



EXPLORING ROMANCE IN 'ASIAN MAN, BLACK WOMAN' BOOKS

By Nyasha Oliver

When 'Asian Man and Black Woman' (hereafter AMBW) books made their way into the romance genre more than ten years ago, many readers were introduced to a new niche in the interracial romance genre. Book covers are often illustrated with dream-like adult characters that evoke sensual fantasy. Books that focus on this type of interracial relationship are often written by Black female authors with Black women as the main protagonists who are mostly reluctant to enter into a relationship first, with the Asian men as secondary and the love interest by the end of the story.

A common narrative is played out throughout these books has the characters meeting, having a clash or a problem to resolve between them which eventually leads them to fall in love. Both have an interesting change of portrayal to their characters in comparison to media stereotypes. The Black female character is written as independent, curvaceous and driven (career or academically) while the Asian male character is heroic, well-built and powerful.

A more in-depth look at the structure of how the book's plots for how the love progresses can be followed in this formula. It starts with the female protagonist meeting the male protagonist in a coincidental way or through mutual friends. Before everything works out in the end, they find an obstacle or complex situation. Not forgetting the continuous sexual tension and physical

action between the characters that the books tease and entice the readers due to the covers. This is hardly a new formula for the romance genre, however, the popularity of this niche leaves more to be explored. This essay will explore two of these books, *The Contract: Sunshine* by Shiree McCarver (2012) and *My Way to You* by Lyndell Williams (2018) to highlight the particular facets of the niche. Like most romance novels, these AMBW books focus on whether the main characters can function in their relationship, but have added interest in fighting racial injustice rather than just the usual uncertainty of whether things will work out between our hero and heroine.

The Contract: Sunshine by Shiree McCarver introduces the readers to Sunshine Dupree, an African-American woman and Young Yoon Min, a Korean man. The book explores their arranged engagement for Yoon to escape being married off to another woman and in the end, it turns into true love. From the get-go, we get a look at one of the common romance tropes that is found among AMBW books like this: "The Rich Billionaire." This trope identifies the Asian male as in opposition to the usual media stereotypes, and as a hyper-masculine, romanticized image of the Asian hero who can win the Black heroine's heart with money.

McCarver gives a less than flattering view of the Black heroine unable to support themselves and

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having to rely on her 'hero' for not only emotional but also financial support. Sunshine actually comes from a wealthy background like Yoon but it is downplayed and seemingly shunned by her family. Because of this, her role is diminished to rely on Yoon and be a housewife as opposed to the usual AMBW character stereotypes.

While it diverts away from the usual narrative of a rich, hyper-masculine hero, *My Way To You* brings more of a realistic turn-point where the female protagonist has an equally great life, career and confidence as the male protagonist does. It focuses a lot on how the main characters, Simon Young and Regina Kent, are viewed by Regina's readers and people around her. The perspective is warped in both books as *My Way To You* focuses more on Simon rather than Regina and *The Contract: Sunshine* focuses on both Sunshine and Yoon. In *My Way To You*, Simon's desire for Regina in the early chapters is for her sense and intelligence. Both characters are presented as the usual AMBW stereotypes, however, Williams takes this story beyond the stereotypical constraints of *The Contract: Sunshine* by showing their vulnerable, realistic sides.

The common complications of interracial romance books like these two is that they often focus on two issues - racial difference and self-doubt. The theme of racial differences is the primary external influence that causes prob-

lems for the characters. This in itself is a fascinating thing to comment upon - race is so important in every AMBW book that it is deemed one of the central themes of every book. Self-doubt is usually encouraged by a tertiary character placing one or both of the characters in a difficult setting in order to end their love.

My Way To You and *The Contract: Sunshine* focuses on the difficulties of dating outside your race as a public online persona, however, in both, the theme could be more greatly explored. Both plots have characters showing a discomfort with the central characters being a couple. The effect it has on the people around them is very a serious and realistic thing to bring to light. In one notable moment in *My Way To You*, the Black male in her apartment gives them a dirty look and calls her a "sellout" for bringing Simon back to her building and assuming she was dating outside of her race. As Regina Kent is a social justice activist and writer, she fears not being accepted by her pro-Black followers for dating an Asian man. Even Simon described the look from this guy as being similar to police in the past racially profiling Regina's brother Marcus. With hate, ignorance and close-mindedness in his eyes.

The issue of race is oddly presented as from the prologue of *The Contract: Sunshine*, this arrangement was started by Yoon's mother and Sunshine's grandmother. The reception from



Image by Xu Duo



Image by Eye for Ebony

Yoon's mother towards Sunshine in their first meeting shows that Yoon's mother will consider Sunshine nothing more than a traditional housewife. Yoon's mother will accept Sunshine if she has children and can teach them Korean as they grow up. But it puts Sunshine in a domestic box rather than letting Yoon and Sunshine live freely and make their own decisions.

The other common complication in AMBW books, onceif dating outside of your race has been dealt with, is bringing about self-doubt in the characters. A large part of that is that readers will still read these books and believe that the character will subconsciously believe that the other character from the other race won't find them attractive. This is not a new idea. Numerous studies have cited that Asian men and Black women are considered the 'least desirable' by many on dating sites. That doubt is also cast into the characters as Simon wonders if he is good enough for Regina. Simon's defence of Regina is slow as he himself is not sure about his feelings and actions for her against her online fans and Marcus. Sunshine and Yoon also have self-doubts as Yoon's mother interfering and threats affect Sunshine's confidence. The issue here is up until this point, the arrangement has been strictly physical and not emotional so Sunshine becomes paranoid she is nothing more than a wedlocked mistress to Yoon.

But, like any other romance book, love will always win, despite other character's opinions and racial differences. If anything, *The Contract: Sunshine and My Way To You* offers new readers a way of opening their minds more and seeing this type of relationship to be normalised in society. Because of their characterisation as 'Women's Fiction', relegated to Mills & Boon and the like, AMBW books are not often published as commercial fiction which means that their readership is limited. There is an argument to say that AMBW books are, therefore, an important niche in the Romance genre, offering new perspectives to those used to reading only white on white romances. AMBW books are extremely concerned with racial difference and uncertainty, positioning race as a problem to be solved, and an issue that must be addressed as the primary problem for the characters. But race is not discussed with much nuance, and brushed aside instead of these deeply engrained issues being fully fleshed out. Asian Man, Black Woman books do what they say on the tin - they are fun explorations of interracial relationships often unseen in popular media. But this does not mean that their lack of nuance on important issues should not be discussed.