Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Undergraduate Dissertation

R. F. Kuang's *Babel*: A Study of Language, Power, and Identity

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May 2024

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on R. F. Kuang's most acclaimed novel, *Babel* (2022), as a literary work concerned with the intricate connections between language and power within the fantasy genre under which the novel is labelled. By establishing a fictional magic system wherein silver bars act as media for translation, Kuang aims to illustrate the socio-political colonialist context represented in the novel. This analysis focuses on the impact of these circumstances on minority-race characters as they deal with the significant role of language in their lives, struggle with identity loss, and navigate power structures that determine their position in society.

Key Words: Language – Colonialism – Power – Identity – Racism

RESUMEN

Esta disertación se centra en la novela más aclamada de R. F. Kuang, *Babel* (2022), dado que es una obra literaria que aborda las intrincadas conexiones entre el lenguaje y el poder dentro del género de fantasía en el que se etiqueta la novela. Al establecer un sistema de magia ficticio en el que barras de plata sirven como medios de traducción, Kuang pretende ilustrar el contexto sociopolítico colonialista representado en la novela. Este análisis se enfoca en el impacto que tienen estas circunstancias en personajes de raza minoritaria mientras lidian con el importante papel del lenguaje en sus vidas, luchan contra la pérdida de la identidad y exploran las estructuras de poder que determinan su posición en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje – Colonialismo – Poder – Identidad – Racismo

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1. Introduction: LANGUAGE AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Once, words had rendered her useless, but now… she felt an innate sense of power.

Markus Zusak

The proverb "Words are power" is a constant reminder of a universally known truth that outlines the world as this vast mass shaped by language. As our reality continues to be increasingly redefined by the cadence of syllables and letters composing a language, these linguistic constructs serve as the genesis upon which today's foundational norms and narratives are built. In that way, the stories constructed along time become part of our history in a sense, leading people to take them as real cases that represent the truth. This phenomenon is visible in contemporary Young Adult novels by authors such as Angie Thomas (1988) and Jay Asher (1975), among others, who emphasize the role of language in constructing a tale, since it can manipulate what others might think regarding the story that is being told. These authors show how language is the fundamental ingredient in narratives in their respective books *The Hate U Give* (2017) and *13 Reasons Why* (2007). Both stories explore the profound impact of words in shaping characters and the dynamics associated to them. Building upon this observation, language's role in colonial narratives not only echoes throughout history but also expands its power in contemporary Young Adult literature. This can be reflected in the skyrocket success of authors like Sabaa Tahir (1983), whose series *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015) delves into the consequences of the Roman Empire expansion, and Malinda Lo (1974), who critically examines colonialism in her Cinderella retelling, *Ash* (2009).

Rebecca F. Kuang (1996) stands out as one of the most remarkable authors in contemporary Young Adult literature because she proficiently uses language to manipulate how historical narratives are told. As one of the youngest female Chinese American authors, she explores themes of colonialism and war in her fantasy trilogy inspired by Asian history, *The Poppy War* (Harper Voyager, 2018-2020), and identity and race in *Yellowface* (HarperCollins Publisher, 2023). She blends these issues in her most awarded novel, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (HarperCollins Publisher, 2022), the

focus on the present essay. This book has encouraged Kuang's readers to engage in debates about colonialism, war, identity, and race on social media. Rebecca F. Kuang, who signs her books only with the initials of her first name to avoid a sales backlash due to her female identity, confessed in an interview that she writes "to make sense of events by recreating them in a fictional setting" (Adeniyi and Kuang). This aim is evident in her exploration of the consequences of British Imperial Expansion that take place in *Babel*, and the historical context of the Opium Wars that are constantly referred to in *The Poppy War* series. Kuang's aim to represent history in imaginary circumstances can be traced in the rest of her published books, such as *Yellowface* —a book about a white American writer who steals the manuscript and future success from an Asian author.

