



COLONIAL ECHOES IN IVORY TOWERS: THE WHITE GAZE IN CHOU'S NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Elaine Hsieh Chou's *disorientation* offers a compelling narrative that critiques the intellectual and racial hierarchy present in contemporary educational institutions. This article explores how the novel's depiction of Ingrid Yang, an Asian American doctorate student torn between institutional expectations and cultural heritage, dramatizes academic imperialism and the white gaze. The study investigates how race, power, and identity are negotiated in prestigious intellectual settings that still marginalize non-white scholars through close reading and postcolonial analysis. The white gaze manifests as an internalized mechanism that molds identity and belonging in addition to being a force of exterior judgment. This paper highlights the need to dismantle prevailing epistemologies in favor of more inclusive and egalitarian narratives by examining cultural appropriation, microaggressions, and the myth of meritocracy. It also illuminates the colonial echoes that still exist in academia.

Keywords: *Academic Imperialism, Cultural Appropriation, Identity Politics, Power Dynamics, Race, White Gaze.*

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are thought as a center which encourages curiosity and education as well as the development of society. You are able to find meritocratic paths towards understanding and exploration that are fair, respectful and respectable. It's the story of a distinct one, which has been marred by the absence of certain groups from the system and Colonial fascinations and an undeniable benefit of being white and wealthy can be hidden under the sparkling exterior. There's no blank space It's actually a framework which was built from the past of power and imperialism, particularly within the West. The legacy left behind by the colonial past is continuing to affect the manner that information is produced or shared and also the manner in which it's managed.

Disorientation by Elaine Hsieh Chou is an insightful review of the legacy left by colonialism, which remains visible within the university system at the present day, when universities are promoting diversification but adhere to strict policies. The phrase, which is traditionally linked to dominant white eyes as well as elitism often referred to as an "ivory tower," is the image of area that is the basis of the novel. With the help of Taiwanese American PhD student Ingrid Yang as the central character, Chou reveals the white eyes as a scientific as well as a democratic instrument used to construct an environment that commodifies and changes the image of people who aren't white. Ingrid's tale reveals that the universities provide a place where students have access to Eurocentric information. However, they're exaggerating and demeaning racism with its claims about the progress of society. If you're a professor who earns income by using Asian backgrounds, your work is at a crossroads which authenticity, authenticity, and honesty are at odds. Academic imperialism is the practices of academics who have white skin and who use the wealth of culture to gain prestige, but giving the same degree of respect to the culture that they are studying, and this is apparent through the influence of a teacher. Chou has a strong opinion against the idea that puts the assimilation of cultures over efficiency and competitiveness by focusing on the fact over the competition rather than looking at one character. In Disorientation Ingrid's quest for academic achievement and the relationships she has with her peers and the sense of her own self-worth and worth, are all impacted by the white gaze, which transcends the boundaries of an opinion. Ingrid invites readers to question the systemic racism caused by inaction within institutions, social phobias, and microaggressions. The book Disorientation Ingrid disproves the belief that meritocracy is an ideal in her institution. Ingrid's book Ingrid shows how those who are skeptical of the idea of the neutrality of those of different races face at school can be used as the battlefield.

Chou's description of Ingrid's psychological confusion provides an illustration of the immense anxiety that results from the society that acknowledges and controls diversity. With her stoic stares Ingrid does not just regain her voice, but she also exposes several flaws in the Western academic communities. Ingrid Yang, the main protagonist of the novel written by Elaine Hsieh Chou Ingrid Yang illustrates the feeling of becoming at a loss in the search to discover authenticity and truth, as well as the deeply embedded patterns of colonialism. Ingrid is located in an elite academic institution, which is a symbol of the notion of an "ivory tower"--illustrates how the structures of Western aesthetics are still an expression of control, power as well as erasers, which was typical from the time of colonialism. Ingrid finds herself compelled to find the real identity of one the characters - one of the characters is an Asian poet whose identity turns out as a fabrication created by a person with a white background from at the earliest. Cultural imitation has been transformed into a terrifying representation of imperialism and control at the universities in the story. Professors of privilege from white people that silences those suffering under oppression, and speaks in behalf of oppressed people.

