



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown of English chair: A critical reading of Netflix's *The Chair* (2021)

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Abstract

Netflix's comedy-drama *The Chair* (2021) chronicles the various challenges and crises that Dr. Ji-Yoon Kim, the first woman and non-white chair of the Department of English at Pembroke University, has to respond to both the professional and personal front. The present paper seeks to make a detailed critical and thematic study of these challenges and crises while also investigating the suggestion, which emerges from the clash between faculty members Elliot Rentz and Yasmin "Yaz" McKay, that young faculties will always be more talented, objective, responsive, and sympathetic to student demands in comparison to older ones, an implication that can remain perpetually debatable. Moreover, the series also highlights, through the characters of Ji-Yoon and Dobson, how the challenges and troubles of one's personal and family life demand simultaneous attention, making it difficult to successfully navigate professional and personal responsibilities.

Keywords: *The Chair* (2021 TV Series), Bill Dobson, Joan Hambling, Ji-Yoon Kim, Yasmin "Yaz" McKay, Elliot Rentz.

Introduction

I don't feel like I inherited an English Department. I feel like someone handed me a ticking time bomb because they wanted to make sure a woman was holding it when it exploded.

Dr. Ji-Yoon Kim [*The Chair*, season 01, episode 04, 'Don't Kill Bill']

Netflix's comedy-drama *The Chair* (2021) chronicles the various challenges and crisis that Dr. Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh), the first woman and non-white Chair of Department of English, Pembroke University, has to respond to both at the professional and personal front. These crisis and challenges often materialize simultaneously at both fronts and together demand equal attention. Indeed, one cannot help but recall Shakespeare's Henry IV ruminating that '[u]

neasy lies the head that wears a crown' (2016, sc. 9:31) and which has therefore been adapted to serve as part of the present paper's title.

The chair opens with a comic yet apt metaphor-cum-foreshadowing as Ji-Yoon is shown walking triumphantly and confidently from the campus ground to the Department (with Vivaldi's equally triumphant and confident "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" in D Major serving as the background score) on her first day as Department Chair (1: 1). Although she unwraps a nameplate marked "Fucker in Charge of You Fucking Fucks" (1: 1), a gift in all likelihood from one or all of the faculty members, it is ironical that Ji-Yoon would soon be fighting multiple battles for the betterment and development of the department where victory isn't guaranteed despite having the best intentions at heart (Aaronson, Scott (2021). Ji-Yoon goes on to sit on her chair with a pleased expression but a moment later the chair suddenly snaps and Ji-Yoon falls sideways on the floor with a thud (1: 1).

The present paper seeks to make a detailed critical and thematic study of the questions raised by *The Chair*, described by Feldman (2021) as 'an immediate conversation starter with subject matter that includes sexism, racism and ageism' (Feldman 2021) and hailed by Basumatary (2021) as 'one of the most original Netflix series released in recent years' (Basumatary 2021). Moreover, Basumatary (2021) lauds the series for its realistic portrayal of the academic world rather than merely using the setting as a background for conventional romantic plots. Nehra (2021) argues that the

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series is the 'only campus drama' that 'exclusively focuses on the faculty, how messed up academia is, how racism, sexism are still very prevalent and deliberately exclude diverse voices' (Nehra 2021).

In her impromptu speech at the faculty party soon after taking over as Department Chair Ji-Yoon wonders why the present generation of students aren't interested in studying literature (1: 2). She goes on to contrast aesthetics ['Why am I scanning this sonnet when there are so many things to be worried about?'] with current political and social reality and practical concerns such as '[c]limate change. Racism. The prison-industrial complex (Basumatary, Dwijiri "Dwij" B. 2021). Homophobia' implying that students' disinterestedness in spending time with a literary work is rooted in the latter's (assumed) disconnect with contemporary reality (1: 2). If it wouldn't have been for the call from her father (1: 2), Ji-Yoon would in all probability have reminded the teachers present that a literary work can indeed address all of these issues and it remains for the teacher in class to make students realize that literature can reflect their anxieties, concerns, and worries about contemporary social, political, (and environmental) conditions, offer emotional comfort, and even hint at a solution even if the work were to be labelled a fantasy in generic terms. Indeed, several contemporary concerns such as terrorism, racism, and homophobia find a reflection in the *Harry Potter* series of novels (1997 – 2007) by British novelist J. K. Rowling.

