applying four theories: Post-nationalist American Studies; Critical Race Theory; Blank, Dabady and Citro's discrimination types; and Aguirre and Turner's reaction types. The findings show that most discrimination types are subtle, unconscious, automatic discrimination, and most reaction types are spontaneous ones. The discrimination and reactions are less vulgar because the upper class apprehends racism in the forms of intentional, explicit discrimination, e.g., physical attack and extermination, are unforgivable. The conclusion drawn is that nonextreme forms still damage mixed-race individuals. This article then argues that identity construction crisscrosses how one identifies himself or herself and how others identify him or her.

Keywords: *biracial discrimination; Eurasian; identity; popular fiction; romance*

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INTRODUCTION

At the 2023 Academy Awards, Michelle Yeoh, a Malaysian actress, won an Oscar for 'Best Actress in a Leading Role' for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* -- a movie about a Chinese immigrant in the US. She is the first Asian actor to win the prestigious category in the 95 years the ceremony has been held (Specter, 2023). This victory might be taken as the peak of the stereotype of Asian descendants in the US as a model minority.

In actuality, since the Chinese Great Migration in the mid-1800s, immigrants from China to the US have often received inhumane treatment, both by society and the state. One of them was the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This law specifically suspended immigration for Asian immigrants. Therefore, it was impossible for them to obtain citizenship status in the US (Wu, 2023). The only way to become a US citizen at that time was through marriage, as encouraged by the Mixed Marriage Policy of 1942 (Pree, 2019, 64).

Marriages between white and Asian people give birth to

mixed-race children, also called 'Eurasian', a portmanteau of 'European' and 'Asian'. Although automatically US citizens, their lives will lean more towards the parent whose DNA they inherit more (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018, 87). When they have White physical characteristics, they are more accepted in society because they are considered the majority. However, when their physical characteristics are more like Asians, they are classified as a minority.

Moreover, the two races have different historical and socioeconomic aspects. The differences are confusing for mixed-race individuals. On one hand, they feel like they have no connection to both parents. On the other hand, they are often not accepted by both white people and Chinese people (Rosado, 1994, 16). Consequently, they often face challenges in finding their place amidst existing racial and cultural differences in the wider society and within their ethnic community.

Racially mixed Asian Americans' experiences are underexplored in mainstream discourse. Often only given the backseat, inclusions of them

are mere tokenism (Adhitya & Wulandari, 2021, 29). A notable work in taking their existence center stage is Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* trilogy, whose first installment was released in 2009. As a young-adult romance (Slaton, 2022), its story focuses more on teenage puppy love. It was not until a decade later when Kevin Kwan reconnoiters complex in-between dynamics in Kevin Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* (2020).

Set in Capri and New York, the heroine is Lucie Tang Churchill, who was born to a "third-generation Asian American" (Kwan, 2020, 83) and "a true blue-blooded New Yorker" (*ibid.* 167). The couple is "a classy union of old money and new money ... a beautiful power couple" (*ibid.* 167). Despite the glamour and luxury in her upbringing, the novel depicts her life as filled with friction resulting from being mixed-race, from both sides of her family and the strangers she encounters. Even in some parts, Lucie's internal conflicts about her Asian origin are also depicted.

The novel presents a unique opportunity to analyze the intersections of race, class, and cultural identity in a globalized context, where issues of ethnicity and racial purity are increasingly

pertinent. According to Mehta (2023),

we all do racist things, we are all implicated and shaped, in our unconscious, by the systems that govern our society.

...
This does several things to the mixed race child, leaning on their white relatives for support as they navigate a racist world.

...
[but] The white parent, grandparent, or other family member has no experience navigating the world as a person of color and so they do not know what the child is going through.

Racism, especially in the context of mixed race, can happen to and from anyone. Intended or not, someone can act in a racist behavior towards themselves or even towards someone they care about. The inability to see racism can cause prolonged and fatal friction and conflicts (Indriyanto, Adi & Adhitya, 2024, 186).

The absence of clear boundaries causes racism to manifest in various aspects and forms in countless situations. The consequences that can be caused and the responses that arise to racism also have varying degrees of fatality. Thus, the ability to navigate actions to avoid racism is

important to acquire (Putri, Adhitya & Kristiawan, 2024, 38).