Since the beginning, Ingrid complies with the rules from the established. It's clear that she is an emotional pressure on the majority of white. The way she conducts herself is continually scrutinized, evaluated and weighed against the inexperienced Eurocentric concept. This is a belief system that favors the superior notion of multiculturalism, but also allows the real challenge to cultural influence in each and every choice she takes. As Ingrid begins to uncover the truth in her studies and her path becomes a grueling struggle against this colonization of cultures. The growing anxiety of Ingrid and the relapse of her feelings and her decision to leave the world of academia are individual as well as an act of protest against the long-running colonial mindset that has been ingrained into universities. Ingrid changes the ways race, power, and understanding influence her choice to stand up against the path of discontent and silence contradiction to the normal. Ingrid acts as a character, and as a way to Chou to address racism that is institutionalized. This is true even in the most advanced of settings. colonial practices are more subdued as well as harmful methods. Therefore, the narrative of her tale is not about an issue about the concept of self-identity. It's about regaining authority over your personal story and fighting epistemic violence and revealing how information can be altered. What exactly does it mean to open up to a society that did not intend to recognize Ingrid for who she is? It's clear in her narrative. Chou employs Ingrid to demonstrate that the eyes of an individual who is white can become more than just one's eyes. it's an organizational structure, an orderly system, in addition to a power which could be shut down.

In Disorientation the author, Elaine Hsieh Chou reveals the legacy of colonialism which has been ingrained into the institutions of higher education by offering the most

concise and insightful analysis. The story is set within this novel, and is located within the so-called "ivory towers" of higher education. The book is an engaging literary examination of what it takes being a human being that thinks, and is able to question the eyes of a white female. Chou challenges the system of education that is racist, which is where people of different races are usually thought of as symbols of the variety and imagination of the human race, whereas knowledge is governed by Eurocentric lenses.

Chou is a comic writer who has a sensitive and sharp wit. The book is told by Ingrid Yang, a Taiwanese American doctoral student who discovers the most famous Asian poet that is the subject of her dissertation is in fact an American white male that is making a mistake in claiming to be an Asian similar ethnicity. The path that she has chosen is totally different. Alongside uncovering the strategies of cultural appropriation, this shocking research demonstrates that the white race continues to influence the way we deal with, and market the representations of the people of color as the race of Other. Chou utilizes this to provide a starting point to explore issues related to authenticity, authority and the impact of imperialism intellectual. In particular, the terms that is used to define acceptance frequently conceals the system of discrimination.

Screenwriter and writer Elaine Hsieh-Chou's research focuses on the interaction between identity, race, and the power structure within American universities and American as well as American society. Her work was widely acknowledged by critics and reviewers. Her debut novel, *Disorientation* (2022) *Disorientation*, it was picked as a New York Times Editors' choice and later selected to be included on the shortlist to be considered for the Thurber Prize for American Humor. In addition to having been the Young Lions Fiction Award finalist, Apple TV+ has chosen the book to play on its huge screen. Chou is an Rona Jaffe Graduate Fellow at NYU; Chou earned her MFA. Chou is also a recipient of an NYFA/NYSCA Artist Fellowship. Numerous magazines like *Guernica*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House Online*, *Black Warrior Review* and *The Atlantic* have published her Pushcart award-winning short story.

Chou has also contributed essays in *Vanity Fair* and *The Cut*. Chou is a mentor to aspiring writers with initiatives like *Tin House*, *Kundiman*, and *Catapult* as well as being an instructor and instructor in workshops for creative writing. It is in 2025 which Penguin Press is anticipated to launch her upcoming novel *What are You Really From* the collection of short stories. Chou is a household name within literary and intellectual communities and is fighting colonial echoes as well as the eyes of whites by displaying her sensibility to culture and quick sense of humor.

1.1. Objectives of the research

- To analyze the novel's depiction of the negotiation and contestation of identity, race, and belonging in the context of higher education.
- To investigate the philosophical, cultural, and psychological ramifications of the white gaze as well as the portrayal of Asian American individuals, particularly the protagonist Ingrid Yang.
- To examine how the novel portrays the struggle for belonging, race, and identity in the setting of higher education.

1.2. Research questions

1. How does the novel depict how the white gaze functions, specifically in relation to Asian American identity and agency?
2. In what ways do the experiences of Ingrid Yang and other racialized characters illustrate the idea of academic imperialism?
3. How does the protagonist's quest for self-awareness and resistance involve the intersections of race, gender, and identity?