John Crowe Ransom (1937), one of the foremost American New Critics, had warned that 'one should never speak impromptu in one's professional capacity' (Ransom 1937). While the anecdote recalled by Ransom involved a teacher dismissing a student who had expressed the desire to pursue textual criticism without undue intrusion from historical and/or biographical context, a similar impromptu declaration is heard during the faculty party wherein one of the teachers complains to another: 'Every semester, there's some theory boy who wants to come and talk about Lacan' (1: 2) (Davies, Mikel J. 2021). While historical scholars and Leftist critics during Ransom's time might have balked at or were afraid of the idea of an aesthetics-oriented, purely textual criticism (Ransom 1937), contemporary teachers, as evident in the comment about Lacan, might be afraid of analysing a text from certain theoretical perspectives given their lack of competency, conservative ideologies, etc. The above incident of the casual remark serves to remind that teachers themselves should never take a dismissive attitude towards (literary) theory; rather, one of their chief duties should be to familiarize students with and inspire them to probe artistic works from as many diverse theoretical perspectives as possible which would enable the students to realize that both literature and literary theory can and often do come into being because of or as a response to socio-political-temporal concerns.

One of the show's central narrative threads, the clash between the old and new generation of teachers finds a reflection in Elliot Rentz (Bob Balaban) and Yasmine "Yaz" McKay (Nana Mensah) respectively (1: 1). Rentz represents a teacher and scholar for whom the text itself is and should be the locus of analysis (1: 1; 1: 3). The traditional scholarly treatment of his subject and the detached attitude towards students enrolled in his course are clearly evident in the title of his class – "Survey of American Letters: 1850 to 1918" – and his style of lecturing from the podium without much interaction with students (1: 1; 1: 3) which some might mistakenly construe as imposing one's opinion onto students' minds. Though he is a Melville scholar, we soon learn that his scholarship is outdated as he hasn't taken into account, even if speculative, Feminist critical development and is selective in choosing paratextual and/or contextual material that would eulogize the author and/or the text which strongly contradicts his evident desire for objectivity in evaluation (1: 3). To a great extent, then, Rentz resembles the renowned literary critic Harold Bloom who 'rages against academics who would pollute the Canon with cultural politics' (Lang 2000).

In contrast, McKay is a teacher who, apart from taking into consideration both the text and the personality of its creator, is someone who attempts to form a close bond with the students, encouraging them to creatively express their critical opinion of the text as in the song the students seem to have written and set to music in response to Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and which leaves Rentz completely dazed (1: 3; 1: 4). Moreover, McKay chooses more sensational and thematic course titles such as "Sex and the Novel" which amounts to an automatic increase in student enrolment as opposed to Rentz's more formalist and traditional "Survey of American Letters: 1850 to 1918" (1: 1). Though this does not automatically translate into one course being better than the other, it is undeniable that McKay's course is likely to attract more students given the appeal it is likely to have on young minds (1: 1). While the series itself seems to favour McKay over Rentz, it cannot be denied that (detailed, though in Rentz's case outdated and prejudiced) scholarship and sustained engagement with the text are perquisite for a nuanced understanding. Indeed, Rentz doesn't approve of McKay's habit of having her students tweet select quotations from the texts she is dealing with as to him it is likely to reduce the complexity involved in interpreting a text with all its attendant contradictions and ironies to being content with mere quotations (1: 1) (Feldman, Dana 2021).

Another instance of the old vs. the new clash is that between senior faculty member Joan Hambling (Holland Taylor) and the reviews she garners from students for her course on Chaucer (1: 1; 1: 3). Hambling has been teaching the course since many years but does not devote time to the reviews posted (anonymously) by students on the website

RateMyProfessors.com (1: 3). The fact that several students do not enjoy her class is evident through disparaging comments, one of which says '[t]his hag makes me wanna kill myself' (1: 4). Though the wisdom of Hambling's reaction to lack of students' appreciation for her and the course she teaches can be debated, including burning copies of the printed reviews – which nearly engulfs her basement office in fire – (1: 3) and ambushing the student reviewer who leaves less than pleasant comments on her classes (1: 4), it cannot be denied that they result from genuine anger and disappointment over students' lack of interest in literature and is altogether justified to advise the student (Jordan Beltz) in righteous anger to not attend her class if he isn't interested in the subject (1: 4).

