

Defense mechanism and narcissistic behavior: A Study of R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface*

*Shaga Marfinda¹, Imas Istiani²

^{1,2}English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines the defense mechanisms and narcissistic behavior of the main character in R. F. Kuang's novel Yellowface (2023) using Karen Horney's concepts of the idealized self and neurotic needs, as well as Christopher Lasch's ideas about cultural narcissism. This research explores how June protects herself from envy and guilt by using various forms of self-deception. It also explores how the social media-driven publishing world shapes June's narcissistic behavior. This research uses qualitative-descriptive methods and deep text analysis. The focus of the study is on the emotional insecurity, the need for recognition, and the dependence on public opinion. Findings show that June creates an idealized image of herself as a successful writer and maintains it through self-deception. At the same time, the publishing industry that focuses on visibility, approval, and performance affects her by pushing her to judge herself and her value through attention and compliments. When this recognition is lost, she feels anxiety, fear, and emotional instability. This study suggests that self-deception and narcissistic behavior in Yellowface are not just personal weaknesses, but psychological strategies created by internal conflict and a competitive cultural environment.

Keywords: defense mechanisms; self-deception; narcissistic behavior; *Yellowface*

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Introduction

The book industry has an important social role and helps shape cultural life. Recently, this industry competes with various other entertainment fields such as film, television, and video games (Clark & Phillips, 2008). The continued prominence of social media in daily business is one of the main factors shaping the development of the book industry (Almazrouei et al., 2021). Social media has become important as it turns into marketing platforms and assisting authors and publishers in finding audiences (Baverstock & Bowen, 2019). It influences how authors seek recognition, as collecting likes and remaining relevant are currently viewed as much more significant than the traditional means. It affects writers' identities and self-confidence as well as strikes their self-esteem, confuses their identities, and forces them to compare themselves with other people (Yang et al., 2017). These conditions may cause mental health issues in writers and their relationship with their own work (Hjetland et al., 2022). The necessity to be authentic and to fulfill the requirements of the market causes ethical issues. The writer must balance displaying a perceived honest personality, commercial forces in the industry, and retaining their creativity (Wellman et al., 2020).

Social media often triggers social comparison because users often see posts that have been edited to highlight success (Appel et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017). Krasnova et al. (2013) found that repeated exposure to others' achievements can trigger envy and negative emotion. Buffardi & Campbell (2008) and Mehdizadeh (2010) indicate that platform features tend to encourage self-

*Corresponding author: **Shaga Marfinda**, Address: English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), Jalan Gunung Pati, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. Email address: marfindashaga@students.unnes.ac.id, ©2026 Leksika. All rights reserved.

promotion and attention-seeking behavior. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) confirm that the interrelationship between metrics and audience responses reinforces the need for public validation. The dynamics of envy and the need for validation are found in *Yellowface* (2023). Juniper Hayward (June), a mid-career writer, sees her friend, Athena Liu, become a successful writer and get more attention in the online world. As June is consumed by envy, she feels the demand to increase her popularity through inappropriate actions, such as stealing Liu's manuscript after her death and creating lies to the public to claim her success. It shows how pressure to get digital validation can push someone to manipulate people's perception and behave criminally. Duffy et al's findings (2021) stated that likes and follower numbers are treated as evidence that someone is worth and successful. Similarly, June compares herself to Athena's achievement on social media. June's effort to create an "authentic" online persona reflects the digital pressure encouraging self-branding and performance, linked to narcissistic tendencies and achieves ethical boundaries (Kapitan et al., 2022). Thus, *Yellowface* highlights how the social media ecosystem can draw individuals toward manipulative and unethical behavior to gain visibility and public praise.

The envy and the validation-seeking behavior can be understood through Karen Horney's and Christopher Lasch's theories. Psychologically, Horney explains that unmet emotional needs in childhood can give rise to basic anxiety, a persistent feeling of insecurity, shaping how a person responds to social pressure (Feist, J., Feist, 2009; Horney, 1937). Horney also said that culture affects an individual's psychological condition. To get over this anxiety, individuals often make decisions with a neurotic pattern, such as moving away, moving against, or moving toward (Parker et al., 2009). June's response to Athena's success and how her unsafe sense develops into jealousy, seeking attention, and her manipulative decision will be helped by those patterns.

