

## Juniper Hayward's Defense Process to Achieves Fame in the *Yellowface* Novel by R.F. Kuang

Nur Anggraheni Putri Mariono<sup>1✉</sup>, Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama<sup>2</sup>  
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya<sup>1,2</sup>  
✉ [nuranggraheniputrimariono@gmail.com](mailto:nuranggraheniputrimariono@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

The *Yellowface* (2023) novel by R.F. Kuang shows the kind of struggle in Juniper Hayward faces a lot of public obstacles and criticism upon the publication of her novel, due to her successful dream coming true. Slowly, June's secret was revealed making the situation even worse; her haters started digging up evidence to expose her faults to the public. Problems that happened in June caused her to build a defense mechanism to protect the career she had always dreamed of as a writer. Therefore, researchers find several problems arise: 1. How does the type of Juniper Hayward's defense mechanism in the *Yellowface* novel? The main character's research data were collected through the defense mechanisms identified in the novel's dialogue. This research aims to use a descriptive qualitative method based on data from novel *Yellowface* and analyze it with Sigmund Freud's theory of defense mechanisms. Researchers found the main character's defense mechanisms in problem-solving of conflict and psychological problems, including denial, projection, rationalization, and intellectualization.

**Keywords:** Defense; Ambition; Self-control

### Abstrak:

Novel *The Yellowface* (2023) karya R.F. Kuang menggambarkan perjuangan yang dihadapi Juniper Hayward saat menghadapi banyak rintangan dan kritik publik setelah penerbitan novelnya, akibat mimpi suksesnya yang terwujud. Secara perlahan, rahasia June terungkap, membuat situasi semakin buruk; para pembencinya mulai menggali bukti untuk mengungkap kelemahannya kepada publik. Masalah yang terjadi pada Juni membuatnya membangun mekanisme pertahanan untuk melindungi karier yang selalu diimpikannya sebagai penulis. Oleh karena itu, para peneliti menemukan beberapa masalah yang muncul: 1. Bagaimana jenis mekanisme pertahanan Juniper Hayward dalam novel *Yellowface*? Data penelitian karakter utama dikumpulkan melalui mekanisme pertahanan yang diidentifikasi dalam dialog novel. Penelitian ini bertujuan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif berdasarkan data dari novel *Yellowface* dan menganalisisnya dengan teori mekanisme pertahanan Sigmund Freud. Peneliti menemukan mekanisme pertahanan karakter utama dalam penyelesaian konflik dan masalah psikologis, termasuk penyangkalan, proyeksi, rasionalisasi, dan intelektualisasi.

**Kata kunci:** Pertahanan; Ambisi; Pengendalian diri

## INTRODUCTION

Social competition profoundly influences human society, which develops the beginning of ambition, envy, and dissatisfaction in human needs. The psychological research by Chamorro-Premuzic (2011, p. 2) states that people have different tendencies and motivations regarding emotional control and competition. These differences significantly influence character and behavior. In this case, during the rise of social issues, humans managed to survive using a problem-solving strategy based on their instincts. Social problems can exist in other aspects of human life, including education, the environment, and the workplace. In the workplace, one example of intense competition is found in the publishing industry. The publishing world is an intense competition between writers, agencies, and readers. This problem arises from unstable structures driven by industry dynamics, in which the popularity of a work among competitors is the measure of success or failure for industry participants (p. 5). The measure creates a stereotype among writers and agencies in the publishing industry leading them to start producing and competing to secure the best ratings for works that are famous and worth readers' attention. One of the most famous writers of the modern era has written about issues in the publishing industry. She explores diverse issues and genres in her novel, highlighting sensitive topics in the publishing world through an accessible, relatable writing style. The writer's identity is Rebecca F. Kuang; she is currently known as R. F. Kuang.

R. F. Kuang as a popular American writer among readers, her academic background had a huge impact on her work, which led her to receive a lot of awards and book admirers.

R. F. Kuang has written her ideas as best-selling novels, *Yellowface* is a Novel, which she published in 2023 (Kuang, 2023). The *Yellowface* novel centers on Juniper Hayward, the main character. A struggling writer dreaming of success, June acts impulsively without thought or consideration, claiming the original manuscript of her recently passed friend, Athena Liu, a Chinese-American writer who was highly popular at the time. This action brings June into the public eye, with all the ups and downs that come with it.

