

A Marxist Examination of Kyuri's Alienation under K-beauty Standards in If I Had Your Face

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how K-beauty standards function as a form of ideological control and how they produce alienation in the character Kyuri in *If I Had Your Face* by Frances Cha. Although previous studies have discussed K-beauty and gender representation, limited research has explored K-beauty standards through a Marxist perspective, particularly in relation to ideology and alienation in literary works. Using qualitative textual analysis and a Marxist literary framework, this study focuses on the concepts of ideology, false consciousness, and alienation. The data are collected through close reading of the novel, emphasizing Kyuri's dialogues, actions, and narrative development related to beauty practices. The findings reveal that K-beauty standards operate as a powerful ideological mechanism that shapes Kyuri's perception of self-worth and social mobility, leading her to internalize the belief that physical transformation is necessary for success. This internalization results in multiple forms of alienation, including alienation from her body, identity, and social relationships, as her body becomes a commodity within a capitalist system. This study concludes that K-beauty standards function not only as cultural norms but also as instruments of capitalist control that reinforce social inequality and regulate individual identity.

Keywords: *K-beauty, Ideological, Alienation, Marxist Criticism, Kyuri*

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INTRODUCTION

Beauty is no longer merely an aesthetic pursuit; it has become a global cultural and economic phenomenon that shapes social values, identities, and everyday practices across national boundaries. The rapid global expansion of South Korea's K-beauty industry, driven by the worldwide popularity of Korean popular culture through the Korean Wave (Hallyu), has transformed beauty standards into a powerful value system that regulates how women perceive their bodies, identities, and social worth. According to Seo et al. (2020), K-beauty has become a form of "hegemonic hybridity" in which global beauty ideals are merged with Korean cultural values and exported internationally through media and consumer culture. Through social media, beauty influencers, cosmetic advertisements, and digital entertainment, K-beauty ideals have gained international influence, promoting highly specific standards of femininity associated with flawless skin, youthfulness, and bodily perfection. Recent discussions on global beauty culture further show that digital platforms and visual media increasingly normalize standardized appearances and intensify pressure to conform to idealized beauty norms (Wired, 2023). In addition, Surgery (2024) reported a significant global increase in cosmetic procedures in its 2024 Global Survey, reflecting the growing normalization of beauty modification practices worldwide. In this context, media, advertising, and popular culture continuously reinforce the belief that physical appearance determines not only attractiveness but also social mobility and professional success.

Within a capitalist framework, these beauty standards operate as a form of ideological control that commodifies the female body and links self-worth to consumption and bodily modification. As argued by Seo et al. (2020) and Nailah (2016), beauty is no longer an

individual preference but a socially constructed necessity shaped by market forces. Dominant ideals, such as symmetrical facial features, youthful appearance, and “glass skin” are repeatedly reproduced through media representations, creating a narrow definition of femininity that women are expected to embody. This process normalizes the idea that achieving beauty requires continuous investment, thereby embedding consumption into everyday identity formation (Kyzy, 2025).

The pressure to conform to these standards is particularly intense for women from lower-middle-class backgrounds, where economic limitations intersect with social expectations. In South Korea, physical attractiveness is often associated with tangible economic benefits, including increased employment opportunities and higher salaries, as employers may favor candidates who meet conventional beauty standards (Rupińska, 2024). For those with limited resources, this creates a cycle of aspirational consumption, where affordable beauty practices, such as skincare routines or minor cosmetic procedures, become necessary investments despite their financial and psychological costs, as beauty consumption is closely tied to social visibility, identity signalling, and class-based expectations (Qin et al., 2026; Seo et al., 2020). As a result, beauty shifts from a personal choice to a socio-economic obligation, reinforcing structural inequalities rather than alleviating them, particularly as beauty practices are shaped by broader systems of inequality and social judgment.