While the conflict between Rentz and McKay seems justified to an extent in that the teacher/scholar should be well-versed with recent critical developments, whether textual or theoretical, and try to engage the class in conversation, dialogue, and debate more often, the series ends up suggesting, in not so implicit terms, that old necessarily means boring, monotonous, and outdated and therefore unfit to continue whereas those who are young – Ji-Yoon affirms she is only forty-six (or in other words, not fifty yet), perhaps an arbitrary line that demarcates the young and the old physically (1: 1) – are by default interesting, thought-provocative, and updated. While both Rentz and Hambling's classes might be too scholarly and less hip to suit the tastes of present generation, the lack of enthusiasm among students for engaging in a sustained dialogue with the text and bringing to bear varied critical and theoretical perspectives on them should not necessarily amount to blaming the teacher.

One of the questions the series raises is whether the worth of a teacher is directly proportional to the students choosing to enrol themselves in his/her course(s). On her very first day of taking over as the Department Chair, Ji-Yoon faces an unpleasant scenario. Dean Larson (David Morse) informs her that three of the tenured faculty members – namely, Hambling, McHale (Ron Crawford), and Rentz – who draw the highest salary are also the ones whose classes have the lowest number of student enrolments and asks Ji-Yoon to convince them to accept a voluntary retirement package (1: 1). Moreover, Hambling, who arrives late for the first Departmental meeting being chaired by Kim, informs her colleagues that her office has been moved to the 'basement under the gym' with all her 'stuff [...] dumped into these open carts that are sitting on the floor of the basement over there right now' (1: 1), a not-so-subtle indication from the University that they would much prefer Hambling and those of age group similar to hers to voluntarily retire. Tellingly, sexism leads to Hambling being the first to bear the brunt of the policy rather than McHale or Rentz, the former of whom has grown much frail (1: 1; 1: 5), is often found dozing

(1: 6), and would therefore be the first of the three whose voluntary retirement could be justified.

The show also casts light on the consequences that long-serving and tenured faculties, on account of their almost unchecked power or influence, can have on the career of those seeking tenure (a permanent position) in the Department, especially if they belong to a non-white ethnic background. For instance, Elliot Rentz, described by Ji-Yoon as the man who 'makes or breaks careers' is to chair McKay's case for tenure and is shocked at the number of students who have enrolled in the latter's American Studies course and less than pleased with the title McKay has chosen for it given that it is likely to attract more students in McKay's American Studies class than his, an area he specializes in (1: 1). Moreover, as noted above, McKay's approach to American Studies stands in stark contrast to Rentz's more scholarly and purely textual who doesn't seem to attach much importance to feminist scholarship and critical race theory (Lang, Joel, 2000). It is also later revealed that Rentz's wife was not able to secure tenure at the Department as she wasn't able to meet the required publications demanded for the same given that she also shouldered the responsibility of raising their three kids (1: 4). Although Rentz considers his wife as the best candidate they had (1: 4), seemingly comparing McKay with her and finding her lacking, further dents his belief in objectivity.

The question of whether or not McKay is granted a tenure is significant given the fact that eighty-seven percent of Pembroke's faculty is white (1: 2) and within the English ethnic background.¹

According to Davies (2021), the fact that Rentz' wields the power to either grant her [McKay] tenure or deny it, the effects of the school's entrenched, institutional racism

¹ McKay securing a tenure is, as Ji-Yoon envisions it, only the first step in diversifying Department faculties and pedagogy. However, Rentz's name is on the list of teachers whom Ji-Yoon has been tasked with convincing to opt for voluntary retirement. On the other hand, Rentz is less than pleased with more students opting for McKay's class rather than his and the possibility cannot be denied that Rentz could interpret Ji-Yoon's suggestion or advice for retirement as an attempt to remove him as chair of McKay's tenure case, an advice or suggestion which he would most likely turn down but which could also further prejudice him towards McKay. Thus, Ji-Yoon attempts to convince McKay to co-teach classes with Rentz, in the hope that it would both save Rentz from forced retirement and give him a first-hand experience of McKay's teaching aptitude which might nudge him to use his influence to ensure that McKay secures tenure. When McKay expresses displeasure that a privileged, white male who is less than pleased with McKay's pedagogy holds the keys to her future, Ji-Yoon recalls and informs McKay of the racism she herself endured when she first joined Pembroke for the simple reason that she, an Asian woman, was teaching Emily Dickinson, an American poetess (1: 1).

