



The Artist's Curse in Contemporary Literature: Creativity, Identity, and Ethical Collapse in R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface*

Dr. A. Banupriya

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science Technology and Advanced Studies.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22049538>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 25-06-2026

Accepted: 18-07-2026

Published: 20-08-2026

Keywords:

Artist's Curse, Contemporary Literature, R. F. Kuang, Yellowface, Creativity, Authorship, Literary Ethics, Identity Politics, Publishing Industry, Psychological Conflict

ABSTRACT

The image of the suffering artist has long occupied a significant place in literary discourse, giving rise to what may be termed the "Artist's Curse" theory. This concept suggests that artistic creativity is often accompanied by psychological turmoil, ethical dilemmas, alienation, and an insatiable desire for recognition. While the trope has traditionally been associated with Romantic and Modernist writers, contemporary literature revisits and redefines the idea within the context of publishing, cultural appropriation, social media, and the commodification of creativity. R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) offers a compelling exploration of the modern artist's curse by presenting a protagonist whose ambition transforms into obsession, guilt, and moral disintegration. Rather than portraying creativity as a purely inspirational act, the novel exposes the anxieties surrounding authorship, originality, and literary success in an increasingly competitive publishing industry. This paper examines *Yellowface* through the lens of the Artist's Curse, arguing that Kuang dismantles the romantic myth of the tortured genius and reconstructs it within the realities of twenty-first-century literary production. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that the curse lies not merely in artistic suffering but in the relentless pursuit of validation, authenticity, and commercial success. The article

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.



contributes to contemporary literary criticism by expanding the applicability of the Artist's Curse as a critical framework for interpreting modern fiction and the ethical complexities of creative identity.

Introduction

The relationship between artistic creativity and suffering has fascinated literary scholars for centuries. From the Romantic conception of the solitary genius to the Modernist representation of fragmented artistic consciousness, literature has repeatedly portrayed the artist as an individual burdened by emotional conflict, alienation, and relentless self-examination. This recurring representation has evolved into what may be described as the Artist's Curse, a conceptual framework that interprets creativity as a condition inseparable from psychological, ethical, and existential struggles. Although the phrase is not institutionalized as an independent literary theory, it has become increasingly relevant in interdisciplinary studies that examine the intersections of literature, psychology, philosophy, and cultural criticism.

Traditionally, the Artist's Curse emphasized the emotional suffering of poets, painters, and novelists whose artistic brilliance appeared inseparable from personal tragedy. The lives of John Keats, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, and Vincent van Gogh have frequently reinforced this cultural imagination. Contemporary literature, however, revises this paradigm by relocating artistic suffering from personal melancholy to professional anxiety. Modern writers encounter different forms of artistic crisis, including competition within the publishing industry, questions of originality, identity politics, copyright disputes, social media scrutiny, and the commercialization of literature. Consequently, the curse of the contemporary artist extends beyond emotional vulnerability and encompasses ethical uncertainty and institutional pressure.

R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* exemplifies this transformation. Published in 2023, the novel examines the competitive world of contemporary publishing through the experiences of June Hayward, an unsuccessful writer who appropriates the unpublished manuscript of her deceased friend, Athena Liu, and publishes it as her own. The resulting success gradually transforms into paranoia, guilt, fear, and psychological deterioration. Rather than celebrating artistic achievement, the novel exposes the moral contradictions that accompany literary fame and commercial recognition.

This paper argues that *Yellowface* redefines the Artist's Curse by demonstrating that contemporary artistic suffering emerges not solely from creative inspiration but from the pressures of authorship, public visibility, and ethical compromise. Through the framework of the Artist's Curse, the novel reveals how the pursuit of literary success ultimately destroys the artist's sense of identity and authenticity. The discussion



further illustrates that Kuang challenges the romantic myth of the suffering genius by presenting creativity as a contested cultural practice shaped by privilege, ambition, and institutional power.

Theoretical Framework: The Artist's Curse

The Artist's Curse may be understood as a critical concept that investigates the paradoxical relationship between creativity and suffering. Literary history consistently portrays artists as individuals who possess extraordinary imaginative abilities while simultaneously enduring emotional instability, social alienation, or moral conflict. Rather than treating suffering as an accidental consequence of artistic production, the theory views it as an integral component of the creative experience.

The origins of this concept can be traced to Romantic aesthetics, where artistic genius was celebrated as a force transcending ordinary human experience. M. H. Abrams observes in *The Mirror and the Lamp* that Romantic writers shifted literary attention from external reality to the internal imagination of the artist, establishing creativity as an intensely subjective process. Friedrich Nietzsche similarly argues in *The Birth of Tragedy* that artistic creation arises from the perpetual tension between order and chaos, reason and instinct. Together, these critical perspectives suggest that creativity flourishes through conflict rather than stability.