Lasch (1979) mentioned that the contemporary world, where consumerism, media, and performative culture dominate, is forcing everyone to cheer themselves up by what others think of them. Similarly, Grubner (2017) suggested the media and visual content as the process of making us all actors whose values lie merely in the way we present ourselves. Current trends on social media likes, followers, and all the numbers push us to continue to promote ourselves and count on external recognition (Kristinsdottir et al., 2021). Thus, narcissism is not only a personal issue but also a response to the digital world, promoting the belief that the more people see you, the more valued you become.

Several studies have examined Kuang's *Yellowface*. Devi and Panmei (2024) focused on the building of meaning, cultural borrowing, and the politics of who is seen in publishing. Abbas et al. (2025) argue that the issue of racial marginalization, minority visibility, and systemic bias occur in the novel. Azzahra (2025) analyzed Goodreads readers' responses to map how audiences negotiate the novel's racial discourse. Similarly, Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theory has been applied in literary works. Tamrin et al. (2023) examined how childhood insecurity produces neurotic needs such as power, exploitation, and withdrawal. Tarik (2024) and Hanifah & Rokhman (2020) examine neurosis through Horney's framework, showing how basic anxiety, neurotic trend, and idealized images emerge as defenses shaped by emotional deprivation and oppressive social conditions.

The novelty lies in its psychoanalytic examination through Horney's neurotic defenses and Lasch's narcissism. While most previous studies discussed issues of racial representation, plagiarism, or the publishing industry, none have investigated how the novel constructs June's psychological portrait through internal conflict and social-media-driven pressures. This study fills that gap by focusing on

June's emotional and behavioral dynamics through two research objectives: (1) to identify the forms of deception June employs as defense mechanisms against her envy and guilt, and (2) to examine how social-media-driven publishing encourages and reinforces her narcissistic behaviors. By combining character psychology analysis and cultural influences, this study offers a more comprehensive reading of how June's characters formed and developed.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the psychological dynamics of June in the *Yellowface* (2023) by R. F. Kuang. Focus on how her self-deception and narcissistic behavior emerge when she is under the influence of social-media-driven publishing. A qualitative approach is effective because it allows for exploring the personality of the character, motivations, and thematic patterns within the book, and to analyze how people interpret their lives as Creswell (2009) explains. The psychoanalytic social theory of Karen Horney, especially basic anxiety, neurotic needs, and self-deception, is used in this analysis, as well as the cultural theory of narcissism by Christopher Lasch. These frameworks guide the understanding of June's defense mechanism and a culturally supported response to media that focus on validation.

The primary data provided by the actions of the story, interactions between characters, and internal monologues in *Yellowface*. The secondary data include scientific journal articles, theoretical books, and previous studies related to self-deception, narcissism, and social media cultures. Data were collected through close reading, with a focus on textual evidence that reflects June's envy, insecurity, and image manipulation among people. The researcher selected and interpreted passages that demonstrate social comparison and self-presentation using the theoretical framework. The analysis process was done by selecting relevant quotations, identifying the psychological implications, and how they correlate to sociocultural pressure depicted in the novel. The results were compared with previous research on *Yellowface* and with works that applied the theory of Horney in literary analysis, which assisted the present research in validating its findings. It also provides new ideas on the methods of defense mechanisms of narcissism in the digital era.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the forms of self-deception as defense mechanisms by June in *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang (2023) and how these actions help her to avoid facing her envy and guilt. It also examines how the publishing world, which is fueled by social media, contributes to and strengthens June's narcissistic behavior. This section reveals the way in which June's inner conflict and external pressures of the publishing business build up and grow to fulfill her needs and satisfaction by analyzing her personal defenses and the external pressures she has to face.

The forms of self-deception

Karen Horney says that when individuals accept unpleasant truths about themselves, they tend to create a better version of themselves. This perceived image assists them in avoiding emotions such as guilt, shame, and self-blame. Consequently, they may adopt different interpretations of what is happening in order not to face their own mistakes or emotional struggles (Horney, 1950).

In *Yellowface*, Kuang depicts this trend by June after she steals Athena's manuscript. However, rather than admitting her envy and her guilt, she changes the meaning of the situation so that it feels

less culpable and righter. These reasons, denials, and rewritten stories about herself make her look good even though this is not the real picture of herself. In this way, June's self-deception works as a way to escape guilt and emotional discomfort.

