



Disclosing Racism in Racial Roles in the Novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu

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Article Info

Abstract

Keywords: African-American, Black Community, Minority, Unequal action, Racial

This research is the crucial issue about racial discrimination that can be found in society in some countries. The purposes of this research is to analyze the depiction of racial discrimination faced by Willis Wu and to uncover the form of racial discrimination experienced by Willis Wu in the *Interior Chinatown* novel (2020) written by Charles Yu. The story of the novel portrays about an American actor of Taiwanese descent as the reflection of real social conditions about racial discrimination in the United States of America. It is presenting the inequality treatment that leads to a discriminative attitude based on a different race through the Colored and looks. It has negative consequences for those who are subjected to them, such as a loss of self-confidence, a negative self-image, and a great deal of resentment. Those who have been treated unfairly will rarely accept their fate; instead, they will fight back. The method used to analyze the data is qualitative approach. And the theory of Fred L. Pincus (1996) and the theory of Homi K. Bhabha (1994) are used to support the concept of those related explanations about the racial discrimination issue. In getting data there are some steps used first, reading the novel several times. Second, finding the data relate to the issue. Next, classifying the data based on an analysis. The last, analyzing the data finding based on the theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Racism is a condition where an ethnic group of a certain race gets unequal treatment from a race that is considered to be of a higher caste or degree. Wilson (1999, p.14) stated racism is “an ideology of racial domination”. A person's sense of superiority is their main reason for pushing to do so. Those who are constructed as superior races often commit acts of racism against lower class racial groups. It is presented in the workplace, in education, in health care and in the courts. It is often present in the stereotype's minority groups hold of majorities as well. It can represent additional discrimination and suffering for black people. However, the definition of racism and racial discrimination is different. Pager and Shepherd (2008) explained racial discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of races, whereas racial inequality concerns unequal outcomes (in income, education, health, etc.).

Nowadays, racial discrimination still exists in reality. For instance, white people treat badly the black people so that sometimes black people can't have the same chances. Racism treatments, such as discrimination against minorities, racial distinctions, and oppression of women and immigrants, have negative consequences for those who are subjected to them, such as a loss of self-confidence, a negative self-image, and a great deal of resentment. Those who have been treated unfairly will rarely accept their fate; instead, they will fight back. Another figure is George Floyd. The 46-year-old man was a security officer. In 2020, this man was trending on all social media because of he received violence brutality from the 'white' police officers. The case occurred when he just walked out from a convenience store. Being handcuffed and pinned beneath down, Floyd finally died. It took his life only 8 minutes 46 seconds. The death of George Floyd has sparked public outrage. Riots exploded in several areas in the United States.

Stereotyping is done in order to eliminate the originality of certain race/ethnic/gender that are considered as disturbing force for the dominating group. Though stereotypes as a whole are now turned into comedic content where we make fun of stereotypes (including Asian ones). For example, we take from You Tuber Steven. Steven He creates comedy content about Asian stereotypes, one of which is that as an Asian you have to be good at everything, such as math, music (must be piano or violin and must also be in the classic genre). Even though this is just a joke, there is some truth to this. This is how Asian is seen with a negative connotation.

From the cases above, it can be seen that As Charles Yu wrote “*Interior Chinatown*,” he worried readers would not be interested in a satirical novel about how Hollywood and society trap Asian Americans in stereotypical roles. However, not only black people get racism by society, but many superior groups felt the same, especially Asian in American society. They almost never get to be the leading man. Instead, they get to be claimed as “Generic Asian Man Number Three / Delivery Guy”. He wants to give a message and acknowledgement that this racism is still exists among the neighborhood. It is still a big problem that people need to fix. This racism reinforces that these Asians are not part of the main story of America. In fact, they are not really Americans, because when Asian-Americans are playing a role, they are often cast as foreigners. Based on the explanation previously, then this study formulates the problem in two research questions: 1. How is the racial discrimination portrayed in *Interior Chinatown*?, and 2. How is the struggle of the main character to fight against racial discrimination in *Interior Chinatown*?

Objectives of the study are to reveal how the racial discrimination portrayed in *Interior Chinatown* and to reveal the struggle of the main character to fight against racial discrimination in *Interior Chinatown*. And the purposes of this study are to analyze the depiction of racial discrimination faced by Willis Wu and to uncover the form of racial discrimination experienced by Willis Wu in analyzing the novel entitled *Interior Chinatown* (2020) written by Charles Yu.

