



Performative Liberalism And Identity Negotiation In Such A Fun Age

*G.Madhumitha*¹

¹ Research Scholar,
Department of English,

Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Kirshnankoil, 626126, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu..

Abstract: This study examines Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* as a critique of performative liberalism and its effect on identity negotiation in neoliberal households. Using Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, the research explores how Emira Tucker and her boss, Alix Chamberlain, face racial and class hierarchies. The analysis finds that progressive self-representation is often a tactic for the privileged to maintain moral authority while also reinforcing the divisions they claim to challenge. This paper argues that the "liberal-off" between Alix and Kelley Copeland shows how performative allyship is used for in-group distinction, prioritizing privileged emotions over the real conditions of the marginalized.

Keywords: Performative Liberalism, Identity Negotiation, Racial Hierarchy, Class Privilege, Moral Grandstanding

I. Introduction

Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* is a sharp sociological study of household work and privileged white identity in post-racial America. The story is triggered by a harsh case of racial profiling in an upscale grocery store. However, the novel mainly focuses on the discursive and performative fallout after the incident. The text shows a shift in modern liberalism, where online presence sets social status, and displaying progressive ideals becomes central for gaining social capital.

This research contends that for Alix Chamberlain, her African American babysitter, Emira Tucker, is not a person deserving respect, but rather a social project for Alix to control in order to affirm her own moral superiority. By utilizing Social Identity Theory, this study examines how identity is shaped through the interplay of public visibility, class reliance, and racialized social perception. The novel's conflict is generated by a moral pincer; Alix needs to present herself as Emira's defender to meet her group's demands for ethical superiority, while also upholding the strict employer-employee structure to protect her own class advantages. By deconstructing the white savior narrative through the perspective of intergroup conflict, this paper emphasizes how the commercialization of compassion frequently leads to the increased marginalization of the individual it claims to protect.

1.1 Objectives

1. To analyze how performative liberalism functions as a tool for ingroup distinction and moral capital acquisition among the white upper-middle class.
2. To examine the mechanics of competitive allyship between Alix and Kelley using the three core pillars of Social Identity Theory.
3. To evaluate the impact of economic hierarchy and digital commodification on the protagonist's ability to negotiate a self-determined identity.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Moral Capital of Wokeness and In-Group Distinction

The inclusivity paradox is an enduring hierarchy despite forward-thinking standards that pose a significant challenge for sociology. Recent studies depict wokeness as a moral leverage and a form of moral capital and a strategy for distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), in which elites highlight their superiority over crude racism to uphold hierarchy using inclusive language (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Yet, the spread of these symbols through social media should reasonably reduce their value as markers of elite status. This disparity indicates that current distinction theories do not articulate how elites adjust signals to preserve exclusivity when moral capital becomes widespread, suggesting a movement toward subtler forms of social gatekeeping.

2.2 Social Identity Theory and the Performance of Allyship

To preserve an affirmative self-concept in the face of systemic complicity, social Identity theory posits that individuals engage in social comparison to alleviate identity threats (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Performative allyship acts as a protective strategy to reinforce moral identity through loyalty to one's group. However, moral grandstanding (Tosi & Warmke, 2020) leads to a paradox of visibility that undermines the victim's agency, positioning the ally in their place. If the psychological need for self-esteem inherently favors the performer, existing allyship frameworks might be at odds with systemic transformation. This indicates that SIT alone is insufficient to explain the shift to genuine, de-centered advocacy.

2.3 The White Savior Industrial Complex Identity Commodification

The white savior industrial complex (Cole, 2012) indicates that humanitarian initiatives frequently focus on the emotional requirements of viewers. This is consistent with neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed, 2006), in which diversity is acknowledged merely as a commodity that does not challenge established power dynamics. Yet, increasing public doubt regarding saviorism indicates declining benefits from these actions. As the stereotype faces stigma, it indicates how leading figures reformulate doing good to avoid criticism. This suggests that existing research does not provide frameworks for the development of covert, trauma-related identity commodification.

2.4 Digital Artifacts and the Performance of Citizenship

Contemporary acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008) utilize environments to assert social inclusion, frequently turning the documentation of marginalized individuals into curated digital artifacts that enhance the social narrative of the performer. However, these actions frequently serve as a tool of societal oppression (Noble, 2018), recording for justice objectifies the individual for the advantage of the performer. This inconsistency implies that digital citizenship might be inherently in conflict with racial justice, and that underscores the necessity for theories that confront the exploitative essence of the digital gaze.