Being the first study on the novel, the formulations of the problem include (1) "How is Lucie Churchill biracially discriminated? and (2) "How did she overcome the biracial discrimination?". By doing so, this research will shed light on how mixed-race identities are represented in literary works and how those representations shed light on their impact on mixed-race individuals.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the intersectional and relational nature of the topic, this study is interdisciplinary. Conducted deductively, its theoretical framework consists of four theories. (1) Post-Nationalist American Studies is implemented as the scope. The paradigm shifts away from the exceptionalist notions of nation-state-centric identity and belonging, which often rigidly exclude individuals who exist between or outside of the dominant groups. It emphasizes what constitutes Americanness itself is continuously negotiated by everyone, including racial, ethnic, class, and gender minorities (Adi, 2023, 100).

(2) Critical Race Theory is applied as the analytical construct. CRT highlights how race affects everyone's experiences as it underlies power dynamics, legal systems, and cultural norms that can perpetuate racial inequality. There are five 'Central Principles of CRT (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). (a) Centrality of Racism denotes that racism is deeply and widely integrated into society, to the extent it is considered normal (Delgado, 2009). (b) White Supremacy signifies the normalization of white privilege and the reinforcement of suppression (Montoya et al., 2016). (c) Voices of People of Color is the counter storytelling by PoC (Lynn & Parker, 2006). (d) Interest Convergence designates that racial equality is upheld only when it benefits the Whites (Fernando & Rinaldi, 2017). (e) Intersectionality conveys that everyone has multiple identity markers (Khan, 2016).

(3) Blank, Dabady and Citro's classification of discrimination (2004, 56-63) is exerted to understand what mixed-race individuals endure. There are four discrimination types: (a) Intentional, explicit discrimination, in the form of verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack, and

extermination; (b) Subtle, unconscious, automatic discrimination, in the form of subtle prejudice, indirect prejudice, ambivalence, and automatic prejudice; (c) Statistical discrimination and profiling; and (d) Organizational processes.

(4) Aguirre and Turner's classification of reactions (2004, 25) is wielded to apprehend how mixed-race individuals react toward racial discrimination. There are seven reaction types: (a) passive acceptance, (b) marginal participation, (c) assimilation, (d) ethnogenesis, (e) withdrawal and self-segregation, (f) rebellion and revolt, and (g) organized protest.

Combining these four theories will yield a nuanced analysis of the lived experiences of racially mixed Asian Americans. The primary data are presented in the form of quotations from the novel. The emboldened parts indicate the type of discrimination, whereas the underlined ones denote the type of reaction. The italicized parts are written as they are in the novel.

DISCUSSION

Unlike his first trilogy, which discusses the intricacy

of Chinese ethnicity (Adhitya & Kurnia, 2017, 28), Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* explores how race, class, identity, and belonging intersect through the lens of a racially mixed character. The analysis will thus examine the biracial discrimination Lucie encounters, which poses challenges to how she identifies herself.

The novel is set in 2013 and 2019. By then, interracial marriages have been happening for centuries and thus a common phenomenon. Yet, Lucie's life is still shaped by biracial discrimination from the moment she was born.

Lucie knew only too well that for Cacky and her Boston Brahmin crowd, being "Very social and entertaining a great deal" was one of the worst insults could give. High WASPs like Cacky didn't need to throw parties, be photographed at "society events," or endow wings at museums to comment on their social position they simply were privileged. She realized that she had one-upped Cacky by marrying a man whose vast fortune eclipsed even hers, and Cacky was feeling sore about it. **Her cousin had always been competitive and a little mean since they were kids, calling her nicknames like "Lucy Liu" and "Shun Lee Lucie."** She decided to ignore her barbed comments, even though Cacky would not

let go of her strange
fixation on Cecil's mother.
(Kwan, 2020, 172-3)

The verbal antagonism, uttered by Lucie's white cousin, "includes casual racial slurs and disparaging racial comments, either in or out of the target's presence" (Blank, Dabady & Ctro, 2004, 56). She reacts with withdrawal and self-segregation by turning a deaf ear, rather than getting her feeling hurt.