One may wonder why Kuang decided to write such an intricate plot in *Babel*, but a novel about translators could only have been written by a student of languages herself. According to Kuang, she "has a Master in Philosophy in Chinese Studies from Cambridge University and a Master of Sciences in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford University" (Kuang, "About"). Therefore, it is not far-fetched to consider that her pursuit of a "PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale" might be one of the reasons behind the writing of *Babel*. As Natasha Pulley points out, "this is a scholarly book by a superb scholar," and it is this deep interest in the internal functioning of languages that guides characters' motivations along the novel. *Babel* was "one of the most anticipated releases of the year [2022] on Booktok," as Rafqa Touma highlights. This instant success became visible in the high rate of sales. Kuang shared on Instagram that *Babel* was an instant success and became number one in *The New York Times* best-selling list in less than three weeks after its publication in the category of "Hardcover Fiction." In addition, *Babel* also won the Nebula Award in 2022 for Best Novel and it featured Blackwell's Book of the Year for Fiction of 2022.

Diving into the depths of the alternative 19th century that Kuang creates in *Babel*, the story delves into the life of protagonist Robin Stewart as the English professor Richard Lovell guides him out of Canton to gift him the life he has always dreamed of. Providing young Robin with an infinitude of books and acting as a father to him, years later Lovell enrolls him in the elite Oxfordian institution of Babel. It is within these walls that Robin finds out that his knowledge is so precious because the English Empire owes its success to the magic silver bars capable of translating a

minority language into English. In this universe, translation is the coin of exchange the Empire uses to expand its conquest. Consequently, Babel hosts students who speak minority languages so they can teach the Empire their languages, which make the silver bars function. As Robin becomes acquainted with students from other countries, they are all drawn to join a secret revolution, made up of ex-students from Babel, who plan to tear down this elite institution to deprive the Empire from the silver bars. In this story where knowledge, translation and language are considered weapons, minorities take the reins to challenge the power held by Babel.

Hence, *Babel* is a very recent novel that keeps proving its high value not only to its target audience, but to readers of all ages and nationalities. As R. F. Kuang's book engages contemporary Young Adult audiences with a fantasy framework, she invites readers to reflect on and critically analyze the various ways in which language can shape power relations. It is a story that gives readers enough space to question their own assumptions and privileges, as its viral success has provoked some controversy among white readers. This analysis will mainly delve into the importance of language within a fictional and elite education supported by the socio-political colonialist context represented in the novel. In addition, it will examine how minority-race characters —most particularly, Robin and his friends— are portrayed and influenced by these surroundings. In the course of three different chapters, *Babel* will be dissected in terms of power structures, the role of language on the loss of identity, and a close examination of the main characters of the novel.

2. UNPACKING POWER STRUCTURES THROUGH LANGUAGE

Stories are a way to preserve one's self. To be remembered. And to forget.

V.E. Schwab

The relationship between language and power has been studied by several literary critics and scholars and is therefore significant for the analysis of *Babel* since Kuang illustrates how translation functions as a tool of domination and resistance within the novel's context. In Norman Fairclough's words: "The exercise of power, in modern

society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language" (2). Fairclough highlights how this connection works nowadays. He emphasizes the fact that "nobody who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society can afford to ignore language" (3), as they are both intrinsically linked. He points at how "power is [not] just a matter of language" (3), since social, economic and political factors also play an important part when it comes to exercising their status upon more vulnerable people. Professor John Huizinga continues to develop the idea of language as the skeleton of all human expression: "Behind every abstract expression there lies the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (4). Therefore, if words constitute reality, it is a logical consequence that the way you define people, countries, minorities, and stereotypes eventually influences the image that society might have of these elements. Michel Foucault reflected on the link between language and power, but also knowledge. In his words, "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (27). In this way, Foucault exemplifies how knowledge can also grant power and represent a higher status when an expert understanding of a field places somebody above other individual. Foucault relates power with knowledge, and language composes knowledge in itself.

Language also reflects the inner hierarchy society moves upon, since as Linda Thomas and Shân Wareing describe, "Who speaks which language […] and the attitudes of people towards that language […] are further issues inherently connected to the concepts of power and society" (10). Their position clearly shows the way languages and dialects are directly related to the concept and view an audience might have upon the speaker. Some languages are held in higher esteem than others simply because of the native speakers who use them as a first language. Moreover, those minority languages, together with their speakers, are considered to have less importance not only for the global politics but for the overall population. This belief continues to relegate them to a marginal role that perpetuates the harmful perception of them. Thomas and Wareing continue to expand their analysis of language in two different ways: the referential and the affective, explaining both of them thus:

> These two functions are the ones most clearly associated with power. The referential function is the one associated with what objects and ideas are called and how events are described. […]. The affective function of language is concerned with who is "allowed" to say what to whom, which is deeply tied up with power and social status. (9)