Research gap

Recent studies frequently examine "wokeness" and "White Savior" motifs separately, overlooking the internal psychological motivations behind these social behaviors. This research closes this gap by incorporating Social Identity Theory classification, identification, and comparison into the neoliberal home environment. It proposes that performative liberalism serves as a strategic psychological tool for addressing identity threats and preserving status when structural complicity is revealed.

III. Methodologies

This study utilizes a Qualitative Literary Analysis integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis. The examination centers on three fundamental phases of Social Identity Theory.

Social Categorization: The cognitive process of grouping people.

Social Identification: The process of aligning with the standards of the selected in-groups.

Social Comparison: The process of comparing one's in-group with others to maintain self-esteem.

IV. Theoretical Frameworks

This study employs Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. The framework is built on the landscape that a person's sense of who they are is based on their group membership(s).

The framework operates through three key distinct processes: The first key is Social Categorization; this is the cognitive process of grouping people into "us" (in-group) and "them" (out-group) to simplify the social world. In this study, the researcher examines how Alix defines the category of "Progressive Ally" vs. "Bigoted Other". The second key is Social Identification; this is the process by which an individual adopts the identity, norms, and emotional significance of the group they have categorized themselves into. For Alix, this involves adopting the woke persona to secure her status within her elite social circle. The third key is Social Comparison; this is the process of comparing one's in-group with other groups. To maintain self-esteem, the in-group must compare favorably. This drives the "liberal-off" between Alix and Kelly as they compete for "positive distinctiveness."

V. Analysis: The Mechanism of Identity Negotiation

5.1 Social Categorization: The "Good white Person" Archetype

Alix Chamberlain categorized the world into a binary of 'progressives' and 'Bigots. After the supermarket incident, her primary drive is to ensure she is placed in the former category.

"She wanted Emira to know that she was on her side...She wanted to show Emira that she was a person who took these things seriously (Reid, 2019, p.54)

In Tajfel's initial stage, Social Categorization involves individuals structuring their social surroundings by classifying others to form a coherent social identity. Alix labels herself a liberal ally to separate from the bigoted outgroup symbolized by the security guard and the crude middle class. This categorization serves as a psychological defense mechanism; utilizing Bonilla-Silva's (2021) concept of "racism without racists," It becomes evident that Alix employs inclusive language as a means of establishing boundaries. She aims to be seen as the "Good White Person" to confirm her moral position, effectively employing Emira as a passive tool against which her progressive identity is assessed.

5.2 Social Identification through Proximity

Alix attempts to identify with Emira by objectifying her authority, a move that illustrates Tajfel's second stage, Social Identification.

"She wanted to be the person who had a friend like Emira. She wanted to be the person who knew where Emira got her shoes, and who knew what Emira's hair looked like when it wasn't in a bun." (Reid, 2019, p. 102).

During the Identification phase, people take on the identity and style of the group they have classified themselves as belonging to. Alix seeks to reinforce her liberal identity by engaging closely with Black culture. This clearly illustrates Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "Distinction," as Alix perceives Emira's aesthetic as a type of cultural capital that she can utilize to elevate her own status. Her obsession with Emira's shoes is an effort to steal authenticity to show she is "down" or "connected". According to Hochschild (1983) on emotional labor, Alix anticipated Emira to offer the emotional affirmation needed for her to feel confident in her "woke" identity, turning a human worker into a lifestyle accessory that enhances her image.

5.3 Social Comparison and the “Liberal-off.”

The rivalry between Alix and Kelley Copeland illustrates the Social Comparison stage of SIT, where the in-group status is maintained by comparing it favorably against a rival out-group.

“You’re making this about you,” Emira said. “You’re making this about your weird competition with him.” (Reid, 2019, p. 284).

Tajfel’s third stage, Social Comparison, encompasses a judgment process in which individuals strive for “positive distinctiveness”. Alix and Kelly participate in what is informally referred to as “Liberal-off.” Each tries to demonstrate they are the least racist, essentially using Emira as the benchmark for their ethical superiority. This rivalry exemplifies Tosi and Warmke’s (2020) concept of “Moral grandstanding,” where the objective is not seeking justice for the victim but rather enhancing one’s own social status. Through the ongoing comparison of her “liberalism” with Kelley’s assumed “saviorism,” Alix seeks to address her own Social Identity Threat, overlooking that her behaviors remain focused on her own emotions rather than Emira’s actual circumstances.

5.4 In Group Favoritism and the Paradox of Visibility

As the narrative progresses, Alix’s need to maintain her In-group status leads to the “paradox of visibility.” Where her performance of allyship actually reinforces the racial and class hierarchies she claims to oppose.

“I don’t need you to be my friend, Alix. I need you to be my boss.” (Reid, 2019, p. 301).