METHODS

According to Litosseliti (2010), qualitative research concerned with structures and patterns and how something is. In addition, Myers (1997) explained that qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. This study used a qualitative method. Qualitative research focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' experiences and meanings they attach to those experiences. To arrive at a conclusion, a qualitative technique employs data as part of the investigation. In addition, the writer used a text analysis approach to assess the data. After gathering the data, the following stage is to

evaluate it using theories that are relevant to the study's topic. The data collected was then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes in the data. The primary subject of this study is *Interior Chinatown (2020)* by Charles Yu. The novel contains 288 pages and seven acts. Moreover, other references which support this study are taken from books, eBooks, articles, and journals as the source of data. All references can support the writer to find out more information related to this study. Data collection method is the way to collect data used in this research. The writer conducts the quotation from the novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu as the main data. The necessary steps of collecting data are as follow, reading the novel several times, identifying the issues that occurred in the novel *Interior Chinatown*, identifying the racial discrimination issue, determining the racial discrimination issue to conduct this study, underlining the quotation from the novel that correlated with racial discrimination, analyzing and classifying the data in the novel based on the statements of the problem. After doing several steps in collecting data, then it is analyzed to answer the research questions. Furthermore, the data collection were completed from the source, the data analyzed through the following procedure: First, Highlighting and collecting the quotation that related to racism in order to be an evidence to support the writer's arguments. Second, analyzing the data. Here, the writer writes the data into paragraphs and relating to the theories which the writer already chose. Lastly, Summarizing the data. After the data has been analyzed and verified as valid and relevant to the study questions, the final stage is to form a conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Racial Discrimination in Interior Chinatown Novel

In the story, Asian Americans are typecast as exotic, servile, or sexless, despite the fact that they have long been subject to discrimination in the media. This adds to the marginalization of Asian Americans and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

Individual Discrimination

In the novel "Interior Chinatown," individual discrimination is a recurring theme that is explored through the experiences of the protagonist, Willis Wu. One example of this discrimination can be found in his attempt to audition for a role as a Kung Fu Guy in a television show. Despite his talent and experience, Willis is repeatedly typecast and denied opportunities to play more nuanced characters. This discrimination is solely based on his race and the preconceived notions that others hold about Asian Americans. Reflecting on his experiences in the entertainment industry, Willis describes his disillusionment with the limitations placed upon him as an Asian American actor. As quoted from the text below.

"I thought I could be anything I wanted to be, but I was wrong. Turns out, I was just a Supporting Oriental. A generic Asian man. A smiling, wordless background body with a mop in his hand or a camera around his neck, occasionally spouting lines like 'Yes, sir' or 'I'm sorry' or 'It wasn't my fault.'" (p. 49)

The novel of Interior Chinatown Shows the harmful impact of discrimination on individuals and serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of diversity, inclusion, and representation in all aspects of society. In one scene, Willis talked to his father about his aspirations to become a leading man in Hollywood. His father responded with skepticism and discouragement. It is quoted as dialogue below.

"Lead roles are not for people like us. The best you can hope for is to be a sidekick, a second banana. You want to be white? That's what you want?" (p. 16)

The quotation shows that Willis's father, like many Asian Americans, had internalized racist stereotypes and believed that they were inherently inferior to white people. He didn't believe that his son could succeed as a leading man because he saw Hollywood as a white-dominated industry that would never fully accept or value Asian Americans.

This kind of individual racism could be especially insidious because it comes from within one's own community or family, and could perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit opportunities for Asian Americans to fully express themselves and achieve their goals.

Institutional Discrimination

Throughout the novel, the characters in the book were constantly confronted with the systemic barriers that prevented Asian Americans from accomplishing success and equality in the United States. One instance of this could be found on page 119, where Willis was discussing his role as Generic Asian Man with his fellow actors on set. They discussed the way that Asian Americans were often typecast and marginalized in Hollywood, and one of the actors said:

"Everything in this country is designed to keep us down, to make us feel like we don't belong. The schools, the jobs, the media. It's all set up to make us feel small, insignificant, like we'll never be good enough." (p. 87)

This quote highlights the way that institutional racism can be pervasive and all encompassing, affecting every aspect of Asian Americans' lives. From the way they are educated to the jobs they are allowed to have, Asian Americans are often marginalized and denied opportunities for success and upward mobility.

"Chinatown is where they wanted us. It's where they put us. It's where they could keep an eye on us, control us, make sure we didn't get too big for our britches. They liked us as long as we stayed in our little boxes, played by their rules, didn't make too much noise." (p. 64)

This quote highlighted how institutional racism was used to confine and control marginalized communities like Chinatown. By creating a separate, segregated space for Chinese Americans to live in, the dominant society maintained its power and control over them. This also reinforced the idea that Chinese Americans were somehow "other" and not fully part of American society.