This phenomenon can be critically understood through Marxist theory, which conceptualizes ideology as a tool used by dominant classes to maintain power by presenting constructed values as natural and inevitable. Drawing on *The German Ideology* by Marx & Engels (1846), this study views literature as a reflection of social and economic power relations, where cultural texts reproduce and contest dominant ideologies. Within this framework, ideology produces what is known as false consciousness, a condition in which individuals internalize and reproduce the very systems that exploit them. In the context of K-beauty, beauty standards can therefore be understood not as neutral preferences, but as socially constructed norms that sustain capitalist interests by regulating how individuals perceive themselves and others. Furthermore, this study applies Marx's concept of alienation, as outlined in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx, 1844), to examine how beauty practices function as forms of alienated labour. Women invest time, money, and emotional energy into modifying their bodies according to market-driven ideals, resulting in a disconnection from their authentic identities and lived experiences. This process transforms the body into a commodity that circulates within capitalist systems of value, reinforcing the idea that self-worth is externally determined. As Øversveen & Kelly (2023) suggest, capitalism extends beyond economic production to shape personal desires, identities, and self-perception, making beauty not only a cultural expectation but also a mechanism through which ideological control is maintained.

These theoretical tensions are vividly reflected in contemporary literature, particularly in *If I Had Your Face* by Cha (2020). The novel explores the lives of young women in Seoul as they navigate economic precarity and rigid beauty expectations. It portrays beauty not merely as aspiration but as a survival strategy within a competitive urban environment. Among the characters, Kyuri stands out as a room salon worker whose identity is deeply entangled with appearance and social validation (York, 2023). Her continuous efforts to modify her body illustrate how beauty standards are internalized and reproduced, positioning the female body as both a site of desire and a locus of control.

Several previous studies have examined related themes through Marxist and feminist perspectives. Nailah (2016), for instance, analyses class and gender oppression in *Mockingjay*, demonstrating how capitalist systems shape identity and resistance. Similarly, Sari (2016) explores alienation in the context of celebrity culture, showing how individuals become detached from their authentic selves due to commodification by media industries. Meanwhile, Sulatri & Damayanti (2022) focus on labor alienation in industrial settings, emphasizing how repetitive work and lack of agency produce disconnection from self and society. While these studies offer valuable insights into Marxist concepts of oppression and alienation, they primarily focus on overt political structures, media spectacle, or formal labor systems.

However, these approaches tend to overlook how everyday cultural practices, such as beauty standards, function as subtle yet pervasive mechanisms of ideological control. In particular, there remains limited scholarly attention to how K-beauty standards operate within literary narratives to shape subjectivity and produce alienation. This gap is significant, as beauty culture represents one of the most normalized forms of capitalist influence in contemporary society, especially for women navigating the intersection of gender and class.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how K-beauty standards function as ideological control and generate alienation in *If I Had Your Face*. Focusing specifically on Kyuri's experiences, this study argues that K-beauty standards operate as a form of capitalist ideology that commodifies women's bodies and shapes their identities, ultimately producing alienation in their sense of self, bodily autonomy, and social relations. Through a Marxist literary framework, this research aims to contribute to broader discussions on the intersection of beauty, capitalism, and gender in contemporary literature.

METHOD

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative textual analysis, a widely used approach in literary research that emphasizes in-depth interpretation of narrative elements and meanings embedded within a text. The primary data source is *If I Had Your Face* by Cha (2020), with particular focus on chapters and passages centered on the character Kyuri. The analysis specifically examines dialogues, internal monologues, narrative descriptions, and interactions that reflect the influence of K-beauty standards on Kyuri's identity, self-perception, and lived experiences. Passages are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly scenes that depict beauty practices, body modification, social expectations, class pressure, commodification of the female body, and expressions of alienation.

This study adopts a Marxist theoretical framework, specifically drawing on the concepts of ideology, false consciousness, commodification, and alienation, to examine how socio-economic structures shape individual consciousness and behaviour within the novel. Data collection is conducted through close reading and systematic note-taking, allowing for careful identification of textual evidence related to K-beauty standards and capitalist ideology. Relevant quotations and narrative events are highlighted, documented, and grouped according to recurring themes connected to the research questions.