Rationalization

June's rationalization appears strongly right after she takes Athena's manuscript. At the beginning of the story, when June has stolen Athena's novel draft, she believes that her actions are justified. The fact that June made the draft published because she took it and continued it until it became a complete text is something that can be justified. However, on the other side of her pride, there is nothing but guilt. At this stage of the story, June feels both tempted by the opportunity and overwhelmed by guilt. To silence the guilt, she creates excuses that make the act feel less wrong.

"And so what if it was stolen? So what if I lifted it wholesale? Athena died before anyone knew the manuscript existed... I gave it a chance to go out into the world without the judgment that multiple authorship always entails. And for all the work I put into it, all those hours of effort— why shouldn't it be my name on the title?" (Kuang, 2023, p. 36–37)

June's way of thinking here shows how she supplies reasons that make her action seem less wrong. Instead of admitting that she has taken someone else's work, she presents herself as someone who improves and saves it. By doing so, she protects her self-image and avoids feeling the guilt connected to the theft. Horney explains that such mental adjustments often appear when a person cannot tolerate negative feelings about themselves, such as shame or self-blame, and therefore reshapes reality to maintain a positive view of themselves (Horney, 1950).

Denial

After June stole Athena's novel draft, June always tried to justify her actions, one of which was by denying all the bad things she had done. At this stage, the danger was no longer just internal guilt, but also external judgment. June often made racist comments to Athena, who is of mixed Asian-America descent, but she denied it. June claims that it is common in the publishing world and is a result of the online world, not solely her fault. Instead of facing the ethical content of the criticism, she turns the whole situation into an unfriendly attack on herself, portraying herself as the victim rather than the perpetrator. In this section, she blocks the possibility of guilt by refusing to acknowledge reality at all.

"It's the internet that's fucked, not me. It's this contingent of social justice warriors, these clout-chasing white "allies," and Asian activists seeking attention who are acting up. I am not the bad guy. I am the victim here." (Kuang, 2023, p. 147)

Rather than reflecting on her own behavior, June places the problem entirely outside herself. By blaming the internet and public opinion, she avoids taking responsibility for the harms. This way of responding allows her to block feeling and to continue seeing herself as innocent. Horney notes that when people feel threatened by truths about themselves, they may refuse to accept those truths in order to protect their sense of self (Horney, 1950).

Projection

After all her actions were discovered and were about to be exposed by Candice Lee, June tried to write a novel that told the story of all the facts that had happened, but in the form of fiction, so that

people would question the truth of those facts. In the book, she made up a story based on the truth she wanted to believe, namely that all her actions were not wrong and that June was the victim of Candice Lee's and the publishing world's misdeeds. She also claimed that it was other people's actions that had ruined June and Athena's friendship, which in reality never existed.

"I am the victim of a dreadful hoax. I was cyberbullied, stalked, and manipulated into thinking I was going mad. Candice Lee took my love for my deceased friend and turned it into something ugly and horrible. Candice is the one who exploited me for her art, not the other way around." ([Kuang, 2023, p. 317–318](#))

Here, June shifts her own wrongdoing onto someone else. The manipulation and exploitation that are actually her own behavior are assigned to Candice instead. This shift allows June to avoid seeing herself as dishonest or harmful. Horney describes this kind of displacement as a way for individuals to distance themselves from traits they cannot accept within themselves ([Horney, 1950](#)).

Self-justification by rewriting reality

Another way June justified her theft was by spreading false stories to others. In the novel, June repeatedly deceived Athena's mother, especially when it came to the evidence of theft of Athena's drafts that her mother had after her death. June acted as if she were a close friend who knew Athena very well, so she did not allow Athena's mother to read the book that was evidence of Athena's draft. At this point, June believed that this was the right thing to do and that the published novel was her work, which she had completed with great effort, not theft.

*"That's been the key to staying sane throughout all of this: holding the line, maintaining my innocence. In the face of it all, I've never once cracked, never admitted the theft to anyone. By now, I mostly believe the lie myself— that it was my efforts that made *The Last Front* the success that it was, that when it comes down to it, it is my book."* ([Kuang, 2023, p.222](#))

Repeating the same story over and over again made June accept it as the truth. Over time, the version of events she had created for herself replaced her memories of what had actually happened. In this way, she not only defended herself in front of others but also convinced herself that she had done nothing wrong.