Overall, this quote demonstrated how institutional racism could manifest in the physical and social segregation of marginalized communities, and how it could perpetuate harmful stereotypes and inequality.

Structural Discrimination

In "Interior Chinatown," structural discrimination is reflected in the limited and stereotypical roles available to Asian American actors within the entertainment industry. The protagonist, Willis Wu, faces constant typecasting and is relegated to playing generic Asian characters, perpetuating the stereotypes that have historically marginalized Asian Americans in media.

We can see from the quote from page 8

"First, you have to work your way up, starting from the bottom, it goes :

5. background Orientale Male.

4. Dead Asian Man.

3. Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy.

2. Generic Asian Man Number 2/Waiter.

1. Generic Asian Man Number one. And then if you make it that far (hardly anyone does) you get stuck at Number One for a while" (p. 8)

The quote described a hierarchical system within the entertainment industry, where Asian characters were categorized and limited to stereotypical roles. The list started with background Oriental Male, followed by Dead Asian Man, Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy, Generic Asian Man Number Two/Waiter, and finally, Generic Asian Man Number One. The progression from lower to higher numbers represented the perceived hierarchy of roles for Asian actors.

This ranking system demonstrated how structural discrimination operated by restricting Asian actors to repetitive and marginalized roles, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting opportunities for authentic and diverse representation. The characters were trapped within these predefined roles, struggling to break free from the confines of the industry's limited imagination

Another quotation of structural discrimination is showed below:

"Kung Fu Guy is not like the other slots in the hierarchy- there isn't always someone occupying the position, as in whoever the top guy is at any given time, that's the default guy who gets trotted out whenever there's kung fu to be done. Only a very special Asian can be worthy of the title" (p. 9)

The quote referred to the position of "Kung Fu Guy" within the hierarchy of roles. Unlike other slots in the hierarchy, this position was not consistently occupied. Instead, whoever was deemed the top guy at any given time became the default choice for portraying the character whenever there was a need for kung fu-related scenes. This implied that only a select few Asians were considered worthy of playing the role of "Kung Fu Guy."

This example showcased structural discrimination by illustrating the limited opportunities and stereotypes faced by Asian actors within the entertainment industry. The position of "Kung Fu Guy" was portrayed as a prestigious and coveted role, but it was often reserved for only a few individuals who met certain criteria or expectations. This reinforced the notion that only a specific type of Asian actor could be deemed suitable for such roles, perpetuating narrow and limiting representations.

2. The Struggle of the Main Character on Racial Discrimination in Interior Chinatown.

Bhabha's concept of racism expands our understanding beyond overt acts of discrimination, highlighting the complex interplay of power, cultural representation, hybridity, mimicry, and the creation of alternative spaces for cultural negotiation. His work has been influential in postcolonial studies and contributes to the ongoing exploration of race, identity, and power dynamics in contemporary societies.

Mimicry

The concept of mimicry is reflected in the way Willis is asked to perform and embody certain Asian stereotypes, such as the "Generic Asian Man" or the "Background Oriental Male." He is repeatedly cast in roles that perpetuate cultural caricatures and reinforce the dominant narratives surrounding Asian Americans. The exploration of mimicry in "Interior Chinatown" sheds light on the complexities and struggles faced by Asian American actors in the entertainment industry. It invites readers to critically examine the role of mimicry in reinforcing cultural biases and encourages the embrace of diverse and authentic representations that go beyond stereotypes.

The idea of mimicry and cultural appropriation was a theme that ran throughout the book. One example could be found on page 44, where Willis reflected on the limited roles available to Asian American actors in Hollywood:

"...we were always playing some caricature of ourselves, or worse, someone else's idea of us. It was like a form of identity theft. They took our faces and our bodies and put them on display, but they didn't want us, not really. They wanted their version of us, a cheap imitation, a copy of a copy, something that looked like us but wasn't us." (p. 44)

This quote highlighted the way that Hollywood often relied on racial stereotypes and caricatures when depicting Asian Americans, rather than allowing them to portray complex, nuanced characters with their own agency and subjectivity. This could be seen as a form of cultural appropriation and mimicry, as the dominant culture took elements of Asian American culture and used them for its own purposes, without fully understanding or respecting their meaning and significance.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence, according to Homi K. Bhabha, referred to the simultaneous existence of contradictory feelings, attitudes, or beliefs within an individual or a community. It represented the complex and often conflicting ways in which individuals negotiated their identities and navigated the intersections of culture, power, and representation. The ambivalence was further exemplified through the depiction of the "Generic Asian Man" character, a recurring role that various characters in the story inhabited. This character embodied the struggle between assimilation and cultural authenticity. While the character was viewed as a representation of Asian culture, it was also a one-dimensional and reductive portrayal, reflecting the tension between visibility and marginalization.