2. Literature review

Postcolonial and critical race theories have long critically examined the continuation of colonial ideas in contemporary academic institutions, revealing the nuanced ways in which imperial power still controls the creation and legitimization of knowledge. The foundation for comprehending how the West has historically seen the East through a prism of exoticism and inferiority, incorporating colonial logic into intellectual frameworks, was established by Edward Said's (1978) seminal work *Orientalism*. Syed Farid Alatas (2003) elaborates on this idea of academic dominance by characterizing "academic dependency" as a situation where non-Western nations mostly rely on Western theories, validation, and publication channels, creating a distorted global intellectual hierarchy. It has been highlighted by scholars such as Raju (2006) that this type of epistemic colonialism is not only historical but also actively present in modern academic systems.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) and other postcolonial feminists contend that the subaltern is frequently marginalized within these frameworks and denied agency and subjectivity, even in discourses that purport to speak for them. The "white gaze," a term coined by Toni Morrison and Bell Hooks (1992), refers to the way racialized persons feel compelled to see themselves and their work through the prism of white standards, aesthetics, and expectations (Alonge, 2017). This gaze becomes institutionalized in higher education,

affecting curriculum, recruiting, funding, and academic reception, according to Griffin et al. (2021). These processes are vividly critiqued in Elaine Hsieh Chou's novel *Disorientation*, which shows how the white gaze skews identity, legitimacy, and belonging in academic settings.

Chou reveals the racial inequalities that are hidden but evident in American academia, as well as the layers of performative diversity, through the protagonist Ingrid Yang, a Taiwanese American PhD student. When Ingrid learns that a well-known Asian poet, who is at the heart of her dissertation, is actually a fabrication by a white professor, it sparks her disillusionment and reflects actual instances of cultural appropriation and the marketing of racial identities for academic prestige. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) asserted that regaining narrative power and questioning the linguistic and symbolic frameworks of colonialism are the first steps towards actual decolonization, and this plotline closely echoes that idea. Ingrid's psychological and emotional journey also resonates with Fanon's (2008) concept of the "epidermal schema"—the internalized sense of inferiority produced by the dominant gaze. The conflicting needs of survival, assimilation, and authenticity within a system that marginalizes and exoticizes her shatter her identity. Chou challenges readers to think about how academic systems use whiteness as a weapon to govern identity formation and intellectual merit by depicting Ingrid's breakdown in a way that is both literal and metaphorical.

The sarcastic genius and political urgency of Chou's story have won it praise from critics. According to *TaiwaneseAmerican.org* (2023) and *The Rumpus* (2022), *Disorientation* exposes the ideological follies of white-dominated intellectual culture by using comedy and absurdity as tactics of resistance. The inclusion of figures such as Vivian Vo in the book, who internalize and spread the white gaze, highlights Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) criticism of how colonial training breaks down solidarity among underprivileged people. These depictions demonstrate how epistemic violence is frequently sustained by both people who have been co-opted by the system and by dominant actors. Additionally, the tokenization of racial minorities in academia is criticized in *Disorientation*, as this practice reinforces white institutional power and frequently results in cosmetic inclusion. Echoing Griffin et al.'s (2021) claim that institutional diversity initiatives frequently mask the need for structural change, the novel emphasizes that diversity without decolonization is just another kind of control. Morrison's theory that narrative can act as a disruptive force that can upend established power structures is consistent with Chou's literary techniques.

3. Theoretical framework

Using the overlapping perspectives of Edward W. Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this article examines how the White Gaze functions in prestigious academic

settings, which are thus metaphorically referred to as the "Ivory Towers." It is placed within the intellectual landscape of postcolonial theory. The colonial afterlives ingrained in contemporary systems of knowledge, representation, and institutional inclusion are examined in this study by looking at Chou's account of racialized marginalization in academic institutions. Even in ostensibly liberal or multicultural settings, colonial ways of seeing, knowing, and silencing continue to shape the experiences of colored intellectuals. Said and Spivak both provide conceptual tools to reveal this.