The analysis is conducted through several steps. First, important quotations, dialogues, and narrative descriptions from the novel are identified and grouped based on key Marxist concepts, such as ideology, commodification, false consciousness, and alienation. Second, the collected data are organized into broader themes, including alienation from the body, identity, and social relationships, as well as the normalization of beauty standards as a social and economic necessity. Third, the data are analysed using a Marxist literary approach to examine how K-beauty standards operate as forms of ideological and capitalist control in the novel. Finally, the analysis explores moments of conflict, awareness, personal agency, and social oppression within contemporary capitalist society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study by applying the Marxist theoretical framework to *If I Had Your Face* by Cha (2020). It focuses on how K-beauty standards function as ideological control and how they lead to Kyuri's alienation from her body, identity, and social relationships. Supported by textual evidence and intrinsic elements such as characterization, setting, and plot, this analysis further explores moments of tension in Kyuri's actions as potential forms of resistance, in order to answer the research questions and substantiate the study's central argument.

Ideology and Internalization

The findings of this study show that K-beauty standards in *If I Had Your Face* function as a form of ideological control that shapes Kyuri's beliefs, decisions, and perception of self-worth. In Marxist theory, ideology works by presenting socially constructed values as natural and necessary, causing individuals to internalize dominant norms without questioning them. Through Kyuri's experiences, Frances Cha demonstrates how beauty standards become deeply embedded in women's consciousness and influence the way they understand success, identity, and social acceptance.

One of the clearest examples of ideological internalization appears when Kyuri states: *"even as a girl, I knew the only chance I had was to change my face."* (Cha, 2020)

This statement reveals that Kyuri has accepted beauty standards from an early age and views physical appearance as the main determinant of her future. The phrase "only chance" suggests that she sees beauty not as a personal preference but as a requirement for survival and social mobility. Instead of questioning why women are valued based on appearance, Kyuri internalizes this belief as a natural reality. This reflects Marxist ideology, in which dominant social values become normalized and unconsciously accepted by individuals.

Kyuri's internalization of beauty standards is further reinforced through her admiration of celebrities and cosmetic surgery culture. She explains that she modeled her face after Candy, a famous idol singer:

"Dr. Shim was the surgeon who gave it to her, which is the reason I had come to him." (Cha, 2020)

This shows how media and popular culture contribute to the spread of beauty ideology by promoting certain facial features as ideal and desirable. Kyuri does not attempt to develop her own identity but instead tries to reproduce a socially approved image. Her dependence on cosmetic surgery reflects how ideology shapes individual desires and encourages conformity to dominant standards.

The findings also reveal that ideology affects how Kyuri perceives other women. When she sees a woman who has not undergone cosmetic surgery, she immediately judges her appearance, describing her face as "devoid of surgery" and saying that she:

"would not have been caught dead walking around with a face like that." (Cha, 2020)

This reaction demonstrates that Kyuri has fully internalized the belief that beauty enhancement is necessary. More importantly, it shows how ideology reproduces itself through social judgment, as individuals begin to enforce dominant standards onto others. Rather than questioning the system, Kyuri participates in maintaining it by viewing natural appearance as unacceptable.

In addition, the room salon environment strengthens the process of ideological internalization by linking beauty to economic success. Kyuri works in a space where physical appearance determines status and financial opportunity. Women are expected to maintain attractive appearances through makeup, fashion, and cosmetic procedures in order to attract wealthy clients. This is evident when the manager refers to Kyuri as the salon's "ace" because many men specifically ask for her every night (Cha, 2020). Her value within the workplace is therefore closely tied to her appearance, reinforcing the belief that beauty functions as social and economic capital. Furthermore, Kyuri's willingness to continue cosmetic procedures despite financial difficulties demonstrates how deeply ideology controls her actions. She admits that she has:

"I've started racking up debts again because of my recent touch-up surgeries." and explains that *"they're just small ones here and there but they add up"* (Cha, 2020).

This finding indicates that maintaining beauty has become an obligation rather than a choice. Although cosmetic procedures place her in financial instability, Kyuri continues to

pursue them because she believes appearance is essential for maintaining her position and value in society. This reflects how ideological control can lead individuals to sacrifice personal well-being in order to conform to dominant expectations.

