

**KILEY REID'S *SUCH A FUN AGE*: THE MANIFESTATION OF RACISM AS WHITE GUILT, PRIVILEGE AND UNWITTING ENCROACHMENT OF BOUNDARIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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**Abstract**

Kiley Reid through her debut novel brings out the modern manifestation of racism in America. Through the efficient use of Gen Z English vocabulary, Reid has shown her readers the vital role that social media plays in manipulating its users on different levels. The concept of white guilt and infringement of boundaries are weaved ever so methodically into the plot that it makes the authors think twice about social media posts and stories that would have seemed normal thus far.

**Keywords:** Racism, White guilt, 21st century, social media, encroachment of boundaries.

Whom do you suppose knows you best? The answer should definitely be pointing to yourself. We are all fragile human beings who are in love with the idea of fantasizing that a special somebody in your life knows you better than yourself. Come to think about it and you gradually realize that no matter how significant a person is in your life, they will never know the existence of a real, raw phase to your character unless and until it unfolds in time. The above sentences are based on one condition: the person you have in mind or is considering is special to you in one way or another. What if this person is only an acquaintance and the relationship you have with this person under consideration is no deeper than that between a boss and his or her employee?

Judith Katz, the author of *White Awareness: Handbook of Anti-Racism Training*, published in the year 1978, speaks about what she terms “white guilt”, as that ‘prickly collective feeling of regret and penitence, overpowering the minds of the whites on brooding over their inhumane ancestors, who dwelled in a heartless past - inflicting both emotional, physical, and psychological pain on the ethnic minorities who lived among them, especially the African Americans’.

Literatures of the later part of the 20th and 21st centuries have made the theme of white guilt predominant in their works. One such recent and noteworthy work is Kiley Reid’s *Such a Fun Age*, published in the year 2020. The novel is worthy to be discussed in all aspects. First and foremost, the novel is of recent arrival and despite being a debut work of the author, it has attained global acclaim, and is the New York Times International Bestseller. It is a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick! English novelist and journalist Elizabeth Day mentions on the cover page of the book that the work is: “A beautiful tale of how we live now.” And that is precisely all about the story narrated by Reid in her debut novel - a tale of our present lives.

The world, especially Americans, would like to believe or dwell in their unrealistic dream that ‘everything is finally in harmony now’. On the contrary though, there are a million instances of disruption every single day rising from the context of racial and class differences. It is true that there is no more legalised slavery or segregation in the present day, but what we fail to understand often is that segregation and dominance have evolved to take up a subtle face now in the form of white guilt and unwitting encroachment of boundaries.

*Such a Fun Age* was rumoured to be based on actual experiences of the author but she says that it does not; even though she might have given herself into the many insecurities faced by the protagonist in the novel. There have been several instances in history where writers were refused to be published because of the issues of race, class and money prevalent or its mere minute existence in their works. Reid recounts her experiences with her publishers -Bloomsbury- gratefully saying that, “she feels lucky her editors don’t push back. But publishers who want to reflect these complicated experiences have still got a long way to go.” (The Guardian)<sup>1</sup>

In an interview Reid had with The Guardian she says that, “ I was not searched for at all. If you want to be a writer, you have to have support and capital to get yourself there. If you do not have that, it’s not going to be easy, and in the States the people who don’t have that are mostly black people. (mostly black women)” If you are a literature enthusiast, the author of this research paper would like you to close your eyes and open your hearts here. Do these words of Kiley Reid call to your mind the frame of a prolific modernist writer of the 20th century? A woman who was denied entry to the fictional university of Oxbridge for being a woman unaccompanied by a man. Yes, the literary figure being alluded to here is none other than Virginia Woolf. Do not open your eyes yet and keep your hearts open wide. Did Virginia Woolf not say that for a woman to write fiction she needs money and a room of her own? Through Kiley Reid’s words we can decipher that the condition of women writers have not changed much with time; let alone black women writers composing fiction on explicit subjects! Reid understands that no subject is off limits when it comes to writing but it is simply impossible for an author to capture the essence of events outside their own experience. But the true voices of these experiences are either muffled or not heard at all due to the lack of money and not belonging to a seemingly superior race or sex. In the distant past, ethnic minorities were enslaved, physically, emotionally and psychologically. Expressing their emotions through any medium was far from consideration. Now, the expression of those repressed emotions and its repercussions in the present generation, comes at a great cost and the same expression is denied to many worthy voices. Keeping this unpleasant context in mind, the author of this paper would like to take a moment now to express gratitude for the publication of *Such a Fun Age* and the ability to have accessed and read it sooner than many.