At the end of the novel, when she was on the verge of ruin from her success, she believed and wanted everyone else to believe that she was not a thief. June wanted to write and declare that she was a savior and hero to prove the truth about all the evil that was happening in the publishing world. And she wanted to prove that everything people said about June being a thief was wrong and a hoax.

"About how my hoax—because let's frame it as a hoax, not a theft— was really a way to expose the rotten foundations of this entire industry. About how I am the hero, in the end." ([Kuang, 2023, p. 318](#))

June not only denies her mistakes but also actively transforms them into moral achievements. Theft is renamed exposure, and guilt is replaced with a sense of purpose. Through this change, June protects herself from accusations by presenting her action as necessary and even exemplary. Horney explains that when the ideal self-image becomes dominant, individuals may alter reality itself to maintain that image ([Horney, 1950](#)).

Narcissistic behavior driven by social-media

In *Yellowface*, June's narcissistic behavior is not only shaped by her personality but is also depicted as something shaped by her social environment. The publishing world in this novel is heavily dependent on publicity and online attention, so success is closely linked to how visible someone is on social media. As a result, June slowly begins to measure her worth through likes, followers, and public reactions. So that her self-confidence becomes dependent on how others see her.

According to Lasch, modern society makes people seek recognition from outside themselves. The media and what is on the internet that make individuals have confidence ([Lasch, 1979](#)). The fact that June wanted attention is a true indication that this kind of environment can make someone become narcissistic. It is not only about being selfish but also a response to a system that values visibility and appearance.

The publishing world is completely connected with social media, especially X (Twitter), where we are all spied on, judged, and compared all the time. So, writers struggle not only through their words but also through the number of their followers, visibility, and what others think about what they say. This puts an unbalanced situation since the beginning of the careers of June and Athena. Athena's first book receives a spontaneous thumbs-up and a massive readership, while June's book was rejected and ignored. This difference not only affects their careers but also affects how June sees herself.

"But then Athena's first short story came out in one of Yale's alt literary magazines... I felt a snarl of jealousy—I'd submitted my own story months ago and had been resoundingly rejected within a day." ([Kuang, 2023, p. 205](#))

June was very disappointed and felt that she was left behind, and it made June's jealousy start to grow. Seeing Athena achieve success easily while June struggled made her start to compare herself to Athena in an unhealthy way. This comparison became inevitable because Athena's success was everywhere on the internet. Every time June saw Athena being praised, she remembered her failure. She was not only jealous of Athena's success but also at the attention and love Athena received. This process fits with the concept that social media encourages people to compare themselves to others, instead of focusing on personal growth. Therefore, June's jealousy is not only internal conflict but also shaped by a culture that makes success competition.

Social media as a source of validation

The further June's career developed, the more she became obsessed with the way people perceived her online. Social media was not only a place to share information, but also June's main way to know her position in the publishing world. Praise, attention, and positive comments made her feel comfortable and confident, while criticism and silence caused her anxiety. Her emotional state goes up and down following the public judgment about her. When the rumors of her plagiarism began to spread, June became addicted to social media. She could not take her eyes off it because her reputation lay there. She was scared, stressed, and overwhelmed.

"But Twitter is real life; it's realer than real life, because that is the realm that the social economy of publishing exists on, because the industry has no alternative." ([Kuang, 2023, p. 154](#))

This quote shows the way June believes that it is the internet that determines whether she is a legit writer or not. Unless she is accepted over the internet, she does not feel that she belongs to the industry. June desperately needed validation and attention from others on the internet. When *The Last Front*, the stolen work, was first released and exploded, June was flooded with good reactions from the readers. So, when she received criticism, June felt that it was something she shouldn't receive.

"I need to know what the world is saying about me. I need to sketch out the contours of my digitally perceived self, because at least if I know the extent of the damage then I'll know how much I should be worried." (Kuang, 2023, p. 99)

By the time, June's identity was dependent on the response of the society. Other people's opinions become a reflection to determine who she was. Comments, reactions, and online discussions not only provide information but also shape her self-image. Instead of trusting her own gut judgment, she measures her value by how she is seen online. This makes her identity unstable and makes her dependent on constant feedback from the internet.

In the novel, when the rumors about June being a thief begin to spread, the readers in the publishing world start creating fake stories about June that then make her collapse. June notices that the number of her followers on social media has dropped a lot, and many posts tag her with insults and threats. At that moment, June feels very stressed and scared, and then she deletes her social media account.