False Consciousness and Desire for Mobility

Kyuri's desire for social mobility is strongly influenced by false consciousness, which causes her to believe that beauty is the main path toward success, stability, and a better life. In Marxist theory, false consciousness refers to a condition in which individuals internalize dominant ideology and fail to recognize the structural inequalities that shape their lives. In *If I Had Your Face*, Frances Cha portrays how Kyuri becomes trapped in the belief that physical appearance can overcome class limitations and provide upward mobility.

This belief is clearly reflected when Kyuri admires a famous idol and thinks:

"You have so much and you can do anything you want. I would live your life so much better than you, if I had your face." (Cha, 2020)

This statement shows that Kyuri associates' success, happiness, and opportunity with physical appearance rather than social conditions or personal capability. Instead of questioning the unequal system that limits her opportunities, she believes that possessing the "right" face would automatically improve her life. This reflects false consciousness because Kyuri accepts the dominant belief that beauty is the solution to social and economic struggles.

Kyuri's dependence on cosmetic surgery further demonstrates her belief that beauty can function as social capital. She repeatedly undergoes cosmetic procedures because she sees them as an investment in her future. This is evident when she admits that she has:

"Started racking up debts again because of [her] recent touch-up surgeries." (Cha, 2020)

Although these procedures create financial problems, Kyuri continues to pursue them because she believes maintaining beauty is necessary for survival and success. This finding suggests that beauty standards encourage individuals to focus on self-transformation rather than recognizing the broader structural inequalities that restrict their lives.

Kyuri views the room salon industry as one of the few available paths for social mobility. Her appearance allows her to work in an exclusive environment where wealthy clients provide expensive gifts, money, and connections. She carefully keeps track of luxury items she receives and later resells them for financial benefit (Cha, 2020). In this context, beauty becomes a form of economic value that can be exchanged within a capitalist system. However, despite the financial rewards, Kyuri remains economically insecure and emotionally unstable. This demonstrates the contradiction within false consciousness: while beauty ideology promises upward mobility, it often keeps individuals dependent on the same exploitative system.

Kyuri's awareness of unemployment and limited opportunities further strengthens this idea. When Sujin encourages her to find another job, Kyuri responds by questioning whether she should:

"Go clean toilets?" I ask playfully. It is not a question that I have ever seriously considered. Everywhere I look, there are only jobs that I cannot possibly ever land (Cha, 2020).

This statement reveals that Kyuri sees beauty-related work as her only realistic opportunity for survival. Although she recognizes the difficulties of her current lifestyle, she still feels trapped within the system because of her class position and limited economic choices. From a Marxist perspective, this reflects how false consciousness obscures structural inequality by directing individuals to focus on personal adaptation rather than collective or systemic change.

Forms of Alienation

The findings of this study show that K-beauty standards in *If I Had Your Face* lead Kyuri to experience different forms of alienation. In Marxist theory, alienation refers to a condition in which individuals become disconnected from themselves, their bodies, and their social relationships due to oppressive social systems. In the novel, Frances Cha illustrates how beauty ideology shapes Kyuri's life to the point that it affects not only her appearance, but also her identity and interactions with others. Kyuri's alienation appears in three main forms: alienation from the body, alienation from identity, and alienation from social relations.

Alienation from the Body

The findings reveal that Kyuri experiences alienation from her body because she no longer views it as a natural part of herself, but as something that must constantly be modified and improved. From a young age, she internalizes the belief that her natural appearance is not enough to achieve acceptance and success. This is evident when she states:

"Even as a girl, I knew the only chance I had was to change my face." (Cha, 2020).

The phrase "change my face" suggests that Kyuri sees her body as a problem that needs correction rather than something she can accept naturally. Her body becomes an object shaped by social expectations instead of personal identity. This alienation becomes more intense after she undergoes cosmetic surgery. Kyuri expresses extreme discomfort with her original appearance, admitting that she:

"Would kill someone before [she] let them see what [she] looked like pre-surgery." (Cha, 2020)

This statement demonstrates how deeply disconnected she has become from her natural self. Instead of accepting her original face as part of her identity, she completely rejects it and feels ashamed of it. From a Marxist perspective, this reflects how ideology controls the body by making individuals believe that their natural appearance lacks value unless it fits dominant beauty standards. Furthermore, Kyuri's repeated cosmetic procedures show that her body has become a continuous project of maintenance. She explains that she has:

"Started racking up debts again because of [her] recent touch-up surgeries... they're just small ones here and there but they add up." (Cha, 2020)

This finding indicates that beauty standards create pressure to constantly improve and maintain physical appearance. As a result, Kyuri's relationship with her body is based on dissatisfaction and correction rather than self-acceptance. Her body is treated almost like a commodity that requires ongoing investment in order to remain socially valuable.