### **Delving Deeper into the Manifestation of White Guilt and White Privilege as Modern Racist Approaches**

Kiley Reid is an American novelist, who published her debut, *Such a Fun Age* in December 2019 and was long-listed for the 2020 Booker Prize. Reid’s command over creative language is astonishing because of her ability to simmer down the most complex of emotions in the simplest of words. Reid maintains throughout her novel a tone of painful sarcasm and she is well updated with the vocabulary of the 21st century teens and adults. Her imagery is worth mentioning. Her work heralds the presence of a generation that has manifested racism in the form of white guilt and privilege especially through social media.

Reid launches the above mentioned theme in the first crack of the novel by detailing the events of a night that is crucial to spinning the rest of the yarn. This event is set in Philadelphia’s deluxe Market Depot. A place where the well-heeled of the swanky neighborhood came to shop. Narrating this incident would not make sense, without the events of the previous day being related even though this does not appear until much later in the novel.

The protagonist of the novel will be introduced further downstream. For the moment, Alix and Peter Chamberlain are the two characters that we should be concerned about. Since the parents have been mentioned, their two daughters, Briar and Catherine should also be introduced here. The couple recently moved to Philadelphia from New York, and Alix was still sceptical about her family’s relocation. Philadelphia was not strange to her, it was her hometown, but she had come to adore the uptown lifestyle of New York, that she imagined that nothing actually happened in a city which was not the most relevant in the country. Little did she know that a lot would happen here, especially now with her being back home.

Alix’s life was strangely easy; she did not have to slave around to earn a living or pinch her money for every essential to be brought in the house. She wrote impressive letters in exquisite handwriting on textured and scented paper to luxury brands and in return they sent her samples of their products which she most generously shared with her roommates back in college and her friends and family now. She procured make-up, skin care, hair care, electronics, wine, clothes, gym equipment, food and snacks from numerous renowned brands everyday in this way. She also taught writing and cover letter composition at various institutions. She was quite active on social media, and frequently posted pictures of her, her three girlfriends - “Rachel, Jodi and Tamra [who] were bright, sarcastic women with careers and young children of their own” (Reid, 24)- and their kids taken back in New York now

that she was not there anymore. She did not want her clients to explicitly know that she had moved her residence. She was famous and had a substantial amount of followers on instagram because of the product reviews that she did and the letters that she wrote.

Peter, Alix's husband, "...was a journalist-turned-newscaster who was raised in upstate New York" (Reid, 21). He was still new at the news center in Philadelphia when his company did a programme on the homecoming dance at Beacon Smith High School. The channel showed colourful impressive scenes of students being asked to the homecoming dance. Among them, finally, was a black student asking a white girl out to dance. To this, Peter responded, quite spontaneously at the end of the video: "Let's hope that last one asked her father first" (Reid, 34). The social media world did not take this comment lightly! Peter was in for an online skirmish from various fronts and it was not pleasant at all.

Peter's and Alix's home was 'egged' by school students that night and Briar was annoyed by all the commotion. Here is when the protagonist of the novel steps in and makes a subtle appearance. 25 year old Emira Tucker, a beautiful black girl who is not entranced by the world of social media and posting filtered pictures, is summoned by Alix Chamberlain. Alix had found Emira on a website her friends would consider sketchy - sitter.com - and she has been Briar's most trusted confidante ever since. It would be worth mentioning certain attributes of Emira that attracted her towards Alix Chamberlain to establish our thesis. First and foremost, Emira could type really well - 125 words per minute. Secondly, she had never heard of Let Her Speak which was an initiative that gained Alix much fame. She had in mind the objective of making use of Emira's typing skills and making friends with her, but Emira on the other hand was composed, reserved and with utmost respect for her personal boundary. Another important reason for Alix to choose Emira was that she was black. This might look like an absurd reason for a person to like another from an exterior vantage point, but a sense of white guilt had overcome Alix although unconsciously. This sense of white guilt becomes ugly and definitive as the plot of the novel advances.