In the novel "Interior Chinatown," the theme of ambivalence was explored through the experiences of the protagonist, Willis Wu. An example could be found on page 26, where Willis described his experience growing up as an Asian American in a predominantly white neighborhood:

"I always felt like I was walking a tightrope, trying to find the right balance between fitting in and standing out. I wanted to be like everyone else, to blend in, but at the same time, I knew I could never truly be like them. I was always different, always other."(p, 26)

This quote highlighted the ambivalence that many marginalized individuals experienced as they navigated the tension between assimilation and cultural identity. Willis's desire to fit in with his white peers was tempered by his awareness that he would never truly be accepted as one of them, due to his race and ethnicity. This sense of ambivalence created a complex and shifting sense of identity for Willis, as he tried to negotiate between competing cultural norms and expectations.

Hybridity

Hybridity, according to Homi K. Bhabha, referred to the mixing and blending of different cultures, identities, and perspectives. It highlighted the complex and transformative nature of cultural interactions, where new meanings, forms, and identities emerged through the encounter of diverse influences.

In "Interior Chinatown," the characters navigated the boundaries between their Chinese heritage and their experiences within American society. They embodied hybrid identities that were shaped by their cultural background and their interactions with the dominant culture. The protagonist, Willis Wu, embodied hybridity as he grappled with his Chinese roots while participating in the American entertainment industry, constantly shifting between his roles as a performer and his desire for genuine self-expression. The novel portrayed hybridity through the characters' experiences of cultural blending and negotiation. They navigated between traditional Chinese customs, such as family expectations and rituals, and the American context they inhabited. The blending of languages, accents, and cultural practices reflected the hybrid nature of their identities and the complexities of belonging to multiple worlds.

One example can be found on page 64, where Willis is reflecting on the ways in which he is expected to perform his identity as a Chinese American:

"I am supposed to be Chinese, but not too Chinese. Asian, but not too Asian. American, but not too American. I am supposed to be just enough of each to be exotic and yet familiar, to be interesting but not threatening." (p.64)

This quote highlights the pressure that marginalized individuals face to perform their identity in ways that conform to dominant cultural expectations, while also being "exotic" enough to be perceived as different and interesting. This performance of identity can be seen as a form of hybridity, as it involves the negotiation and blending of different cultural and social codes in order to create a sense of belonging and recognition. However, this process of hybridity is fraught with tension and contradiction, as Willis must constantly navigate the conflicting expectations and stereotypes imposed upon him by different social groups.

On the other hand, this process of hybridity can also be a source of anxiety and insecurity, as Willis is forced to constantly negotiate his sense of identity in relation to the expectations of others. This suggests that the relationship between hybridity and power is complex and contingent, and that cultural identity is always subject to negotiation and contestation.

"You calling me a model minority", "You said it, I didn't. Don't you see? This is how it works. We're fighting with each other. I don't want doing this anymore than you do." (p. 58)

The quoted passage portrayed a conversation between two characters discussing the notion of the "model minority" stereotype. The term "model minority" was often used to describe Asians who were perceived as successful, high-achieving, and conforming to societal expectations. The dialogue between the characters suggested a tension and disagreement about this stereotype.

The discussion about being labeled as a "model minority" implied a clash between the dominant culture's expectations and the individuals' desires for authentic self-expression. This clash reflected the hybridity experienced by the characters, who navigated between their cultural heritage and the pressure to conform to societal expectations.

By engaging with the concept of hybridity, the novel invited readers to question and challenge fixed notions of identity, encouraging them to embrace the multifaceted nature of their own cultural backgrounds. It underscored the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse identities and

experiences, ultimately fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of hybridity in contemporary society..

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the issues of racial discrimination that shown in the novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu, the writer can conclude two findings, which are racial discrimination in and the struggle of the main character. The racial discrimination in the novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu comes with two types of race individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination. The main problem in the book is about prejudice and stereotyping toward Asian people. It can be categorized the type of discrimination with individual discrimination, structural discrimination and institutional discrimination.

The struggle of the main character can be seen in the novel from the beginning until the end of the story. In this study, it can be seen the journey of the main character as an Asian American actor navigating the limitation and expectation thrust on him. the main character often find himself pressured to conform to stereotypes and to imitate the expected behavior and roles given to him as an Asian American actor. Being limited to reach the goal just because of his race really shows the racial problems.

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