Alienation from Identity.

Kyuri experiences alienation from her identity because her sense of self becomes unstable and heavily dependent on external validation. Instead of understanding herself through personal values or genuine self-acceptance, Kyuri defines her worth based on appearance, social approval, and the expectations of others. As a result, she struggles to maintain an authentic identity and becomes emotionally disconnected from her true self.

One indication of this alienation is seen in the way Kyuri hides the reality of her life from her mother:

"I tell her I am meeting scores of men at the office where she thinks I work as a secretary." (Cha, 2020)

She pretends to have a respectable office job instead of revealing that she works in a room salon. This shows that Kyuri feels unable to openly present her real identity because she fears social judgment and disappointment. The need to lie to her mother reflects the separation between her public image and her private reality. Rather than living honestly, Kyuri is forced to construct different identities depending on the situation. This condition demonstrates alienation from identity because she cannot fully accept or express herself openly.

Kyuri's unstable self-worth is also evident in the way she constantly measures her value through beauty. She believes that physical appearance determines success and happiness, as shown when she thinks:

"I would live your life so much better than you, if I had your face." (Cha, 2020)

This statement reveals that Kyuri associates a better life with possessing a socially desirable face rather than with personal ability or individuality. Her self-worth becomes unstable because it depends on beauty standards that are constantly changing and difficult to maintain. Instead of appreciating herself as an individual, Kyuri compares herself to others and feels incomplete without the "ideal" appearance.

Furthermore, Kyuri's identity is strongly shaped by external validation. She gains confidence when clients admire her appearance and when she receives attention in the room salon. Her position as the salon's "ace" gives her temporary feelings of value and importance because it confirms that she is considered attractive and desirable by others. However, this validation is unstable because it relies entirely on outside approval. When beauty and youth are treated as the main sources of value, Kyuri becomes anxious about losing them. This is reflected when she describes herself as having "an imminent expiration date" (Cha, 2020). The phrase suggests that she sees her worth as temporary and dependent on maintaining physical attractiveness.

Alienation from Social Relations

K-beauty standards contribute to Kyuri's alienation from social relationships. Beauty ideology creates competition, comparison, and insecurity among women, making it difficult to form genuine solidarity and emotional connection. Instead of building supportive relationships, individuals are often encouraged to evaluate themselves and others based on appearance.

This tension is clearly seen in Kyuri's interaction with Miho. During an argument, Kyuri accuses Miho of acting superior because she is naturally beautiful without surgery, saying:

"you're just lucky that your kind of face is trendy these days... you don't have to be such a condescending snob about surgery." (Cha, 2020)

This interaction reveals how beauty standards create jealousy and insecurity between women. Kyuri is unable to fully understand because appearance has become a source of comparison and emotional tension. Rather than forming solidarity, beauty ideology encourages women to judge themselves and others according to socially accepted standards.

Kyuri's alienation from social relations is also reinforced by the room salon environment, where relationships are shaped by economic exchange rather than genuine emotion. Her interactions with clients are closely connected to financial benefit, expensive gifts, and social status. This reflects the commodification of relationships, as personal interactions become transactional within a capitalist system. In addition, Kyuri constantly competes with other women in the salon to maintain her position as the "ace," showing that her social environment is built on rivalry and performance rather than authentic connection.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that K-beauty standards in *If I Had Your Face* operate as a form of ideological control that shapes Kyuri's beliefs, identity, and social relationships. By applying Marxist theory, particularly the concepts of ideology, false consciousness, commodification, and alienation, this study reveals that beauty standards are not simply personal preferences but social constructions connected to capitalist and patriarchal systems. Through Kyuri's experiences, Frances Cha illustrates how dominant beauty ideology influences individuals to internalize certain values and regulate themselves according to socially accepted standards.