Emira was at a birthday party when Mrs Chamberlain called her past 10 pm that night. She agreed to take Briar out because Alix promised double the pay and cab fee up and down. She could use the money. The fact that she was turning 26 in less than a month horrified her. Emira's name would be erased from her parent's health insurance and her house owner will hike up the rent. She despised birthday parties as she wondered how people can celebrate the day they advance in age by another year. What bothered her the most was that unlike her friends she had not found a proper job yet. She graduated from Temple University but she was still a babysitter to a 4 year old Briar, and she was also a typist part time; but this was not enough to pay her bills. Emira doted on Briar and she knew the child perhaps more than her own mother who cared more about who Emira's friends were, if she had a boyfriend or if she was interested in being friends with her white employer.

Emira arrived at the Chamberlain's home at the promised time and picked Briar up. Briar was overjoyed to see Emira and Sarah, her friend, walking up the drive. They took Briar to Market Depot, which according to Emira and her friends was a place infested by the affluent whites of the area. In the store, the trio danced to a tune that Sarah played on her phone. They are being greeted by a middle-aged woman who pats Briar's head fondly and another young man probably in his late 20s walking down the aisle with a shopping cart. Sarah takes leave to meet her potential boyfriend. Emira feels a swift chill as her black friend walks out the door. She felt insecure in a supermarket, late at night, sprawling with white people. Before long, she sensed the security guard walking up to her and her favourite person in the whole world, Briar Chamberlain. The guard began questioning Emira's presence in the supermarket conspicuously along with a white child at such a late hour. Emira was appalled to find the woman she saw before, approaching the small group to add to the accusations of the guard. Emira could not lose her cool so she held her stand, and affirmed that she was Briar's babysitter and technically her nanny, and that she had not kidnapped the child! Emira glanced in disbelief at the young man she met before standing adjacent to her, shooting the entire scene on his phone. She could not believe that this was happening; of course she had been exposed to particular circumstances earlier in her life which she could describe as being racist but this was something that would make her cry that night.

Emira called up Peter instantly and related the issue to him. Everything was set right once he walked in through the glass door and nobody had any complaints now. Emira was surprised to see the speed with which the group dissolved in different directions. She took leave immediately and left Market Depot.

We see Emira being approached by the young man she saw at the supermarket, named Kelley Copeland. Kelley explained to Emira the possibilities of attaining justice by releasing the video he had captured on his phone. He was adamant in trying to convince Emira to sue the store for the ill treatment. Emira on the other hand did not see the point in doing such a thing and she did not want to attract attention to herself, and besides, her parents were not aware of the fact that she was babysitting. Her family had wanted her to pursue a career more solid and secure. Emira wanted Kelley to delete the video from his phone, but he convinced her to at least send it to her email, before he could erase it in case she has a change of mind. We see Kelley and Emira together as a couple as the novel advances.

Alix feels responsible for this particular incident at Market Depot and discusses with her friends as to what she should do. Her friends advise her to offer Emira all the support she needs even if it means filing a case against the store. Things were going well until Alix found out that Emira was dating Kelley who apparently turned out to be her high school sweetheart.

Kelley and Alix's history was not pleasant. Back in school, Kelley and Alix had decided to meet at her place when her parents were away. Alix used to leave letters for Kelley in his locker and what she did not know was that right below his locker was that of one of the school's black soccer players. A letter slips in through a vertical gap in their lockers and the soccer player and his friends decide to play a prank on Alix by using her pool in the middle of the day. This prank goes brutally wrong as Alix calls up the police when they show up at her place and the soccer player loses his scholarship and serves his time in prison. This incident paved the way to Alix's miserable years in high school. She was termed racist and a lot of other brutal names. Kelley and Alix had parted ways thus, hoping to never meet each other. Alix justified her action by saying that she was only trying to protect her sister and her black nanny.