become more and more clear' (Davies 2021). The students of the Department are perhaps deeply conscious of the prejudices that operate against non-white faculties seeking tenure. Dustin (Vinnie Costanza) and Capri (Jordan Tyson) meet up with Ji-Yoon after the Department of Political Science denied tenure to its only person of colour faculty and are concerned that a similar fate might befall McKay whom they clearly admire (1: 4). Dustin goes on to list the several discriminations faced by Black teachers including their research being considered less 'rigorous', that they are 'disorganized' and 'less collegial', and are often ignored by their white colleagues when inviting others to their home for dinners (1: 4). The concerned students, three-hundred and twenty in total, therefore, have signed a letter in McKay's support detailing the 'impact' her presence has made on the lives of coloured students and Dustin warns Kim that if McKay is 'denied tenure' the students' plan to take action' (1: 4).

The *chair* offers a pertinent warning against the dangers of interpreting anything outside of its proper context and the harm that current video editing features available to every user, including students in the classroom, can cause if used without proper discretion. In his introductory class on the "Death and Modernism" course offered by him, Bill Dobson (Jay Duplass), who is still mourning the death of his wife sets about to discuss Absurdism and Fascism (1: 1). While defining the former as '[t]here is no meaning' and 'we exist in a purposeless universe' and the latter as '[a]ll meaning is ascribed to the state', Dobson ends up performing the Nazi salute in what was clearly a satirical, sarcastic, and critical gesture and which is recorded on the mobile devices of a few students attending the class (1: 1). Several students, moreover, exchange nervous glances (1: 1), perhaps unable to grasp the gesture as such, or even if they did, unwilling to digest the performance of a salute representing one of the vilest dictatorships the world has ever been witness to (Nehra, Devki 2021). Soon, however, a short clip in loop of Dobson performing the salute (with a Nazi cap clearly edited over his head) but without the context before or after it starts circulating among the Pembroke student community (1: 2). Ironically, Dobson's brief thesis in the class soon after performing the salute was clearly anti-Nazi if only the students had paid attention to it rather than on making the salute viral or anyone from the class would have stepped forward with the complete, unedited recording after it spirals into a huge controversy.²

² Dobson points out that both Samuel Beckett (1906 – 1989) and Albert Camus (1913 – 1960), though they viewed life and existence on earth as painful, absurd, meaningless, or purposeless, nevertheless fought in the Resistance against Nazi Germany (1: 1). In other words, despite life being absurd and characterized by suffering, both attempted to save lives rather than end it.

Feldman (2021) aptly observes that the series is concerned with 'the swift and dire impact of a cancel culture just waiting to pounce with the oh-so-convenient smart phone at the ready to record a mistake and take down an entire career in the span of minutes' (Feldman 2021).

In his review, Scott Aaronson (2021) reads the series in the light of insight gleaned from Leo Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing* ([1952] 1980) wherein the author argues that writers wanting to avoid political persecution for their heterodox ideas expressed the same, metaphorically speaking,

between the lines. That [kind of] literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage – that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage – capital punishment for the author.³ (Strauss [1952] 1980: 25)

Thus, for Aaronson,

there's an "overt" [or, in Straussian terms 'exoteric'] reading, wherein Bill Dobson is done in by his own hubris, or wherein it's a comedy of errors with no one to blame. But then there's also an "esoteric" reading, wherein Bill is the victim of an extremely specific modern-day collective insanity, one that future generations might look back on with little more ambivalence than we look back on McCarthyism. The writers of *The Chair* might *hint* at this latter reading, through their sympathetic portrayal of Bill and the obviousness of the injustice done to him, but they can never make it too explicit, because of the political and cultural constraints under which they themselves operate. (Aaronson 2021, emphasis in original)