According to Thomas and Wareing, words represent how influential language can be when it comes to naming and recalling episodes, whereas the affective function exemplifies the power an individual can hold in relation to their use of language. Since it can have many uses, the magic system that makes the silver bars of Babel function connects something as abstract as language with the characteristic capitalism of the Empire. As Pierre Bourdieu says, "The distinctly instrumental use of language […] clashes with the often-unconscious pursuit of symbolic profit" (67). This profit, however, is tangible, as the translation carried out by the silver bars is extrapolated to the colonization of the Empire in other nations. Yet, Bourdieu exemplifies how language can serve as a tool for capitalistic purposes.

Regarding the way language shapes social hierarchies in society and literature, the myth of the Tower of Babel is a very good exemplification of how the plurality of languages can determine the inner functioning of a whole system. The story tackles the diversity of languages and cultures which end up being collected in one place, beginning with the promise that "All the world spoke a single language and used the same words" (Bible Hub). As the myth progresses and the people in the tower try to reach the heavens, what happens is that "[The Lord] comes down to see the city. […] He said, 'let us go down there and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand what they say to each other'" (Bible Hub). The previous quote shows not only the cultural barrier, but the tough obstacles that speaking different languages can bring with them. The title of Kuang's novel is intrinsically related to the myth, as it explains the reason behind the naming of the tower: "That is why it is called BABEL, because the LORD there made a babble of the language of all the world; from that place the LORD scattered men all over the face of the earth" (Bible Hub). This babbling of languages is precisely what differentiates the elite institution of Babel from other universities in the novel. The diverse languages are represented by the students that arrive at the fictional Oxfordian university, since all of them come from countries where minority languages are spoken. Although the book mainly focuses on Robin, who was born and raised in a very poor area of the Chinese

city Canton, the text also follows Rami—a Muslim Indian student from Calcutta—, Victoire—who comes from Haiti—, and Letty—the daughter of a British former admiral. Their motivation towards the study of languages and being foreigners in an unfamiliar city is what unites them. They bond over the desire to fit in while preserving their own essence and identity. This is something that Babel tries to erase in favour of the Empire. As can be said about the original myth, Kuang's book is about the resistance of minority languages against the pressure of the one most widely spoken.

It is during this time of imperialistic expansion when the plot actually takes place. The perceived moral superiority of the English people over other nationalities is clearly visible from the beginning, since the first chapters orientate the reader into the right mindset and context in which the novel takes place. The typical business-driven aim of the English is expressed in the way Robin feels towards Lovell's offer: "He could not tell if Professor Lovell wanted him in London or not; indeed, this seemed less like an adoption and more like a business proposal" (Kuang, *Babel*, 12). The emphasis on the economic context is related to how Robin is about to be brought to England with the intention of studying in Babel, and therefore, being put in the service of the Empire without even being aware of it. This new place is described with awe and admiration. The highlight of the time the story is set in makes the reader aware of the socio-political colonialist context Babel deals with, something emphasized as the novel progresses:

> The docks were a flurry of the colonial trade at its apes. Ships heavy with chests of tea, cotton, and tobacco, their masts and crossbeams studded with silver that made them sail more quickly and safely, sat waiting to be emptied in preparation for the next voyage to India, to the West Indies, to Africa, to the Far East. They sent British wares across the world. They brough back chests of silver. (22)

The quote above exemplifies the first impressions Robin has of London when he finally sees the city with his own eyes. One can also identify here the fictional traces of the story.

The comparison of silver with the other precious materials the Empire was trading with helps readers to know how valuable silver is in Babel, since its magic properties are used for translating purposes and, therefore, colonialist ones, as is shown in the following quote:

> The stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing —the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language to another. The silver catches what's lost and manifests it into being. (Kuang, *Babel*, 84)

Considering the tough division between the Empire and its colonies, this separation is also extrapolated to the characters of the novel and the power dynamics they maintain with one another. Their differences in relation to social class, education, and race are what makes them so unique yet archetypical at the same time, as if they had to embody their nations merely by being born in them. Racism is explicit in the book, as statements like the following one are constantly spat out of Lovell's mouth:

> I hoped […] that you had grown to be a diligent and hardworking boy. I see now that I was wrong. Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind. […] You are, by nature, foolish, weak-minded, and disinclined to hard work. You must resist these traits, Robin, You must learn to overcome the pollution of your blood. (43)

These word's implications are not only the hatred and racism they convey, but the belief that being a foreigner —Chinese in this case— is similar to being afflicted with an inherent disease from birth. There are no halfway measures in judging someone exclusively based on the prejudices they face while studying at Oxford, which becomes a harsh reality to Robin's eyes.