Later in the novel we see Alix inviting Kelly and Emira to their thanksgiving dinner which does not go as planned. The novel fires up after this Thanksgiving dinner. Alix confronts Kelley to let go of Emira because she thinks that Kelley is just using his girlfriend to attract attention. The concept of white guilt is at its peak in this third part of the novel (The novel itself is divided into 4 parts). Alix is a person who feels that she knows what is best for everyone around her. She does not stop herself from checking Emira's phone every once in a while without her knowledge to know what was happening in her life. She was not concerned if a foul word slipped out of Emira's mouth in front of Briar or Catherine but she was restless if she found out that Emira had a boyfriend. The white guilt in her unconscious mind led her to hold fast to the belief that she was responsible for her sitter as if Emira was a commodity that she owned. She wanted Emira to feel at home, and did things for her because she thought that these feigned acts of kindness would bring Emira closer to her, or to put it in better words, Alix assumed that if she gave Emira little treats every now and then she would become dependent on her. This thought was toxic but it is something that prevails in the minds of most rich whites in today's American culture.

Alix also takes for granted her presence on the internet. She scrolls through Kelley's social media accounts, and discovers that all his pictures had a black person in it. These pictures portrayed Kelley as that nice, well-to-do white man who had no 'problems' being with black people and posting pictures with them for the public to see.

The characters of both Alix Chamberlain and Kelley Copeland cannot be completely comprehended if one is ignorant of two recent terms associated with racism in America and Canada, namely, 'white privilege' and 'white guilt'. Peggy McIntosh, the author of *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1988) described white privilege as "those conditions which...attach somewhat more skin-colour privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location" (178). In simpler words, "one is born into white privilege based on the colour of one's skin and for no other apparent reason" (Kirwan, 3).

White guilt which goes hand in hand with white privilege, is defined by Patrick Ryan Girzanka in his *White Guilt: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Emergent Racisms in the Contemporary United States* as,



“...a culturally and historically contingent emotion rooted in White people’s recognition of unearned privileges and collective and/or individual roles in the perpetuation of racism” (3).

This sense of guilt and privilege can easily be recognised in numerous accounts, if one scrolls through any social media platform. Kiley Reid brings in such an attribute in the character of Kelley Copeland primarily. Kelley Copeland was obsessed with making friends out of the popular black jocks in high school and even though he accuses Alix of taking advantage of all the black people who have ever been associated with her, readers will not miss that fact that he too, consciously or unconsciously exploits his relationship with his black mates for personal gains or satisfaction. As Alix surfs through Kelley’s Instagram page, she observes that all his girlfriends were black including ‘her very own’ Emira. Alix could immediately identify the kind of person Kelley was; probably because she has had similar feelings, which her mind refuses to account for or even acknowledge. Anna Freud’s analysis of defense mechanisms can be taken into consideration here to establish this point further. According to Anna, defense mechanisms are, “unconscious resources used by the ego” that will ultimately result in the reduction of internal stress or a conflict between the id and the superego. She defines five major defense mechanisms, out of which the ‘projection mechanism’ is used by Alix here. According to Bailey, projection is: “Attributing one’s own maladaptive inner impulses to someone else.” Alix is a definite example of this projection mechanism as she is imposing on Kelley all her ‘maladaptive impulses’ and or attributes.

Alix also believes that Kelley was responsible for the miseries she went through in high school. She has told everyone that it was Kelley who inspired his black jock friends to pull a prank on her. But in the dark rear of her mind she knew that she was lying because she had found while cleaning, in the vertical gap between the lockers of Kelley and his friend, the letter she wrote to Kelley asking him to come over and the code to her electric gate. She kept this truth a secret so that she would not be blamed further and she also did not want Kelley to go blameless. Alix knew deep down in her heart that what she did was unforgivable and her actions had gone a little overboard. The readers are forced to believe at a point that the source emotion that led Alix to call the cops to arrest the familiar trespassers was the hope of getting recognized for protecting her black nanny. She was not as mature then as she is now but this emphasises the fact that a feeling of white guilt and privilege is embedded in the minds of white children. Especially privileged kids like Alix, whose parents were overcome by the same feeling, and were adamant on employing black nannies to look after their children. To some point, a need to prove to the world that they do trust their children, alone in the care of a black person seems poignant here. This is another area in which white privilege and guilt manifests itself.