1. The White Gaze's Epistemic Infrastructure and Said's Orientalism

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, (1978), offers a fundamental paradigm for comprehending how the West has historically created knowledge about the Other in ways that support its own supremacy. According to Said, Orientalism is a discourse and a system of representations that portray the "Orient" as unchanging, illogical, feminine, and inferior. It is not just a literary genre or a political philosophy like that. These depictions were—and remain—closely linked to imperial authority, defending colonial dominance in the name of advancing civilization. The White Gaze in the academia serves as a modern expression of Orientalist rhetoric in the context of Chou's experiences. Under the pretense of objectivity, neutrality, or meritocracy, the institution frequently perpetuates Eurocentric hierarchies despite its apparent commitment to diversity and inclusion. Chou is allowed to be visible, but only in certain predetermined capacities—as a symbol of institutional liberalism, a speaker for marginality, or a representation of cultural diversity. Said's concept of latent Orientalism—the unconscious, frequently unacknowledged mental models that nevertheless confine the racialized subject to simplistic dichotomies—is recalled by this conditional inclusion.

Furthermore, the monopoly of representational authority by dominating institutions is explained by Said's theory. Though not entirely visible, Chou's story is filtered by institutional logics that decide whether facets of her voice, identity, or criticism are acceptable. In this way, the White Gaze is about determining who may be understood and how, but it's also about regulating the terms of intelligibility. Therefore, Chou's subjectivity can only be understood after being filtered via the institutional norms of academic "objectivity" and racial decorum.

2. The Subalternity of Spivak and the Politics of Silencing

The micropolitics of voice, agency, and epistemic violence are examined by Spivak, whereas Said concentrates on the macro-structures of imperial discourse. The idea that subaltern subjects can just "speak" and be heard is complicated by Spivak in her landmark article "Can the Subaltern talk? (1988).

The subaltern is inaudible or misheard even when they speak, she contends, because dominant institutions shape the same circumstances that allow for speech. The technique of epistemic violence is the rearticulation of subaltern voices using hegemonic grammars that negate their radical potential, rather than the outright suppression of speech.

Chou's narrative makes this type of brutality very evident. Her criticisms of whiteness, marginalization, and institutional tokenism are frequently disregarded, reframed as emotional excess, or diluted into performative gestures of reform, despite the fact that she is officially empowered to speak in the academic setting. Her scholarly efforts are acknowledged only when they conform to the inclusive image of the prevailing institution. The simultaneous erasure and visibility of the colored academic, who is continuously deprived of discursive sovereignty despite appearing within the system, is Spivak's subaltern conundrum. Spivak's critique of strategic essentialism also cautions against the allure of institutional diversity frameworks, which simplify complicated identities into easily understood markers of multicultural success. As a woman of color, Chou develops into a valuable institutional asset whose presence supports the university's progressive self-image. But her voice is muted or pathologized when she subverts academic respectability norms or questions structural whiteness. This makes inclusion a containment tool, a sophisticated kind of visibility-based postcolonial management.

3. **The White Gaze in the Ivory Tower as Colonial Surveillance**

Combining the frameworks of Said and Spivak allows for a thorough theorization of the White Gaze as an academic epistemic surveillance mechanism. It involves more than just gazing; it involves organizing reality, deciding what should be heard, who should be seen, and under what circumstances. Racialized individuals are brought into the Ivory Tower, which turns into a place of disciplinary inclusion, but only to be watched over by white people. It functions through academic culture, peer review, policies, and curricula; it is a gentle yet potent gaze. The ambivalence of institutional inclusion is demonstrated by Chou's handling of this gaze. Her intellectual contributions are consistently overlooked, despite the fact that her existence is perceived as progress. Although she is requested to perform her identity, the circumstances behind that performance are not questioned. This dynamic represents what Said referred to as "the silent dogma of the West's cultural supremacy"—a doctrine that is ingrained in the systems of research financing, academic legitimacy, and discipline canons and no longer needs to be overtly stated.

Nevertheless, it is evident from Spivak's focus on the Western institutions' culpability in silencing that more is needed to destroy this gaze than just inclusion or representation. In order to do this, the academy's foundations must be decolonized through an epistemological rupture that takes seriously the histories, voices, and knowledges that have been routinely marginalized or appropriated.

4. Colonial Reverberations and present

This article's title, "Colonial Echoes in Ivory Towers," is meant to evoke strong feelings. The fact that the colonial project's epistemic structures are still present in the language, hierarchy, and procedures of modern academic institutions indicates that it did not stop with decolonization. This is where Said's and Spivak's views agree: the postcolonial is never truly post-. Instead, the ghosts of empire continue to haunt our institutions through aestheticized diversity, institutional gatekeeping, and knowledge production mechanisms. In this context, the White Gaze is the modern manifestation of colonial power, which is based on the subtly dominant control of norms, discourses, and emotions rather than on the use of force. Liberal inclusion that calls for silence, representation that eschews criticism, and visibility that serves as discipline are what keep it going. Under this gaze, the university preserves its colonial heritage while disguising it as post-racial and modernist.