This thread of thoughts does not stop there, but rather continues as Robin sees his innocence breaking before his eyes when Rami tells him:

> "If they are going to tell stories about you, use it to your own advantage. The British are never going to think I'm posh, but if I fit into their fantasy, then they'll at least think I'm royalty. […] My father says we were aristocrats in the Mughal court, or something like that. But not anymore."
> "What happened?"
> "The British, [Robin]. Keep up." (Kuang, *Babel*, 56-57)

The power of stories and the making of constructed narratives is illustrated in this dialogue. Rami is aware of the manipulating power of language and although he tries to overcome the social limitations he has because of his nationality, the final sentence shows the defeat that comes when trying to fight a power like the Empire. The novel makes it clear that they do not belong to the elite institution of Babel in the most subtle details: "You're Babblers, aren't you? I heard all Babblers are on scholarships.

[…] They don't let your kind in otherwise" (60). This quote has a double meaning: on one side, it shows that they belong to a lower social class, as they would not be able to study at Babel if it were not for the scholarship they had. As a consequence of being constantly judged and criticized for their nationalities, the main characters of *Babel* learn to use language in several different ways. The English professors take a more romantic and idealistic stance, saying:

> Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace. Translation makes possible communication. […] We're here to make the unknown known, to make the other familiar. We're here to make magic with words. (83)

Though this is true and explains the purpose of translation in a beautiful way, characters like Robin, Rami and Victoire have different views on what Babel stands for, each struggling to determine the real implications of the institution on their identities.

As the novel progresses and the previous quote illustrates, students start to see what they really are there for. They realise, as the character of Griffin —one of the rebels of the revolution carried out by Babel's ex-students, and Robin's half-brother— does when he says this, that they are mere tools that work in favour of a country that is not theirs and which, in addition, is responsible for the poverty of their own nations. In this alternative 19th century-Oxford where language is considered an exchange good, Kuang also reflects on its tangible value in relation to the social and economic classes the characters belong to, as language is compared with tangible items:

> But language is not like a commercial good, like tea or silks, to be bought and paid for. Language is an infinite resource. And if we learn it, if we use it – who are we stealing it from? (Kuang, *Babel*, 119)

Professor Lovell has a very privileged view that corresponds to his status and position. However, it gets in conflict with the actual ideology of the book and its main characters. Robin has a more critical view due his foreign background, but also the people he meets at Babel. His thoughts in the previous paragraph are the early stages of the rage that will guide him in the process of bringing the institution down. Yet, Robin goes through a whole process of grief because of what he was promised

when he first arrived in London and the harsh truth he has to face when he finds out the Empire does not take him into account as a human being, but as an instrument of translation:

> He hated this place [Babel]. He loved it. He resented how it treated him. He still wanted to be a part of it —because it felt so good to be a part of it, to speak to its professors as an intellectual equal, to be on the great game. (122)

Kuang skillfully represents how human emotions work, demonstrating how Robin constantly experiences the duality of hatred and love. His awareness of what he deserves and what he does not, while longing for the security that Babel provides, illustrates the internalized colonialism Robin deals with throughout the novel. In the course of the book, he challenges the rules, dynamics, and world's functioning he has learned to live in, eventually triggering the downfall of Babel.

3. LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN *BABEL*

Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.