All her life, people have mistaken Lucie for not being a part of her extended family because she looks like her mother "with her peachy-white cheeks and delicate black eyelashes, ... she looked like the most adorable, exquisite little China doll!" (Kwan, 2020, 182).

"We go first to your room, and then I will take your friend to her room," Paolo said to Charlotte.

"She's my cousin," Charlotte corrected

"Oh? Your cousin?" Paolo glanced reflexively at Lucie in surprise. But Lucie simply smiled. She knew that within the next few seconds, Charlotte would automatically launch into the explanation she had always given since Lucie was a little girl.

"Yes, her father was my uncle," Charlotte replies, adding "Her mother is

Chinese, but her father is American."

So is Mom. She was born in Seattle, Lucie wanted to say, but of course, she didn't.

(Kwan, 2020, 15)

At first encounter, nobody automatically thinks Lucie and her white cousin are blood-related. This automatic prejudice is followed by an instant disbelief. Lucie's reaction to such a reflex is passive acceptance as she lets her cousin explain her racial background.

Growing up, due to her appearance, Lucie is treated differently from his older brother, who takes "after their father in appearance ... the quintessential WASP" (*ibid.* 64) with Caucasian-dominant features and dark blond curls (*ibid.* 157).

"I was in my workout clothes, holding a big paper sack with takeout. Some lady got into the elevator with us, obviously a visitor, and she smiled at me and asked, 'Do you get good tips?'"

George stared blankly at Lucie. "What did she mean?"

"Well, I had no clue either, but when Freddie started laughing hysterically, I finally figured it out. The lady thought I was delivering food. Like I was some Chinese delivery girl. That's always the story with me, but no one would ever

mistake Freddie for the help."

(Kwan, 2020, 15)

Because she looks more Asian, Lucie often experiences statistical discrimination and profiling. As mainstream media portray Asians as manual laborers (Marchesin, 2021); when Lucie is in luxurious surroundings, she is assumed to be the domestic worker. Her reaction is passive acceptance as she "tolerate[s] unacceptable things ... and make no attempt to hold the other person accountable while complaining" about how others treat her (Downing, 2010).

As the plot thickens, Lucie marrying a New Money white man becomes the butt of the joke for the white part of her family.

Lucie looked at her mother for some support, but Marian seemed totally checked out—as she always did around her father's family—and was fixated on picking the bits of dill off her smoked salmon crostini. Annafred, thankfully, leaped to her defense again.

"Don't be ridiculous, Aunt Cushing. Renee Pike may be social with capital S, but she's actually done quite a bit of good. The Times listed her as the most charitable individual in the country last year! Speaking of which, Teddy, we really need to get her involved

with the Prince's Trust. I'm told she's singlehandedly keeping the oldest lace maker in France in business, thanks to her commitment to only wear couture."

"My, my, Lucie, are we dressed up enough for your new family? I hope you won't be too embarrassed of us," Cacky teased, as she adjusted the cuffed sleeves of her floral Carlisle jacket.

(Kwan, 2020, 173)

Lucie's white family thinks less of her Asian family as they do not think her mother "would know this particularly glamorous ladies" (*ibid.* 164) Hollywood's depiction of Asians as tacky (Blair, 2018) has engraved in society that White, Old-Money Americans align them with White New-Money Americans. Her white cousin then extends indirect prejudice to her fiancé as well because it

"leads ingroup members to blame the outgroup the disadvantaged racial group--for their disadvantage ... Differences between the ingroup and outgroup ... are often exaggerated, so that outgroup members are portrayed as outsiders worthy of avoidance and exclusion" (Blank, Dabady & Ctro, 2004, 59).

Lucie reacts with passive acceptance as she "just accepts without making an attempt to respond" (Downing, 2010) because she does not have the

power to defend herself in front of her White family.

Adding insult to injury, just as mixed-raced individuals are deemed ambiguous, so is biracial discrimination. The many types it can take form, that is how many sources it can come from (Ho, 2015), including from the loved ones.

Lucie wanted to roll her eyes but kept herself in check. She knew this game of her cousin's all too well—Charlotte was the queen of guilt trips, and now she was looking her straight in the eye. "Lucie, everything I do, I do with the best intentions. I'm here out of your generosity, and **my only interest is in safeguarding your good name.**"

"My good name? You sound as if we're living in the Edwardian age!" Lucie laughed.