According to Davies (2021), however, though Dobson's intention might have been satirical, it was nonetheless

grossly unprofessional and wrong, which the students of Pembroke are quick to point out. Through that storyline, the show explores underlying themes of racism, insensitivity and reckoning, illustrating how more and more university students across the country are no longer tolerant of "one bad joke". (Davies 2021)

A probable esoteric reading also containing a note of caution against misinterpretation can be undertaken with regards to Dobson's interaction with Dafna Eisenstadt (Ella Rubin) who, apart from being a student at Pembroke, is also the daughter of a member of the Board of Trustees. In most cases, those in positions of power are quickly assumed guilty of abusing their power for gaining unlawful favours, mostly financial or sexual (Ransom, John Crowe, 1937). However, *The*

³ The quote comes from the second chapter, titled "Persecution and the Art of Writing", originally published with the same title in *Social Research*, November 1941, pp. 488-504.

Chair seems to suggest that one must not be too quick to pass judgement based merely on outward appearance(s).

The first episode of the series depicts Dobson, late for his class, accepting a lift from Dafna, unaware of the fact that she is the daughter of one of the Board Trustees (1: 1). When Ji-Yoon mentions that someone from the Dean of Students office e-mailed her about it, in all likelihood drawing attention to the negative connotations of Dobson's action, the latter defends himself on the ground that his car was impounded which he was yet to have released, prompting Ji-Yoon to admonish Dobson and expect that 'everyone [of the faculty is] on their best behaviour' (1: 1).

While Dobson, though late for class, could have certainly acted more prudently, it becomes clear only in the last episode of the season that rather than Dobson seeking any potential sexual favours from the student, it is Dafna who was in need of a favour from Dobson – reading the manuscript of her first novel, offer her some notes on her work, and since she mentions that she would be submitting the manuscript to the publisher Dobson has been associated with, implying that if Dobson found merit in the work to offer a positive review of it to the publishing house (1:6) – and was thus trying to help Dobson if an opportunity so presented itself, whether by offering a car ride (1: 1) or advice (1: 3).

Indeed, Dobson himself falls into the trap of hasty (mis)interpretation when Dafna drops by at the former's residence to submit a copy of her novel's manuscript (1: 6). Dafna's ambiguous references to plucking up her courage (of whether to approach Dobson with the request of reviewing her novel) and to have dropped by to ask for 'something' from Dobson regarding which if his 'answer is no' she will be 'totally fine' (to drop in a positive comment about her work to the publisher she plans to submit her novel to) prompts Dobson to quickly assume that she intends to make sexual advancements towards him, which as it becomes clear moments later, wasn't actually Dafna's intention at all (1: 6).

Another instance of the dangers of (deliberately) interpreting something outside of its proper context, in this case a statement, occurs soon after Lila (Mallory Low), Dobson's Teaching Assistant who is also writing her dissertation under his supervision, is advised by Ji-Yoon not to discuss the matter of Dobson's Nazi-salute with anyone (1: 3). When Charlotte Lo (Sarah Lo), a reporter for the on-campus newspaper *The Pembroke Daily*, attempts to interview Lila, the latter at first refuses to comment on the matter (1: 4). Upon further prodding, Lila, without intending to and clearly under distress, misrepresents Ji-Yoon's advice as having received 'an earful [from her] about not talking to anyone about this' and leaves (1: 4). The newspaper prints this news as Kim having issued a gag-order on speaking about Dobson's case, thereby stifling students' right to voice their opinion and concerns (1: 5; 1: 6).