The findings related to ideology and internalization support Hamadi's (2017) argument that ideology functions by making socially constructed values appear natural and unquestionable. Kyuri's belief that changing her face is her "only chance" demonstrates how deeply she has internalized beauty standards from an early age. Rather than viewing cosmetic surgery as a choice, she sees it as a necessary step toward social acceptance and survival. This reflects how ideology works subtly through normalization instead of direct force. In Marxist theory, individuals often unconsciously reproduce dominant values because they believe these values are part of reality. Kyuri's judgment toward women who do not undergo surgery further strengthens this idea, as she not only becomes controlled by beauty ideology but also participates in maintaining it through social judgment.

The findings also align with Marxist concepts of false consciousness. Marxist theory explains that false consciousness occurs when individuals fail to recognize the structural inequalities that shape their lives because they are influenced by dominant ideology. In the novel, Kyuri believes that beauty can provide upward mobility and solve her economic struggles. Her admiration of celebrities and her statement that she could live a better life "if I had your face" show that she associates success with appearance rather than broader social structures. Instead of questioning class inequality or limited economic opportunities, Kyuri focuses on changing herself physically. This supports the idea that capitalist ideology encourages individuals to seek personal transformation instead of recognizing systemic oppression.

Furthermore, the findings reveal the commodification of the female body within capitalist society. Marxist theory argues that capitalism transforms human qualities into commodities with exchange value. In Kyuri's case, beauty becomes a form of capital that can be exchanged for money, gifts, and social status through her work in the room salon industry. Her repeated cosmetic procedures, despite financial instability, show that maintaining beauty is treated as an investment. This supports Almaarof's (2024) argument that capitalist culture commodifies identity and the body by turning them into objects of value and consumption. Kyuri's body is no longer viewed as a natural part of herself but as an asset that must constantly be improved in order to remain economically valuable.

The findings on alienation also strongly support Marxist theory. Marx explains alienation as a condition in which individuals become disconnected from themselves, their labor, and their social relationships due to oppressive systems. In the novel, Kyuri experiences alienation from her body because she views it as inadequate and feels pressured to constantly modify it through cosmetic surgery. Her rejection of her pre-surgery appearance demonstrates that beauty ideology has separated her from self-acceptance. In addition, Kyuri experiences alienation from identity because her self-worth depends heavily on external validation. Her need to hide her real job from her mother and her dependence on clients' approval show that she struggles to maintain an authentic sense of self.

The findings also reveal alienation from social relations. Marxist theory suggests that capitalist systems weaken genuine human connection by encouraging competition and individualism. This is reflected in Kyuri's relationship with other women, particularly in moments of jealousy and insecurity related to beauty. Instead of solidarity, women are positioned within systems of comparison and rivalry shaped by beauty standards. Moreover, relationships in the room salon are transactional, as interactions are closely connected to economic benefit and social status. This demonstrates how capitalist beauty culture affects not only individual identity but also social relationships. The findings and discussion demonstrate that K-beauty standards in the novel function as a powerful ideological system that shapes women's consciousness, identity, and social interactions. By applying Marxist theory, this study reveals that beauty standards are closely connected to capitalism, commodification, and alienation. Through Kyuri's experiences, the novel critiques how dominant beauty ideology creates emotional insecurity, social inequality.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines Kyuri's alienation under the influence of Korean beauty standards in the novel *If I Had Your Face* through a Marxist literary perspective. The research aims to analyze how capitalist ideology commodifies female beauty and shapes Kyuri's identity, social relationships, and life choices. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes narrative events, character development, dialogues, and descriptions in the novel using Marx's theory of alienation and Marxist literary criticism. The findings reveal that Kyuri experiences multiple forms of alienation, including alienation from herself, her body, her labor, and her social relationships, as she strives to conform to the demands of the K-beauty industry. Beauty is portrayed as a form of capital that reinforces class inequality and gender oppression while limiting women's autonomy. The study concludes that the novel critiques the capitalist beauty system by exposing its psychological, social, and economic consequences for women in contemporary South Korean society.

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A Marxist Examination of Kyuri's Alienation under K-beauty Standards in If I Had Your Face
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