4. Discussion

Elaine Hsieh Chou's *Disorientation* exposes how colonial power structures persist within academia through the white gaze and academic imperialism. The protagonist, Ingrid Yang, becomes a lens through which the novel critiques the marginalization of non-Western voices and the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge. This chapter explores how Chou's narrative reflects the ongoing colonization of intellectual spaces and calls for a decolonized academic discourse.

4.1. Surveillance, Silencing, and Spectacle: The White Gaze in *Disorientation*

In *Disorientation*, Elaine Hsieh Chou deftly analyzes the mechanisms of the white gaze in scholarly and social settings, presenting it as an extension of colonial visibility and epistemic control. In the story, being white serves as a normative framework that filters knowledge, legitimacy, and desirability in addition to being a racial identity. The Taiwanese American lead, Ingrid Yang, is racialized and is always being watched and interpreted; she is never allowed to speak without first being heard. This chapter examines how Chou's depiction of the white gaze aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory

of epistemic violence (1988) and Edward Said's idea of Orientalism (1978), demonstrating how Ingrid's visibility serves as a means of both exposure and silencing. The white gaze emerges early in the novel under the guise of academic encouragement. A white professor assures Ingrid "And your particular background is so unique. It doesn't have to be a disadvantage—it can be an advantage. Do you understand what I mean?" Ingrid nodded enthusiastically and jotted down the words "unique" and "advantage" in her notebook." (Chou, 2022, p. 12).

Despite its apparent support, this statement has strong colonial overtones. Her "unique" background—which is inherently white and male—is presented as a departure from the academic norm. Only when her differences are turned into a positive aspect of diversity are they accepted. This is in line with Said's thesis of Orientalism, which holds that the Orient is constituted as exotic, marginal, and interpretively dependent by the West rather than being given the freedom to define itself.

Despite being kindly expressed, the professor's remarks reinforce whiteness as the dominant component of academic culture by reducing Ingrid's identity to a performative signifier. In more intimate situations, the white gaze's function becomes more profound. Ingrid's white fiancé, Stephen, introduces her in a moment of cultural misidentification by saying "A twinge of annoyance bit her. She glanced at Stephen, smiling his pleasant smile. Of course—he had probably said "Chinese" instead of "Taiwanese" (Chou, 2022, p. 123).

In intercultural discourse, Stephen's racial generalization is a common example of erasure. It eliminates Ingrid's unique national and political identity and flattens and simplifies Asian identity into a single label. This exemplifies Spivak's idea of epistemic violence: dominant speech acts override the voice of the subaltern subject. Despite his good intentions, Stephen denies Ingrid narrative agency by asserting his power to speak for her. The white gaze becomes verbal, authoritative, and epistemic in this act, mediating even interpersonal connections. It is no longer merely visible. Ingrid's uneasiness extends beyond instances of racial mislabeling and encompasses emotional asymmetry. She notes about Stephen: "She didn't like, she realized how easily he accommodated fame...He was still soft-spoken, good-natured, polite. But suddenly he wasn't inquiring after her general state of being every five minutes." (Chou, 2022, p. 124).

Stephen's natural integration into social and academic achievement stands in contrast to Ingrid's emotional vigilance and hyperawareness. As the racialized subject pays the psychological price of representation and intelligibility, the white subject can maintain composure and detachment, reflecting a larger racist emotional labor. Said characterizes the Oriental as existing as a figure to be interpreted but never to interpret, and Ingrid's fears are a reflection of the internalized pressures of being noticed all the time but never fully understood.