"Lucie, you are a Churchill, don't ever forget that. Your name and standing are everything; wherever you go, you represent the family."

(Kwan, 2020, 27)

Lucie's closest cousin, who is white, disassociates her Asian heritage. This avoidance "entails choosing the comfort of one's own social group (the ingroup in social psychological terms)", which in her case is White privilege. How she reacts is marginal participation by playing along while silently detesting it.

Eventually, Lucie's patience reaches a boiling point after years of holding back.

"Are you really changing your tune now? **All my life, all you Barclays and Churchills have made me feel like I wasn't really part of the family, like I was some little troll in the attic.**"

"What are you talking about? We've done no such thing!"

"Why is it that **every time you introduce me to someone new, you have to explain to them exactly how we're related? Our racist grandmother does the exact same thing, as if no one would ever believe from looking at my face that I was really a Churchill, a bona fide Mayflower Knickerbocker Social Register Churchill!**"

"Lucie, our grandmother is many things, but the one thing she is not is racist. She is an insufferable snob and a creature of her background, and she has many limitations that I myself have been victim to."

Lucie shook her head vehemently. "I'm sorry, but Granny is a racist."

"But Granny loves you!" Charlotte insisted.

"Don't you see it's possible to love someone without realizing you're being racist toward them? How can you not see it? Especially after the way Granny treated you over your Jewish boyfriend?"

(Kwan, 2020, chapter 16)

It is assumed that, on the one hand, having more than one

heritage allows mixed-raced individuals to belong to more than one culture. On the other hand, they might feel alienated in either one since biracial discrimination can be done by immediate family members (Mehta, 2023, 2). Throughout her life, Lucie's White family effectuates avoidance of her Asianness to the extent that she perpetrates rebellion and revolt by venting her frustration to her cousin, including that of their grandmother.

Furthermore, mixed-race individuals experience racial confusion dialectically. Not only do they internally question their own identity, but others also ask them how they racialize themselves, which adds to their confusion.

"Tell me, dear, what do you consider yourself?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"When you look in the mirror, do you feel more Asian or more Caucasian?"

"Well, I'm equal parts both . . ."

"But do you lean toward a particular side? It's rather marvelous that you could pass for either."

Lucie gritted her teeth, finally angry. "You know, I've never tried to pass for anything. I feel like I'm just me."

(Kwan, 2020, 71)

Lucie, whenever people cannot put their finger on her ethnicity, endures ambivalence, in which she is "not necessarily subjected to uniform antipathy ... [and] may be disrespected but liked in a condescending manner" (Blank, Dabady & Ctro, 2004, 60). She gets asked probing questions about her racial identity that she never asks to herself, at least not out loud. One of them is about passing, a practice of mixed-race individuals eliminating the less for more privileged race.

Lucie's reaction is ethnogenesis, in that she "comes into being and develops into an ethnicity distinct from the surrounding culture" (Fitzgerald, 1993) of her White side of the family. She does not need to pick one of her parents' races and declare it as her identity because her mixedness is her identity.

Surprisingly, racism towards Lucie being a racially mixed Asian American also comes from other Asians.

Mercedes jumped into the conversation. "And your father, what is his ancestry?"

"English, Scottish, and Swedish," Lucie replied as patiently as she could. Why was it that only other Asians interrogated her about her background?

(Kwan, 2020, 114)

Often being over-generalized under one umbrella term (Joo, Reeves & Rodrigue, 2016), there are "21 detailed different groups" of Asian diasporas in the US (Monte & Shin, 2022). The differences are used to define social standing (Seida, 2015). By asking about her white family's heritage, the Filipino woman assesses how she and Lucie fall in rank. Lucie's habitual reaction to the indirect prejudice is marginal participation by answering the question dismissively because she does not care about any subsequent perception.

Even the legitimacy of her last name is questioned.

"This would be your Churchill grandmother? Tell me, how exactly are you all related to the English Churchills?"

Lucie reached for the crystal goblet in front of her. She wasn't much of a drinker, but if she had to endure this inquisition for another three courses, she might as well get completely shit-faced.