Whether it is a woman author or an education institution

(for women), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* ([1929] 2015) stresses the importance of healthy material conditions – simply put, money – as a key factor influencing the success or failure of the endeavour (14-16; 27-28). However, Pembroke becomes a grim reminder of how deserving candidates can bear the brunt of the drive for securing financial aid or grants, especially when that aid is controlled by a single person or a group with a particular ideology or agenda. Although Ji-Yoon has already promised the Department's Distinguished Lectureship to McKay⁴ and even went ahead with an unscheduled announcement without Dean Larson's permission⁵ (1: 2), during the dinner conversation with the board trustee Mrs. Whittenden (Cynthia Mace), the latter insists on conferring the Distinguished Lectureship to David Duchovny (David Duchovny), a New York Times best-selling author who left his Ph.D incomplete and was the advisee of the literary critic Harold Bloom at Yale (1: 3). When Ji-Yoon reminds that conferring the Distinguished Lectureship has been the prerogative of the Department Chair, Dean Larson, at whose house the dinner has been arranged, reminds Ji-Yoon that the funds for the same 'are at the discretion of the trustee who endowed them' (1: 3). With low student enrolment in almost every other subject, it is only the creative-writing class attracting student enrolments (1: 3) and Dean Larson is concerned only with quantity rather than quality (Shakespeare, W., 2016). While Duchovny worked on Beckett years earlier for his dissertation, his scholarship, as Ji-Yoon has the courage to point it out to him in order to convince him against giving the Distinguished Lecture, is outdated and he hasn't kept track of critical developments since the 1980s (1: 5).⁶

The chair reminds viewers that every individual, including a teacher whose one key responsibility is to always

4 Travers (2021) argues that '[a]s the first woman and first woman of color to serve as chair, Ji-Yoon recognizes she's the critical initial step in a longer movement to bring Pembroke University out of the dark white ages. Accordingly, she feels pressured to embolden diverse, minority voices in a world long controlled primarily by men' (Travers 2021, strikethrough in original).

5 Earlier, Dean Larson had clearly hinted to Kim that he would consider McKay for the Distinguished Lectureship only after Kim convinces the three highest-earning faculties with lowest enrolments in their class to retire (1: 2), once again highlighting the importance of the financial health of any educational institution.

6 Kim instead suggests Duchovny to donate funds to the University so that they can endow a chair in his name and promises him an honorary doctorate in return. However, by the time she is able to convince Duchovny to withdraw, McKay has been offered an '[e]xpeditious tenure and an endowed professorship' at Yale along with a handsome paycheque (1: 5).

be a confident and positive role model students look up to, might be burdened with difficult problems in their personal life and about which their students might be completely unaware (Travers, Ben, 2021). Dobson is grieving the death of his wife (1: 1), and while he is surely attracted towards Ji-Yoon (1: 2), he does miss out on his classes and ends up playing during the class one of his late wife's videos from the days of her pregnancy (1: 1). He is also worried about his daughter Doodles (Sophia Macy) who has secured admission at Columbia University and who is less than pleased with her father's constant concern for her (1: 1; 1: 2). In Ji-Yoon's case, her adopted daughter Ju-Hee "Ju-Ju" (Everly Carganilla), who is of Mexican descent and is aware of Ji-Yoon not being her biological mother, is yet to develop a bond with her, is rebellious, and is also unconsciously worried about her adoptive mother dying early and leaving her alone in the world to fend for herself as is evident from the drawing she made at school (1: 1; 1: 2). Moreover, Ji-Yoon has also endured heartbreak. Peter Seung, to whom she was engaged, moved to Michigan for a teaching position (1: 6). While the institute attempted to negotiate a spousal hire, ultimately what was offered to Kim was only a contractual teaching position for a period of three years (1: 6). Though the couple tried long-distance relationship, Seung met someone else not long after and broke up with Kim who 'buried' herself in her work and soon had 'a half dozen R1 universities begging for me to apply' (1: 6).

The chair also highlights gender discrimination within Pembroke's English Department during much of the past century and even the present. For instance, Ji-Yoon, the current Chair of the Department, had to face gender discrimination from Rentz as she reveals to McKay (whose tenure case is being chaired by Rentz). While Bill Dobson was always appreciated and invited for dinner at Rentz's, Ji-Yoon was completely ignored by him (1: 4). Hambling, on the other hand, describes the pay disparity between male and female faculties, how certain responsibilities were assigned to female faculties with the only justification that they being women would be most suitable to undertake it, and how raising a voice was often perceived as hostile and therefore anti-feminine:

I started as an Assistant Professor here 32 years ago. They offered me \$26,000. But I found out that John McHale, who ... who started the same year I did and is still kicking around, got 16,000 more. I thought about saying something, but I didn't wanna be that woman. I wrote a book on Chaucer that was the first feminist reading of "The Wife of Bath." But here at the department, they'd ask for a volunteer to be on faculty governance, "Oh, let's have Joan do it." Or they needed someone to host the annual holiday party, "Joan won't mind. Joan loves parties." It's a well-documented fact that departmental service falls disproportionately on female faculty. I, um ... I let my research go, and I never went up

for full professor. (1: 6)