June action brings her fame and recognition, but also puts her reputation at risk.  
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*Yellowface* novel shows June as a character who is desperate to prove her worth, but has a weak personality and is an ambitious person, thus revealing how personal weaknesses and lack of ambition can damage a person's morality. June's story illustrates how the modern digital age's obsession with fame is a universal desire to be recognized and praised in competitive fields. June uses all her strategies to keep her fame. June is realized as a form of human character that is strong in saving their own ambition to achieve their dream, and using several kinds of strategies to achieve their goals. Thus, the impact on human psychology was found in June's character. As Vaillant (1992) describes, the unconscious strategies used by the ego to manage painful emotions, protect self-image, and reduce internal conflict are called defenses (p. 4). June's reliance on her rationalization, denial, and projection shows that psychological defenses can distort her moral reasoning and enable her to maintain a sense of identity despite overwhelming feelings of guilt and social pressure. Cahyawati et al. (2025) also describe in their article that each character in the subject study has different defense mechanisms to deal with trauma and anxiety within themselves. This case relates to June as the subject in the novel *Yellowface*, who has several defense mechanisms as a form of self-defense against emotional anxiety. Thus, *Yellowface* provides not only a critique of the publishing industry but also a case study of how individuals deploy defenses in response to social and psychological pressures.

The researcher finds several studies by three researchers that used the same object, or the *Yellowface* novel, and the other one had the same theory. First, the researcher finds a similar study with the title *Negotiating identity of the main character in the novel Yellowface by R. F. Kuang* that uses a novel object, *Yellowface*, and Juniper Hayward as a character. This study describes and focuses on June in negotiating her identity as a Chinese writer and as an owner of the novel *Last Front* with interactive process, agency, culture, and power (Kaimuddin, 2024).

Second, *the main character's motivation to become a famous writer described in R.F. Kuang's Yellowface thesis* is another paper with a similar object. This paper describes a different analysis that focuses on June's motivation as a writer to fulfill her need to be famous using the hierarchy of needs theory (Fauni, 2025).

Lastly, the same object in the *Reading Issues of Race and Ethnicity Through Yellowface Novel as Popular Literature* paper shows that the researcher analyzes race and ethnicity

issues in America raised by the author in the novel, with the publishing industry as the story's backdrop. This study focuses on how readers interpret novels through reviews on the Goodreads platform. Using Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, this study categorizes reader responses into three types: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional (Azzahra, 2025).

Based on the explanation above, the researcher finds some interesting points in the *Yellowface* novel after reading the previous studies and interest to analyzing the main character's psychological issue using defense mechanism theory, which focuses on the main character's defense during achieving her fame, and analyzes kind of June Hayward's defense mechanism in her strategy to keep her publishing fame in the novel *Yellowface*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defense Mechanism

Defense mechanisms are strategies developed unconsciously or as a form of self-protection against psychological problems. This theory was proposed by Freud in 1966, underwent significant changes over time, and was later developed by his sister, Anna Freud. (Vaillant, 1992). According to Anna Freud (p. 3, 1983), all defense mechanisms are protective of the individual against painful emotions, ideas, and drives, and they can also serve as part of an individual's healing process. Instead, they serve as needed tools to drive instincts and stabilize the external pressure. In this case, defense mechanisms help characters survive the social pressures they face, serving as solutions and even psychological motivators in differences of perspective, character, and culture. Besides that, the other uses of defense mechanisms are from an individual perspective. This applies in literature studies to analyzing the form of character pressure through the psychological background in the narrative. Anna Freud states that defense mechanisms are divided into several parts, and the five parts used in this study include: (Denial, Projection, Rationalization, and Intellectualization).