(Kwan, 2020, 115)

To further place her social standing, Lucie is asked in detail about her white heritage. The question does not infect her directly, but its implication infers a demeaning intent. She reacts to the indirect prejudice with

rebellion and revolt as she does not express her anger verbally but chooses to drink as a rebellious act.

Considering she is "quiet and well-mannered ... [and that] her father would be so proud" (*ibid.* 182), people set Lucie high expectations. Once she does something out of the ordinary, she gets crucified.

Suddenly, a chorus of voices began to crowd her head. The voices of her relatives, her neighbors, her college friends, her classmates back at Brearley. . .

"You'll never guess what Lucie was caught doing in Capri."

"Who would have imagined that Lucie Churchill, who only dated the preppiest guys and wouldn't even give Stavros Theodoracopulos the time of day, would end up falling for a Chinese boy from Hong Kong?"

"A Chinese boy who goes to Berkely, off all places."

"He wears a Speedo and Birkenstocks. Together."

"Ewww!"

"Have you seen that mother of his? NOCD."

"I suppose it's fine that she's fallen for someone like him since Lucie's never cared about joining Piping Rock."

"Have you fallen for him?" Suddenly Lucie realized Charlotte had been speaking to her all along. "Answer me, Lucie, so I can best help you clean up this mess,"

Lucie shook her head vehemently. "I haven't fallen for him, Charlotte. I am not even attracted to him! It was all a mistake! I just had a wild moment."
(Kwan, 2020, 147)

Lucie is put on the pedestal of perfection. When her action or choice fails to meet their expectations, it is blown out of proportion. It is an aftermath of the model minority, which "has been attributed to Asians being hardworking and deferential to parental and authority figures" (Ruiz, Im & Tian, 2023).

The indirect prejudice is done by commenting on the person Lucie is close with to indirectly judge her. Her response is assimilation as she conforms to the dominant race and neglects the values that her other racial background is known for. To the extent that biracial discrimination is internalized.

"So why did you tell him you didn't? Why did you have to go and break my boy's heart?"

Lucie crumbled onto the sofa. "I don't know. I was confused, I was ashamed. I was afraid of what my family would say ..."

"Your family? Do you mean your mother?"

"My mother, yes, but also my extended family. You don't know what it's like for me. **Ever since I was little,**

it's always seemed like my mother's only wanted me to be around my dad's family. It's as though Mom's ashamed of her Chinese roots—I hardly ever see my Chinese grandparents. I know she rebelled against her parents by marrying my dad, and I didn't think she'd ever want me to fall in love with a Chinese boy either. And I thought my father's family would be disappointed in me if I didn't marry some billionaire prince. I've been in a no-win situation all my life. My Chinese relatives treat me like I'm some sort of precious unicorn, too good to be one of them, and my WASP relatives treat me like I'm not good enough for them," Lucie cried.

(Kwan, 2020, 329)

The intricate intersection of race and identity Lucie witnesses is absorbed into the internalized racism she battles on a daily basis. According to Johnson (2008, 45), "internalized racism involves both conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy in which whites are consistently ranked above people of color". The internalized racism then becomes indirect prejudice, as she does not perceive it firsthand, but she is still affected by it.

Her usual reaction to discrimination is passive acceptance since she usually

"passively allow anything that comes" (Downing, 2010). In other incidents, she is portrayed as), "said quietly exasperated (Kwan, 2020, 131), "remained silent" (*ibid.*, 145), "wanted to defend her mother, but she knew she wasn't even in a position to defend herself (*ibid.*, 147) and "need to dig a hole and bury myself in it right now" (*ibid.*, 174). The unassertive reaction further affiliates the model minority stereotype that "characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourselfes-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving" (Blackburn, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* depicts biracial discrimination within the top echelon of society. Most of the discrimination types taking place are subtle, unconscious, automatic discrimination. Most reaction types appearing are spontaneous ones, while organized protest is not. The instances of biracial discrimination and reactions to them are less vulgar because, as well-brought-up upper crusts, they apprehend that rampant racism in forms of intentional, explicit discrimination, e.g., physical

attack and extermination, are unforgivable. Nonetheless, nonextreme forms of discrimination can still damage racially mixed individuals. The reason is that identity construction crisscrosses how one identifies himself or herself and how others identify him or her.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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