

Cultural Appropriation in Literature: Ethics, Power, and Representation.

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ABSTRACT

Cultural appropriation in literature prompts significant debates about voice, authenticity, and power dynamics when stories traverse cultural lines. Rather than viewing appropriation merely as artistic borrowing, this study interprets it as an outcome of broader structural inequalities in which dominant communities often gain advantages by representing marginalized groups. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives and related theoretical approaches, the research outlines key evaluative elements such as the writer's positionality, the degree of cultural consultation, factual accuracy, tangible consequences, and the reactions of the communities depicted. The analysis underscores that authorial intention alone cannot justify such representations; ethical literary practice requires responsibility, collaboration, and systemic reforms within the publishing industry. Although respectful intercultural exchange can enhance literary creation, careless appropriation may result in harm, misrepresentation, and commodification.

KEYWORDS Aesthetic, Marginalized cultures, Cultural appropriation, Pseudonymous, Racial hierarchies' colonialism.

Introduction

Literature has long acted as a medium through which cultures interact travel narratives circulate across borders, myths evolve as they move between societies, and contemporary fiction often blends multiple cultural traditions. Yet in the context of late modernity, shaped by global markets, racial hierarchies, and the legacy of colonialism, the very act of borrowing cultural material carries substantial ethical weight. What one reader may view as creative empathy might be understood by another as cultural theft or distortion.

This research investigates cultural appropriation in literary practice through the intersecting frameworks of ethics, power, and representation. It argues that discussions must move beyond surface-level textual features to examine the historical and institutional conditions that influence authorial choices and shape their consequences. The central aims are to refine conceptual distinctions, analyses illustrative examples, and propose ethically grounded approaches for writers and publishers.

Cultural exchange refers to reciprocal, mutually beneficial interactions in which communities willingly share cultural stories, forms, and traditions. Such exchanges usually involve recognition, mutual consent, and some degree of equality between the participating groups.

Cultural appropriation in contrast, occurs when members of a dominant social group adopt elements of a marginalized culture without permission, adequate understanding, or attribution. This process often commodifies or distorts cultural meaning and may weaken the marginalized group's control over its own cultural expressions. Because cultural borrowing rarely takes place under conditions of equal power, appropriation is inherently tied to systemic imbalance.

It involves respectful engagement, intentional learning, and representation grounded in dialogue with cultural insiders. Although both appreciation and appropriation involve crossing cultural boundaries, they differ sharply in ethical orientation, process, and impact.

Postcolonial Theory and Power:

Postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak highlight the ways literary representation has historically reinforced imperial power. Through depictions of colonized peoples, dominant writers shaped narratives that justified control while excluding those communities from authorship and economic benefit. Appropriation today must be understood against this backdrop of cultural exploitation and narrative dominance.

Scholars like Stuart Hall argue that representation actively constructs meaning rather than merely reflecting reality. When outsiders depict marginalized cultures, the risk of stereotyping or oversimplification increases, especially when those portrayals become widely circulated.

Ethics of Voice and Testimony:

Debates in moral philosophy and ethics address who is entitled to speak on behalf of others. Narrative authority confers epistemic power, and when influential authors claim to represent marginalized experiences, they may inadvertently silence or overshadow authentic voices.

Issues of consent, accountability, and reparative justice therefore become central. This study employs a conceptual-analytic approach supplemented by close readings of representative texts, critiques in literary and media studies, and authorial peritexts such as interviews, statements, and prefaces. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, the analysis foregrounds context-sensitive ethical reasoning.

Colonial and Imperial Eras:

During colonial expansion, literature frequently functioned as an instrument of classification and domination. Indigenous languages, traditions, and knowledge systems were often appropriated, reframed, or exoticized in travel writing, imperial fiction, and ethnographic accounts. These practices normalized unequal narrative power relations that continue to

influence present-day appropriation debates.

20th-Century Modernism and Mid-century Writing:

Modernist writers experimented with diverse voices and cultural forms, but many also

engaged sometimes knowingly in subtle forms of cultural borrowing that reinforced racial hierarchies. Examples include reworking colonized landscapes for Western readerships or adopting minority vernaculars without acknowledgement.

Globalization and Contemporary Market Forces:

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, global publishing networks have intensified pressures to commodify cultural difference. Books set in “exotic” contexts or centered on marginalized trauma often attract commercial attention, sometimes at the expense of nuanced representation and community agency.

1. American Dirt (Jeanine Cummins): Controversy and Market Structures The 2020 publication of *American Dirt* provoked heavy criticism for its depiction of Mexican migrants by an author from outside that community. Critics argued that the book exemplified how publishing industries favor outsider narratives of marginalized suffering, often marketed to middle-class Western readers. The debate raised crucial questions about market priorities, editorial responsibility, and the limits of empathetic storytelling.

2. Historical Examples: Kipling, Hemingway, and Others

Authors like Rudyard Kipling embedded imperial ideologies in their work, using representation to reinforce cultural hierarchy. Likewise, some modernist and mid-century writers incorporated languages or customs from other cultures in ways that subtly reproduced racial inequality.

3. Diasporic Writers and Hybrid Identities

Writers such as Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith complicate binary distinctions between insider and outsider. Their culturally hybrid identities enable them to navigate multiple traditions, illustrating that belonging and authorship cannot always be neatly categorized for ethical evaluation.

4. Ethical Collaboration and Co-creation

Collaborative writing projects—where cultural bearers participate in authorship, editing, or narrative direction—offer models of ethical engagement. Such partnerships distribute creative and economic power more equitably and often yield more authentic, contextually grounded portrayals.

Imagination vs. Appropriation:

A central tension arises between the value of creative imagination and the responsibility to avoid harm. While imaginative empathy is foundational to literature, it does not grant unrestricted license. Ethical writing recognizes cultural boundaries without unduly limiting artistic freedom.

Permission and Consultation:

Seeking consent or consulting with community members is an important, though not foolproof, ethical practice. Consultation can enhance accuracy, demonstrate respect, and redistribute interpretive authority, but power differences may persist even when dialogue occurs.

Economic Exploitation and Structural Gatekeeping:

Appropriation often benefits authors and publishers from privileged backgrounds while marginalized creators remain underrepresented. Addressing appropriation therefore requires structural reform, including more equitable publishing practices, fair compensation,

and broader representation in editorial decision-making.

Representation and Stereotyping:

Misrepresentation perpetuates stereotypes and reduces complex cultures to simplistic symbols. Ethical representation demands historical awareness, contextual sensitivity, and a commitment to nuance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research:

This study relies on conceptual analysis and selected case studies rather than systematic empirical research. Future work could incorporate quantitative examinations of publishing trends, interviews with cultural consultants, or reception studies exploring how different audiences respond to outsider portrayals. Integrating legal, economic, and literary analysis may further enrich understanding of structural solutions.

No universal rule can fully determine when literary borrowing becomes cultural appropriation. Instead, it requires continuous reflection on power dynamics, ethical responsibility, and creative intent. Questions about who tells stories, who profits from them, and who shapes their meaning extend beyond aesthetics into institutional and societal realms. By foregrounding equity, strengthening consultative practices, and pursuing reforms within the publishing industry, literature can foster genuine cultural dialogue rather than exploitation. The challenge lies in balancing artistic freedom with a commitment to redressing the historical inequalities that make certain forms of borrowing harmful.

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