Within contemporary literary studies, the Artist's Curse extends beyond emotional suffering to include professional insecurity, ethical compromise, cultural appropriation, and public performance. The artist becomes vulnerable not merely because of heightened emotional sensitivity but because creative labour is increasingly evaluated through market success, public opinion, and institutional recognition. Consequently, artistic identity becomes unstable, continuously negotiated between personal authenticity and commercial expectation.

Viewed from this perspective, *Yellowface* presents an ideal contemporary illustration of the Artist's Curse. June Hayward's tragedy originates not in the absence of talent but in her inability to reconcile ambition with ethical responsibility. Her psychological collapse reflects the destructive consequences of transforming artistic creation into a competitive pursuit of recognition rather than an authentic expression of imagination.

Creativity, Envy, and the Burden of Authorship in *Yellowface*

R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* presents creativity as a contested space where artistic ambition is shaped by envy, insecurity, and institutional power rather than by inspiration alone. The novel departs from the



Romantic celebration of artistic genius and instead exposes the precarious position of the contemporary writer within an intensely competitive literary marketplace. Through the character of June Hayward, Kuang demonstrates that the greatest burden of the modern artist is not merely the challenge of producing meaningful literature but the constant struggle for visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. Read through the framework of the Artist's Curse, the novel reveals how creativity becomes inseparable from psychological conflict and ethical compromise.

At the beginning of the novel, June is introduced as an aspiring novelist whose first publication has failed to achieve commercial success. Despite years of dedication to writing, she remains overshadowed by Athena Liu, a celebrated literary figure whose novels receive critical acclaim and international recognition. This imbalance establishes the emotional foundation of the narrative. June does not simply desire success; she desires the recognition that accompanies artistic prestige. Her frustration gradually transforms into resentment, suggesting that the curse of the contemporary artist often begins with comparison rather than with creation itself.

The sudden death of Athena Liu becomes the turning point in June's artistic journey. When she discovers Athena's unpublished manuscript, she decides to claim it as her own and publishes it under a revised title. This act of appropriation marks the beginning of her psychological decline. Although June achieves the literary fame she had always desired, her success is founded upon deception. The novel therefore challenges conventional assumptions that artistic recognition produces fulfilment. Instead, Kuang demonstrates that success obtained through unethical means intensifies anxiety and self-alienation.

The Artist's Curse becomes increasingly visible through June's fragmented consciousness. Rather than enjoying her newfound reputation, she lives in constant fear of exposure. Every interview, public appearance, and social media discussion becomes a reminder that her identity as an author lacks authenticity. Creativity no longer functions as a liberating force but as a source of relentless psychological pressure. June's imagination, once directed toward storytelling, is redirected toward constructing elaborate justifications for her actions. The creative mind becomes imprisoned within its own fabrications.

This transformation illustrates a significant departure from the traditional image of the suffering artist. Romantic literature frequently portrayed artistic pain as the consequence of extraordinary emotional sensitivity or existential loneliness. In *Yellowface*, however, suffering originates from ethical failure and professional insecurity. June's artistic crisis is not caused by a lack of inspiration but by her inability to distinguish ambition from integrity. Kuang thereby redefines the Artist's Curse as an ethical condition shaped by the structures of contemporary publishing.



Another important dimension of the novel concerns the commodification of literature. Books are repeatedly presented as marketable products whose value depends upon publicity, branding, and commercial appeal. Literary awards, bestseller lists, promotional interviews, and online reviews become mechanisms through which artistic success is measured. Within this environment, originality itself becomes a commodity subject to economic competition. The publishing industry rewards visibility as much as literary merit, encouraging writers to cultivate public identities that are often disconnected from their authentic creative selves.

June gradually internalizes these commercial expectations. She begins to perceive writing less as an act of artistic expression than as a performance designed to satisfy publishers, critics, and readers. Every decision concerning the manuscript becomes influenced by questions of marketability and public reception. Consequently, the creative process loses its ethical foundation. The artist becomes both producer and product, simultaneously creating literature while marketing an idealized version of the self.

The novel also foregrounds questions of cultural ownership and representation. Athena's manuscript, which focuses on Chinese labourers during the First World War, carries historical and cultural significance. June's decision to appropriate this narrative raises complex debates concerning authorship, privilege, and cultural identity. While June repeatedly insists that literature should transcend racial boundaries, the novel exposes the unequal power structures governing whose stories receive recognition and whose voices remain marginalized. The Artist's Curse therefore extends beyond individual psychology into broader cultural politics, demonstrating that artistic production is deeply embedded within systems of race, privilege, and institutional authority.

Kuang refuses to provide simplistic moral resolutions. June is neither presented as an irredeemable villain nor as an innocent victim of circumstance. Instead, she embodies the contradictions of contemporary authorship. She possesses genuine literary ability, yet her ambition consistently overrides her ethical judgement. This ambiguity enriches the novel's exploration of the Artist's Curse by illustrating that artistic talent alone cannot guarantee moral integrity. Creativity and ethics emerge as distinct, though inseparable, dimensions of literary production.