"I wake up the next morning to see I've lost a thousand followers. The metric is still dropping; nines turning to eights before my eyes. This time, I don't have to search my name to track the conversation. It's right there, all over my timeline and in my mentions." (Kuang, 2023, p. 211)

When she lost the public support from the readers, and it became hate and attacks, June experienced an emotional breakdown. This excerpt shows how deeply June's emotions are connected to online attention. When that attention faded, she not only lost popularity but also lost her emotional balance. Her response shows that losing online recognition feels like losing a part of herself. This happens because June is dependent on how other people see her, so criticism and silence hit her more than usual. The meaning of all these here is not only fear of public judgment, but also the destruction of an identity shaped by the desire to be seen and to be admired.

Discussion

This study demonstrates how June's self-deception (rationalization, denial, projection, and rewriting reality) developed in the context of the social media-based publishing industry and how it shaped her internal struggles and narcissism. This study highlights how industry pressure influences individual psychology by connecting internal defense mechanism and external validation system.

This study takes a different approach compared to Azzahra (2025), who studies *Yellowface* through readers' responses on Goodreads. Azzahra (2025) analyzes how readers respond to race, ethnicity, and conflict in novels based on online discussions. Their results demonstrate the way readers perceive and respond to identity and representation, whereas this study examines how June's jealousy and guilt shape her behavior in the narrative itself.

Additionally, Devi and Panmei (2024) discuss the topic of *Yellowface* as an issue of inequality in the publishing world, where visibility and cultural value are influenced by market trends and popular perception. This study supports their argument, but focuses more on June's personal response,

showing how she adjusted herself in order to survive within the system. While Abbas et al. (2025) concentrate on the way in which public opinion characterizes and pressures the character externally through stigmatization. However, this study focuses on how June experiences the pressure internally and how it affects her emotions, identity, and behavior over time. This study explains how the character reacts to this pressure psychologically.

The theory of Karen Horney has been used by different studies to examine the way the characters address the emotional conflicts. A similar approach was taken by Tarik (2024) and Hanifah & Rokhman (2020), who all concentrated on the way characters develop a perfect self-image to avoid anxiety, failure, and emotional pain. Psychological conflict was primarily presented in their findings, just as in this study; June also developed a self-image to escape guilt and shame. However, this study highlights that June's self-image was not only shaped by her internal anxieties, but also external pressures from the publishing world and social media.

Moreover, Tamrin et al. (2023) examine the neurotic needs of Horney, especially the need for recognition and security. They demonstrated that when these needs become too strong, conflict occurs and determines the behavior of a character. This is similar to June, who has a pressing drive to be accepted. However, this study puts the need for public attention in the context of the publication and social media, rather than in the context of personal relations.

Overall, while previous studies have focused on race, media, cultural appropriation, reader response, or psychological patterns separately, this research combines all these aspects by analyzing how personal self-deception and social systems have an influence on each other. This research demonstrates that June's behavior is not just a moral failure or cultural problem, but the result of a psychological process formed by an environment where visibility, approval, and performance are valued. This article provides a new psychological and sociological approach to *Yellowface* with the help of Karen Horney's and Christopher Lasch's theories.

Conclusion

This study examined how self-deception can be a psychological defense mechanism in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) and how this is being influenced by a social-media-driven publishing environment. Using Karen Horney's theory and the concept of cultural narcissism of Christopher Lasch, this research analyzes the interaction between June's inner struggles and the outer pressure of visibility, comparison, and public judgment.

The findings indicate that June uses rationalization, denial, projection, and rewriting reality to protect herself against her guilt, shame, and responsibility. These tricks allowed her to maintain a good self-image even when she does bad things. At the same time, the publishing culture depicted in the novel encourages her dependence on public validation, which intensifies June's narcissistic behavior and causes her identity to be unstable and weak.

This study contributes to the previous research by connecting psychological defense mechanisms with the cultural and media systems, demonstrating that June's behavior is shaped by individual conflict and social circumstances. It provides a more coherent explanation of identity, morality, and self-esteem construction and maintenance in contemporary literature. The subsequent studies might explore the reactions of the readers to *Yellowface*, draw comparisons between the trends in digital era novels, or apply other theories to examine the identity and self-deception issues in modern books.

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