Both Alix and Kelley think that they know what is best for Emira. Kelley tries to get Emira to quit her job by convincing her that Alix is just taking advantage of her and that her affection was just pretense. Even though Emira opposes and says that even if she quits it needs to be on her own terms, and not under any external force even if it is Kelley’s. Emira’s reaction to Kelley’s suggestion shows that the blacks are aware of the fact that the whites think they know better and they are tired of it. Kelly also wants Emira to post the video from Market Depot so that he can be known on social media as the protective boyfriend of the girl who was a victim of racism at Market Depot. On the other hand, Emira had her own doubts about Kelley. She was not sure if he was the right person for her. She wondered if she would say yes if he ever asked her to marry him; she wondered if he would take their children out for a haircut without feeling insecure. She was not sure if he would ever be the right person to explain to their children, to not stand too near to a white woman in the train; or to slowly put their hands overhead if they were ever pulled up by cops. These are insecurities faced by every black person who is in a relationship with someone white and the white counterpart would never understand these feelings despite their desperate effort.

Just like Kelley warns Emira about Alix, Alix too warns Emira about Kelley. She says,

“...I had some issues with Kelley not respecting my privacy, which led to a lot of harassment from other classmates on my end. But more importantly, and why this may involve you, it was fairly common knowledge that Kelley had a habit of fetishizing African American people and culture. I won’t get into the details...but I’d be so completely crushed if Kelley ever used you the same way.” (Reid, 218)

Here we see how Alix blames Kelley for not respecting her privacy but what she failed to understand is that she was doing the same by going through Emira's phone and publishing her video from Market Depot online without her knowledge! This action does not root from the ignorance of the fact that the infringement into one's privacy and publishing personal information on social media without consent is a serious offence. She assumed that she was privileged because of her skin colour and this made Emira who is black, her responsibility. She felt that by releasing Emira's video she was helping her and not breaching into her private space or rather she ignored this knowledge.

To some extent, the readers can empathise with Alix and tolerate the idea that she thinks from Emira's perspective; but what they cannot accept is that she thinks she is always right about her decisions for a black person. In her desperate attempt to prove herself to Emira she even consults Tamra, her black friend, to know how Emira might feel. It is also true that Alix despised her life in Philadelphia which led her to make something interesting happen which will make her 'known' there better. What she did not know was that her plan would backfire when Emira realised that it was she who released the video. The readers find themselves in an awkward position while analysing this novel especially because none of the characters are completely to be blamed nor are they entirely blameless.

The silent war between Alix and Kelley about 'who knows Emira better and what is best for her' is a reflection of the constant plight of the white race correcting the mistakes of their past. The whites are in a hurry to make themselves in the right, and their efforts have attained an envelope of competition now, that it has manifested itself as a modern form of racism for the blacks. It is high time the whites realise that their helping battle is actually proving to be toxic and that they need to stop; stop not helping but encroaching into the personal spaces of the black people. In an interview session titled "Kiley Reid: Race, Class and Awkwardness in *Such a Fun Age*" hosted by The Daily Show, Reid says that her book has a really old plot of the white mother, white child and the black babysitter or nanny. She says that the same old complication between the white mother and her employee leads to the separation of the white child and her nanny. She does not fail to mention that "most white supremacy comes with a smile"; well intended like Alix Chamberlain. But tiny steps to make an effort - like asking to touch a black person's hair - to make things better leads to complications. She also mentions that it is not right to assume that a black person's problems are universally relatable to any white person's experience. Reid's interview content serves as the best conclusion to this research paper as she summarises the problems and solutions to its thesis.

Kiley Reid's contribution to literature through *Such a Fun Age* is massive as it is vital to be aware of the effects of white guilt and privilege in a culture of social media. This field of study requires much more in depth study with many more recent works. The screen adaptation of the book is to be released soon. This should bring in scopes for comparative analysis of the novel and the movie.

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