## RESEARCH METHODS

The descriptive qualitative method was conducted in this research based on Juniper Hayward's dialogue and *Yellowface* narration by R.F. Kuang. The descriptive qualitative method is called the real-world observation. The data collected consists of detailed

descriptions of people's conversations, events, and situations from the subjects of data analysis, completed with data analysis from other documents and memos to identify and correct information gaps (Koh & Owen, 2000). The researcher also outlines the steps of the procedure for this research: first, read the novel *Yellowface* as the subject of data analysis. second, collecting the point of the main character from the novel that relates to the defense mechanism. Third, analyze the full range of data types of Juniper Hayward's defense mechanism as presented in the novel. Fourth, collecting the secondary data to complete the analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Denial

June's bad feelings made her personality worse, causing her to fall even lower and feel jealous of Athena's success and the defense mechanism shown up. This defense mechanism caused by June that refused to admit that what she did was immoral by stealing Athena's work, it wasn't that she thought it was wrong, but rather that she convinced herself that she was "completing" a story that deserved to be told, "I never pretended to be Chinese, or made up life experiences that I didn't have. It's not fraud, what we're doing." (Kuang, 2023, p. 159). In the dialogue above, June used denial to reject reality or facts that were threatening to her. June used denial immediately after taking Athena's novel draft. However, June insisted that her immoral actions were not wrong. June uses denial or rejection by making statements to make herself appear to admit her bad morality and take refuge in her anxiety and guilt. This allows June to maintain her ambiguous belief in her innocence, stealing Athena's draft. According to Freud, this rejection is a defense mechanism that distorts public perception in order to maintain self-esteem.

### Projection

The evidence of the novel stealing has been revealed to the public through Candice, who was posing as Athena, and June's fear drove her to confess all her mistakes to the fake Athena. June transferred her guilt by making Athena appear manipulative and parasitic, "Athena was the leech, the vampire, the ghost who wouldn't let me go; Candice her deranged wannabe proxy. I am innocent." (Kuang, 2023, p. 241). The defense mechanism of projection emerged when June did not feel guilty and accused



others of having negative motives rather than facing her own insecurity and jealousy. She used projection to transfer unacceptable emotions or traits to others. On the other hand, this projection helped June distance herself from her mistakes, an immoral strategy she employed throughout the novel by blaming her deceased rival, Athena, for her anxiety. June's projection of hatred toward Athena relieved her of guilt and maintained her perception of her own moral superiority.

### **Rationalization**

The viral issue regarding evidence of June's cheating caused her to distance herself from the success she had achieved. This made June very fragile. However, June did not give up by putting up her defenses. After creating a defense mechanism of projection, June used rationalization as a reinforcement. Rationalization was formed because of June's persistence in justifying her actions by claiming that success in publishing was distributed unfairly and that she thought deserved the same recognition as Athena, "My only sin is loving literature too much, and refusing to let Athena's very prenatal work go to waste." (Kuang, 2023, p. 241). Through this rationalization, she transformed unethical behavior into seemingly noble actions. This mechanism is consistent with Freud's concept of secondary revision, in which individuals create socially acceptable explanations as a justification for unacceptable behavior. June justified her moral violations by describing them as acts of dedication she performed as a literary writer rather than theft.

### **Intellectualization**

June's intellectualization happens because she wants to free herself from her emotional pain. June transfers and releases these emotions through her logical thinking. This case causes the detachment of her emotional guilt over stealing Athena Liu's manuscript by turning the moral issue into an intellectual argument about authorship and originality, "No one in their right mind could call this stealing. That's what's most fucked up about this whole debacle. Mother Witch is my original creation. All Athena contributed was a couple of sentences, maybe some underlying imagery." (Kuang, 2023, p. 153). In the release of her third novel, the public found evidence of similarities in quotes from the novel Athena. June made a statement about intellectualization as a shield by viewing her mistakes as unintentional events rather than personal failures. In this case, June's emotions were somewhat well-controlled, and she was more aware of

the importance of her mental health. Therefore, June's thinking represents the intellectualization defense mechanism because June logically replaces emotional awareness with intellectual statements to protect her ego from guilt and anxiety.

## CONCLUSION(S)

In summary, Juniper Hayward's characterization and psychological journey in *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang reflects the complex intersection between ambition, morality, and self-preservation. Through Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, it is evident that June's behaviors such as denial, projection, rationalization, and intellectualization function as unconscious strategies to protect her ego from guilt and shame after stealing her friend, Athena Liu's manuscript. Her ambition to gain the "writer fame" transforms into a moral downfall. Kuang's narrative also portrays critiques of the cultural obsession with fame and authenticity in the competitive publishing industry. Therefore, the study concludes that June's defense mechanisms serve as both her psychological shield and the source of moral collapse, symbolizing the fragile boundary between success and self-deception in modern creative life.

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