According to Feldman (2021), the series goes on to also highlight gender inequality in what are often patriarchal workplaces and it dives into how women of color, specifically, are forced to navigate near impossible standards and challenges their white male counterparts will never have to endure or even understand. (Feldman 2021)

When Rentz learns from McKay that the reason Ji-Yoon merged their classes was because the former had low student enrolment in his class and was likely to be asked to voluntarily retire, Rentz teams up with McHale and Hambling to move a no-confidence motion in Ji-Yoon as Department Chair given that he feels that while Ji-Yoon was putting in all her efforts to defend Dobson, whom she was in love with, she wasn't representing their 'interests' (1: 5). It is noteworthy that while Rentz hasn't updated his scholarship for years and seems to disregard critical race theory and feminist scholarship and is only concerned with evading forced retirement, he moves the no-confidence motion against Ji-Yoon arguing that '[o]ur very field is at stake, both within the University itself and in the culture at large' (1: 6). Indeed, it is not too difficult to read the latter part of the statement as the threat perceived by Rentz and others like him to the dominant white male institutional and political power and which they couch in terms of threat to 'the [hegemonic] culture at large' they themselves have created and which sustains them.

Ji-Yoon, however, ensures that a woman remains at the helm and proposes Joan's name to replace her as Chair (1: 6).⁷ Following her liberation from 'a shit job', Ji-Yoon is finally able to devote her full time and energy to something she enjoys the most – teaching – whereas McKay, before leaving to join Yale, leads the American Studies class with Elliot taking up a supportive role (1: 6). Arguing that change, more unexpected than as planned, is one of the central themes of the show, Venable (2021) is left wondering (Venable, Heidi, 2021).

how much progress did viewers actually witness? Ji-Yoon's stint as the first person of color to chair the department was short-lived, dismantled quickly by white men. Yaz had to take a job at another university because she kept getting passed over. Seemingly nothing changed for the dean, the board or the tenured professors averaging five students per class. The continuation of Ji-Yoon, Joan and others' efforts to tear down walls at Pembroke is something viewers would hopefully see happen if there is a second season. (Venable 2021)

⁷ Although Rentz's No-confidence Motion against Ji-Yoon passes with six in favour and five against, Hambling had backed down at the last moment, thereby earning Ji-Yoon's gratitude in the form of the nomination (1: 6), a step which also prevents the prolongation of Rentz's forty-odd years of (prejudiced) 'institutional power' (1: 4) since he had offered his services as 'interim chair' before Ji-Yoon nominated Hambling (1: 6).

Conclusion

The chair (2021) provides illuminating insight into the various challenges of being a Chair of a University Department, in this case the Department being English, which can be further compounded by the fact that Dr. Ji-Yoon Kim is the first female and non-white person to Chair the Department.

The challenges and crisis Kim has to respond to as chair includes students' lack of interest in studying literature (which could be made all the more severe by the corresponding indifference towards literary theory at times betrayed by teachers); clash between old and young faculty members; the question of deciding a teachers' value either on the basis of the salary they draw or the knowledge and wisdom they provide; the pitfalls of prejudiced scholarship and the influence that long-serving and tenured faculties can have on prospective careers; student activism and protests led by them (whether misplaced in Dobson's case or justified in case McKay is denied tenure); the dangers of misinterpretation, especially students misconstruing what the teacher aims to convey, chiefly due to insufficient attention to context and intention; the influence of financial concerns and board trustees on academic matters; gender, pay, and racial discrimination within the Department and University; and the attempts to maintain status-quo by vested interests.

Moreover, the series also ends up suggesting, through the clash between Elliot and McKay, that young faculties will always be more talented, objective, responsive, and sympathetic to student demands in comparison to older ones, an implication that can remain perpetually debatable. Finally, the series also highlights, by providing viewers with a look into Ji-Yoon and Dobson's personal lives, how the challenges and troubles of one's personal and family life demand simultaneous attention, making it difficult to successfully navigate professional and personal responsibilities.

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