4.2. Colonial Ventriloquism: Academic Imperialism and the White Gaze in *Disorientation*

Elaine Hsieh Chou's *Disorientation* analyzes the subtle relationship between academic imperialism and the white gaze, showing how Western organizations deliberately reimagine racial identity for intellectual gain in addition to appropriating non-Western voices. Said's (1978) critique of knowledge as colonial power and Spivak's (1988) concern with the silencing of the subaltern are echoed in Michael's condescending expertise and the unsettling revelation of a white poet posing as Asian. "What had gotten into Michael? She understood infidelity and divorce would make anyone act erratically. But even while sopping drunk, he'd been callously succinct in his dissection of Cixi." (Chou, 2022, p. 132). He is the epitome of the white male scholar who uses knowledge as a tool of power. A defining characteristic of Orientalist scholarship, his icy disinterest implies that Eastern histories are objects of study rather than subjects of reverence. The event illustrates how intellectual conversation turns into a stage for colonial performance, when cultural complexity is reduced to empathetically analyzed bits.

Ingrid's realization that the most admired "Chinese American" poet is actually a white man wearing yellowface—"Ingrid knew the answer: she'd discovered the most famous Chinese American poet in the country was a white man masquerading in yellowface." (Chou, 2022, p. 124). This discovery cuts to the core of racial imitation as academic currency—a hideous mockery of authenticity in which whiteness maintains its dominance through the performance and consumption of Otherness. It serves as an example of how scholarly forums support white ownership of racially charged narratives, so bolstering hegemonic power under the pretense of diversity. The system in which whiteness speaks for, over, and as the Other is criticized by Chou through these storylines. The book shows how, when unregulated, academia may turn into a theater of colonial mimicry, erasure, and performative inclusion while remaining under the constant watchful eye of empire.

4.3. Performative Inclusion and Academic Control in *Disorientation*

A scathing critique of academic imperialism and performative diversity may be found in Elaine Hsieh Chou's *Disorientation*. Universities frequently tokenize scholars without changing ingrained power structures, as the novel reveals, highlighting "the flimsiness of diversity programs that put appearance above substantive change." This deceit is evident in Ingrid's academic crisis. Instead of being a choice, her investigation of Chou's work was a prescription: *Chouian sonnets, villanelles, odes and elegies consumed her. What more could she do? Hire a ghostwriter? Alas, Ingrid was approaching the*

problem as though it held a logical solution, but her dissertation woes were preordained from the start: she had never wanted to research Chou in the first place. (Chou, 2022, p.10)

The strain to fit in consumes her—"sonnets, villanelles, odes, and elegies by Chouian authors consumed her." What else was she capable of doing? Recruit a ghostwriter. — exposing the ridiculous and draining nature of fulfilling expectations set by institutions. Chou shows through Ingrid how academic systems deprive scholars of color of genuine academic agency while demanding intellectual effort that serves appearances and reputation.

4.4. The Fetishized Scholar: Unveiling Exoticization and Hyper sexualization in *Disorientation*

In *Disorientation*, Elaine Hsieh Chou effectively challenges the harmful prejudices about Asian women in Western academia and society. The idea of exoticization, in which Asian identity is diminished to a sexualized or aesthetically pleasing display for white consumption, is at the heart of this criticism. Chou challenges the pervasive hyper sexualization of Asian women by asserting that "Asian women are hypersexualized and always willing to comply with White man's prurient demands. This germinated even more interest in Asian women as sexual objects." (Chou, 2022, p. 380). This sentence highlights the fetishization of Asian femininity in institutional and interpersonal contexts, which feeds colonial fantasies of obedience and subjection. Chou illustrates the institutional structure of gendered violence in academia by depicting a professor who sexually assaults a student but escapes punishment: "They got to hit "Start Game Over." Just like the Barnes professor who'd sexually assaulted a freshman five years ago and continued to teach in the Economics department." (Chou, 2022, p. 353). The trivialization of trauma and the institutional culture of impunity are demonstrated using the video game metaphor. Instead of maintaining safety and integrity, academic institutions perpetuate cycles of abuse under the pretense of tenure and status.

Chou criticizes the racist obsession as well as the institutional safeguards for attackers by connecting sexualization with power relations. Under the guise of academic validity, her story provides a biting critique of how exoticization serves as a tool of control, diminishing Asian women's agency and elevating white male supremacy.