The psychological deterioration of June intensifies as accusations of plagiarism circulate online. Digital culture magnifies every controversy through anonymous commentary, viral discussions, and public condemnation. Social media functions as a modern equivalent of the artist's conscience, constantly reminding June that her literary identity rests upon a fraudulent foundation. Her paranoia grows with each online debate, and she becomes incapable of distinguishing legitimate criticism from imagined persecution.



Kuang demonstrates that contemporary artistic suffering is amplified by digital surveillance, where the boundaries between public reputation and private identity become increasingly unstable.

From the perspective of the Artist's Curse, June's decline illustrates that creativity cannot flourish when it is detached from authenticity. The external rewards of literary success fail to compensate for the internal consequences of deception. Rather than liberating the artist, fame becomes another mechanism of imprisonment. The more recognition June receives, the greater her psychological burden becomes. Artistic success thus functions paradoxically as the very source of her destruction.

Ultimately, *Yellowface* dismantles the enduring myth that suffering automatically produces great art. Instead, Kuang argues that suffering resulting from dishonesty, exploitation, and relentless competition ultimately corrupts creativity itself. The novel suggests that authentic artistic achievement requires not only imagination but also ethical responsibility. Through June Hayward's tragic trajectory, Kuang reimagines the Artist's Curse for the twenty-first century, presenting it as the consequence of a literary culture in which ambition, commercialism, and identity politics frequently overshadow the genuine pursuit of artistic truth.

Conclusion

R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* reimagines the traditional concept of the Artist's Curse by relocating artistic suffering from the realm of Romantic melancholy to the realities of the contemporary publishing industry. Rather than portraying the artist as an isolated genius overwhelmed by inspiration, the novel presents creativity as a practice shaped by competition, market forces, cultural politics, and ethical responsibility. June Hayward's psychological decline illustrates that the greatest burden of the modern artist is not the act of creation itself but the relentless pursuit of recognition in an environment where originality, authenticity, and identity are constantly scrutinized.

Viewed through the framework of the Artist's Curse, *Yellowface* demonstrates that artistic ambition becomes destructive when it is detached from integrity. June's appropriation of Athena Liu's manuscript initiates a cycle of deception that transforms literary success into psychological imprisonment. Her growing paranoia, fear of exposure, and fractured sense of self reveal that creative achievement obtained through unethical means ultimately undermines the artist's identity. The novel thus challenges the long-standing cultural myth that suffering naturally produces artistic greatness. Instead, Kuang argues that creativity flourishes only when supported by honesty, accountability, and respect for the experiences of others.

The novel also broadens the scope of the Artist's Curse by connecting personal suffering with institutional structures. Publishing houses, literary prizes, online reviews, and social media collectively



influence how authors are perceived and rewarded. Artistic identity is therefore constructed not only through individual talent but also through systems of cultural validation and commercial success. Kuang exposes the tensions between artistic freedom and market expectations, demonstrating that contemporary writers negotiate multiple forms of pressure that extend far beyond the creative process.

Another significant contribution of *Yellowface* lies in its interrogation of authorship and cultural ownership. By foregrounding questions of race, representation, and privilege, the novel demonstrates that creativity is inseparable from ethical responsibility. The Artist's Curse consequently emerges not merely as psychological suffering but as the moral consequences of exploiting another person's voice for personal gain. This reinterpretation transforms the concept into a valuable critical framework for analysing twenty-first-century literature.

The study concludes that the Artist's Curse remains a productive lens for understanding contemporary fiction because it accommodates changing definitions of creativity and artistic identity. While earlier literary traditions associated the curse with loneliness, emotional instability, and existential despair, Kuang reveals that modern artistic suffering increasingly arises from professional competition, public visibility, digital surveillance, and ethical conflict. *Yellowface* therefore expands the significance of the Artist's Curse beyond individual psychology, demonstrating that creativity in the contemporary world is deeply influenced by cultural institutions and ideological power structures.

Future research may extend this framework to other contemporary novels that explore authorship, artistic identity, and the politics of literary production. Comparative studies involving works by Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, or Sally Rooney may further illuminate the evolving representation of artistic labour in twenty-first-century English literature. The Artist's Curse thus continues to offer a meaningful theoretical perspective for examining how literature negotiates the enduring relationship between creativity, ambition, ethics, and human vulnerability.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 1953.
2. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 142-148.
3. Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 113-138.



4. Kuang, R. F. *Yellowface*. HarperCollins, 2023.
5. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1967.
6. Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1994.
7. Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own*. Princeton University Press, 1977.
8. Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
9. Wimsatt, W. K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1946, pp. 468-488.
10. Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. Columbia University Press, 1983.