This interaction emphasizes the ultimate psychological outcome of Tajfel’s stages: In-group Favoritism. Alix prioritizes her emotional ease in her role as a friend rather than the material needs of the professional relationship. This corresponds with Teju Cole’s (2012) “White Savior Industrial Complex,” where the ‘emotional demands’ of the white bystander take precedence. Alix’s effort to “rescue” Emira by releasing the supermarket video is a tactic to win approval from her progressive social circle. However, as Melamed (2006) indicates, this “neoliberal multiculturalism” guarantees that as long as Alix is perceived as the “recur,” the fundamental economic power imbalance and Emira’s absence of genuine autonomy persists unexamined.

VI. Discussions: The Paradox of Visibility and Power

6.1 Digital Surveillance and Moral Currency

The supermarket video serves as a commodified object that Alix seeks to organize. For Emira, the video serves as a documentation of trauma; for Alix, it functions as a means of social positioning. This corresponds with Noble’s (2018) criticism in *Algorithms of Oppression*, where she contends that digital portrayals of Black individuals frequently lack context and are utilized as tools to benefit prevailing social groups. In the digital era, “to exist is to be observed,” yet as Noble points out, this visibility seldom equates to power. Alix’s sense of self is shaped by societal perceptions, in which her expressed anger, her “digital performance,” transforms into a type of moral currency that holds greater worth to her than actual resolution of the event.

6.2 Economic Dependency: The Limit of Liberalism

The relationship between employer and employee maintains the racial hierarchy, regardless of Alix’s claims of equality. This tension is most effectively elucidated through Coulthard’s (2014) theory in *Red Skin, White Masks*, suggesting that politics of recognition frequently uphold colonial-era power structures instead of dismantling them. By presenting Emira with a “friendship” rather than structural security, Alix participates in a type of acknowledgement that necessitates the subaltern’s ongoing dependence. As Emira pointedly remarks, “I need you to be my boss,” revealing the shortcomings of Alix’s performative liberalism. Alix’s “wokeness” reflects her privilege as a means to achieve moral forgiveness without relinquishing the economic control she has over Emira.

6.3 Acts of Citizenship and the Professionalization of Identity

The “liberal-off” between Alix and Kelly can be analyzed using Isin’s (2008) framework regarding Acts of citizenship. Isin distinguishes “active” citizenship from “activist” citizenship, with the latter entailing the violation of existing norms to open up new opportunities. Yet, the actions of Alix and Kelly represent only professionalized forms of citizenship that closely follow the social norms of their in-group. Comparing Reid’s characters with Isin’s concepts reveals that their activism is introspective. They aren’t taking action to transform the world for Emira; they are taking action to reinforce their status as model citizens within their own privileged, liberal enclave.

6.4 The “New Racism” and the Performance of Color-Blindness

The novel’s conflict exemplifies what Bonilla-Silva (2021) describes as the “style of color-blindness,” marked by a careful choice of words and an urgent desire to seem non-racial. Alix’s identity negotiation involves a continuous struggle to manage the new racism in which over-bias is substituted with complex social exclusion and the objectification of the “other.” Comparing Alix’s fixation on Emira’s “coolness” with Bonilla-Silva’s research shows that Alix is not overcoming race; she is simply redefining it. Her liberalism acts as a “white habitus” that enables her to feel progressive, while her actual experience is completely secluded and elevated.

VII. Conclusions

This examination of Such a Fun Age through Social Identity Theory reveals that performative liberalism operates as a complex psychological tool for preserving class and racial structures. By utilizing Tajfel’s stages of categorization, identification, and comparison, the research demonstrates that Alix Chamberlain leverages “wokeness” as moral capital to address identity threats and maintain in-group status. This “liberal-off” commercialized the trauma of marginalized groups, redirecting attention from systemic justice to the rivalry for individual status. The “paradox of visibility” demonstrates that performative allyship strengthens the employer-employee divide it claims to eliminate. Emira’s dismissal of Alix’s “friendship” shows that true equity necessitates prioritizing the “emotional needs” of those who are privileged. This research finds that in neoliberal home environments, the professionalization of identity acts as a barrier, guaranteeing that social signaling stays a privilege of the elite instead of a driver for systemic transformation.

7.1 Future Scope and Limitation

This research is constrained to a qualitative literary analysis of a single contemporary novel and the primary focus on the interaction between two white characters and one Black protagonist, potentially neglecting the wider systemic influence of the “gig economy” in strengthening these identities. Future studies should investigate how the digital “attention economy” impacts identity negotiation in modern literature with more novels.

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