4.5. Academic Imperialism and the Illusion of Inclusion in *Disorientation*

With its hilarious yet painfully realistic depiction of higher education, Elaine Hsieh Chou's *Disorientation* delivers a scathing critique of academic imperialism. Ingrid is a Taiwanese American Ph.D. student at the center of the book, and her academic path is

impeded by an organization that ostentatiously promotes diversity while fundamentally upholding white supremacy. Chou reveals how academic settings frequently regard identity as a "angle" rather than a valid area of investigation, tokenizing racial minorities under the pretense of inclusion. Judith counsels Ingrid in an opening scene: "*Academia is a tough game. You'll need a unique . . . angle. "Judith squeezed her hands together, and, Ingrid imagined, her thighs under the desk. "And your particular background is so unique. It doesn't have to be a disadvantage—it can be an advantage. (Chou, 2022, p.12)*

This ostensibly supportive statement conceals a performative logic: ethnic identity is only appreciated when it can be used to further institutional diversity objectives. The statement is a prime example of the fragility of inclusion initiatives that put appearances ahead of structural change. Rather than being a researcher with agency, Ingrid is reduced to a checkbox and becomes a symbol of bureaucratic window dressing. Chou also criticizes academic disciplines' commercialization. Judith's claim that *Modernism and deconstruction and post-structuralism—it's all a dying field,* "every other word punctuated by a quick half smile. "Now comparative literature, on the other hand. *Being able to move between mediums, be it film or graphic novels—that's where the future of academia lies. (Chou, 2022, p.12)* illustrates how scholarship is influenced by what is popular, financially feasible, and accepted in the West rather than by intellectual rigor. This reframes academia as a marketplace that values performativity above authenticity rather than as a place where people seek the truth.

The colonial undertones of cross-cultural studies are highlighted by Stephen Greene's situation as a white translator who focuses on translating Japanese literature for a living. Chou writes: "Pink Salon establishes Azumi Kasuya as the most daring young writer in Japan, and Stephen Greene as a translator on the rise— challenging the gatekeepers of Japanese literature with his inventive and unorthodox interpretations." (Chou, 2022, p .121). Greene is praised for his "bold" interpretations, yet the Japanese authors he translates are frequently ignored. A common academic trend is the elevation of Western mediators as authorities on cultures they do not represent.

As Ingrid puts it, " Ingrid noisily slurped the rest of her wine. She stifled a yawn. She'd heard it all before— not only at the apartment, but at all the readings, literary conferences and cocktail parties cluttering her formerly empty social calendar." (Chou, 2022, p. 122). This illustrates how academic social rituals alienate rather than support scholars of color. Despite being intended to promote "community," these gatherings actually serve to uphold intellectual gatekeeping and elitism. Lastly, the institutional fetishization of minority excellence is reflected in the fictional poet Chou: " The university let me get away with what I wanted. I was their prize Chinese American poet, after all." (Chou, 2022, p. 266). This quotation perfectly captures the performative aspect of

institutional pride, which limits the celebration of racialized people to those who meet white standards or elevate the university. Through layered narrative and sharp critique, *Disorientation* unveils how academic imperialism cloaks itself in progressive language while perpetuating exclusion, appropriation, and epistemic control.

5. Conclusion

Elaine Hsieh Chou's *Disorientation* serves as a compelling literary intervention that exposes the entangled operations of academic imperialism and the white gaze within Western institutions. Through the lens of Ingrid Yang's struggles, the novel deconstructs the façade of inclusion and diversity programs that often operate as symbolic tokens rather than instruments of meaningful structural change. The university setting in *Disorientation* becomes a microcosm of broader colonial legacies—where knowledge production, recognition, and authority are filtered through Eurocentric frameworks, and where scholars of color are simultaneously commodified and marginalized.

The narrative lays bare the mechanisms through which white gatekeeping continues to shape the boundaries of intellectual legitimacy. Figures such as Stephen Greene, a white man who masquerades as a cultural bridge, and the fictionalized “prize Chinese American poet” manufactured for institutional prestige, reveal the ongoing exploitation and appropriation of marginalized identities for academic capital. Chou's text foregrounds how the white gaze objectifies and exoticizes Asian women, simultaneously hypersexualizing and erasing their subjectivity under the guise of liberal inclusion.

Furthermore, *Disorientation* critiques the performative nature of allyship, the flimsiness of supposed academic meritocracy, and the psychological toll of existing within an institution that rewards assimilation and punishes authenticity. Chou confronts the reader with the reality that for racialized scholars, navigating academia is not merely an intellectual endeavor but a constant negotiation of identity, legitimacy, and resistance.

In challenging the epistemic violence of the ivory tower, Chou not only disorients the reader but also invites a necessary reorientation—toward equity, decolonization, and genuine transformation in educational spaces.

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