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Series Review: *The Chair and the Myth of the Anti-Racist Superhero*

A. Peet & A. J. Wyman (Creators); T. Romary & H. Shaukat (Producers)

“The Chair” depicts the kind of stodgy English literature program that made me drop the English major when I was an undergraduate. Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh) is the new chair, and she plans to shake things up. But she has been handed a ticking time bomb, and she knows it. And as she puts it, *they wanted to make sure a woman was holding it when it explodes*.

“The Chair,” like “Dear White People,” offers a snapshot of a PWI (predominantly white institution) in the Black Lives Matter era. The old white men of Pembroke (a fictional small-liberal-arts college) are aging out, but they’re still in charge. If we accept the show’s parameters (predominantly-white cast) and limitations (zero representation of adjunct instructors), and read it through the lens of mid-career, tenure-track professors of color, then bluntly, this is the future we are being set up for. To become *The Chair* is to *Arrive*. And like that introductory scene where Ji-Yoon steps into her new Chair’s office and falls off her office chair, these positions sell a false bill of goods that anyone can actually single-handedly change structural racism and sexism.

What kind of “arrival” is this? And are the sacrifices worth it?

For me, this question manifests most poignantly with the other women of color in the show: Kim’s daughter Ju-Hee (Everly Carganilla), coworker Yaz (Nana Mensah), and teaching assistant Lila (Mallory Lowe).

Ji-Yoon’s home life is a struggle. She and her daughter, Ju-Hee (who prefers Ju-Ju)—adopted and (it is suggested) of Oaxacan descent—butt heads. Neither feels understood—linguistically, culturally, or personally. A babysitter quits moments after arriving because the house has “no boundaries.” Ji-Yoon’s father helps with caregiving but is also overwhelmed, and speaks only Korean in defiance (a foil to the English literary world that his daughter inhabits the rest of the day).

In scene after scene, Ji-Yoon leaves Ju-Ju in a rush. Ju-Ju runs away from home. Ju-Ju runs onto campus to find her mother. This part is heartbreaking—the sacrifices to be a single parent and the strained relationship with your child that results—particularly as Ji-Yoon is tasked with coddling the immature egos of her fully-grown colleagues all day.

Ji-Yoon sacrificed a romantic relationship for her job (her fiancé moved to Ann Arbor and met someone else). A tension throughout the show is that we know she is asking herself whether it

was worth it to stay at Pembroke rather than take a non-tenure-track job with a high teaching load so she could follow her fiancé—a position that many academic couples are put in as they fight to stay in the same city, or even region. Because Ji-Yoon stayed at Pembroke, she has to make it worth it.

The person who could be her closest ally at work is Yaz, an American literature specialist who is up for tenure. Yaz, the only Black woman in the department, is the one person who calls out the fact that Ji-Yoon placates the old white men in charge and sells out Yaz in the process. In the era of Lorgia García-Peña and Nikole Hannah-Jones' highly publicized tenure cases and the [dismal underrepresentation](#) of Black women in tenure-track jobs, students know they will need to back up Yaz. Elliott Rentz (Bob Balaban) is tasked with chairing Yaz's tenure case, but he looks down on her creative pedagogies and critical readings of classic texts.

Yaz's classroom offers a rare example of multimodal pedagogy in popular culture; students sing, laugh, and applaud, bringing *Moby Dick* to life through their bodies, melodies and compositions. Rentz's suspicion of this pedagogy echoes empty but common accusations that multimodality is shallow "infotainment" that does not encourage deep engagement with texts (and reminded me of a paper I got back from an English professor as an undergraduate that accused me of "turning a Shakespeare play into an episode of *The West Wing*"). To her credit, Ji-Yoon backs up this multimodal approach to literary pedagogy.

But white academia's structural divide-and-conquer strategy among women of color manifests again in Ji-Yoon's relationship to Lila, a Teaching Assistant. Ji-Yoon urges Lila not to talk to the press about a department scandal because it would make the department look bad. The media explosion that follows makes it clear that in addition to the old white men, the women of color in positions of power need to be held accountable too. By this point, the role of the chair has started to write Ji-Yoon's actions rather than the other way around.

These contradictions remind us that diversifying leadership, in and of itself, is never enough. As Ji-Yoon's own crash-and-burn, alongside the larger racial justice movement and the students at Pembroke show us, nothing will shift without a movement backing it. In the department in which I work, our European-literature-heavy curriculum did not change until the campus [Latinx Student Alliance](#) went public with their demands, with a small group of faculty allies inside the department, widely-circulated media reporting, and petition signatures. The department fell squarely in the eyes of the campus, larger university system, and public—particularly the contradiction of an HSI (Hispanic-Serving Institution) with such a British-literature-heavy English curriculum. And in Fall 2021, we began teaching our [revised curriculum](#), which centers Black and Latinx literatures, research and writing, and an introduction to the major titled "Unsettling English Studies."

I took no pleasure in watching Ji-Yoon crash and burn. It was painful. I took no pleasure in seeing an Asian woman cast in the longstanding state-sanctioned role of "racial wedge" between Black and white people, or seeing Ji-Yoon's exhaustion in the face of the extractive relationships with white male colleagues.

Was it necessary to narratively sacrifice a woman of color at the altar of the chairship to reveal the contradictions of academia?

I have watched brilliant people crash, burn, or compromise in the name of single handedly changing structural racism. If there is a core strength of this series, for me it is revealing the empty bourgeois promise of anti-racist work outside the context of collective organization and strategy. While Yaz was alienated from her colleagues by virtue of structural anti-Blackness, Ji-Yoon assumed the “anti-racist superhero” persona, at least in part, out of a genuine belief that she could change things by herself. Ji-Yoon’s story reminds us that in the context of an academic department and campus faced with budget cuts, dwindling enrollments, and reliance on Trustee support and funding, this kind of solo anti-racist work risks becoming reduced to an argument to upper management, who will sell you out because that is their job, and put you in a position to sell out your colleagues.

In my imagination, the hope for the future of the Pembroke English department is not (as early episodes might suggest) a love affair between Ji-Yoon and her scattered, irresponsible colleague, Bill. The hope lies in Ji-Yoon taking accountability for her actions towards Yaz and joining Yaz as a force in the department, in conversation with the student organizations that backed up Yaz and held Ji-Yoon accountable. And it lies in Yaz’s classroom—a rare life-giving space on an otherwise traditional white college campus—a space that, had I encountered it as an undergraduate, may have led me to major in English after all.

— Vani Kannan, Lehman College, CUNY