Angela Carter

In her most awarded-novel, Kuang reflects several times on how the deep study of a language can change not only the way you see that particular culture, but how you perceive your own identity and sense of belonging. In order to be accepted in his new life, Robin sees himself forced to speak constantly in English and, therefore, loses fluency in his native language. The emphasis Kuang places on dreaming, as if it were only in his dreams that Robin could actually let himself be his true self, is also a clear indicator of the significant pressure the Empire puts on him. As Robin and his friends get used to their new life, they feel how their past experiences in their native countries get in conflict with the elite students they are supposed to be in the present: "It took them all several months to learn to speak like Oxfordians. […] Fluency also entailed a whole host of social rules and unspoken conventions that Robin feared he might never fully grasp" (Kuang, *Babel*, 142). This quote entails that the English

spoken at Oxford was a different language, and that everything that came with studying at this place was distinct and not a process that could happen overnight. That anxiety of never fitting in, no matter how hard one tries, highlights the instability foreigners faced in England at the time. This also reflects some of the contemporary issues of our present society. That is one of the reasons why *Babel* has been so acclaimed since it got published: not only because of its complex and rich story, but because Kuang uses the past to criticize the problems of our present.

In addition, Kuang also illustrates how the characters' ethnic background clashes with the English environment they are forced to be in. Aside from the language, the differences between Robin, Rami and Victoire with their friend Letty, who is white and the daughter of a British admiral, are a metonymy of the contrasts between them and the rest of the country, as can be seen in the following quote: "Despite their gowns and pretensions, their bodies were not safe on the streets. They were men at Oxford; they were not Oxford men. The enormity of this knowledge was so devastating" (Kuang, *Babel*, 70). Along these lines, the reader can perceive the fear and anxiety of being attacked on account of their origins. There is a clear distinction shown along these lines about how they do not belong to the place —Oxford— they are living at. As Foucault was cited before, there is a clear link between power and knowledge, and that is precisely the reason why their awareness of the situation feels deeply catastrophic. They remain powerless to change it, as they must conform to the situation. Their minority position is not only reflected in their native countries or tongues, but also in the power status they hold against the system. Even so, Robin's skin tone also contrasts with Rami and Victoire's dark skin, which allows him to enjoy even more privileges than they do: "It's not the manners that's the issue, I think. It's that Robin passes as white, and we don't" (144). Threats hover over Robin and Rami's friendship, with Robin fearing the loss of his privileges. This contrasts sharply with Rami's more confrontational attitude. Such behaviour exemplifies how colorism affects people —while Robin wants to execute a change but is too fearful of losing his benefits, Rami is free from any potential consequences.

However, the movement they had been planning to eradicate Babel, which had been slowly merging in the shadows, starts to become more and more significant. Considering that *Babel*'s full title is *Babel or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, it should not surprise any reader to see that violence is used in the process of trying to make a change. In the full course

of the book, there are several allusions to the use of violence and its purpose, all of which are inextricably intertwined with the novel's title. Griffin mentions in his discourse how the Indian troops share a similar logic with Robin, highlighting the safety entailed in serving the Empire, despite their violent methods, which lead to a confrontation between them: "They pit us against each other. They tear us apart" (Kuang, *Babel*, 220). Griffin's words introduce a type of violence different from the one people might initially think about. It is the cruelty the Empire practices upon them —the force that divides, as separation lowers the chances of succeeding. Griffin's character advocates in favour of acting rather than simply using words and resisting when it is the time to do so. He places a special emphasis on "they," referring to the English only, when in reality it could refer to the whole world who is letting minorities die and fight against each other in order to endure. Victoire also wants to tear Babel down: "I want it to burn" (434). The anger expressed in her voice towards the end of the novel, the lethal calm that her tone expresses, says it all: the people who have suffered so much because of Babel do not want mercy for it.

It is precisely the union between these different people that makes them stronger than the system would have ever anticipated. Their lower social status creates in Babel's students in favour of the revolution a sense of resistance and familiarity that proves how essential human relationships are, because that communal feeling makes them realize they are not alone in their rage. Even in sorrow and anguish, they find comfort in each other, as can be seen in:

> But the dream was shattered. That dream had always been founded on a lie. None of them had ever stood a chance of truly belonging here, for Oxford wanted only one kind of scholar, the kind born and bred to cycle through posts of power it had created for itself. Everyone else it chewed. (Kuang, *Babel*, 433)

This quote shows how Babel only wanted tamed students and those with their own judgment do not fit into that mold. The tone conveying these sentences is one of defeat, as the dream mentioned can also mirror the American Dream that has led multiple generations into the United States only to find the same problems as Babel's students: rejection, racism, classism, and violence in many different ways. This shows how Kuang has portrayed a fictional institution in a very contemporary way, and why so many young people are praising this book in the literary spheres. The feeling of unbelonging continues to be explicitly developed in the following lines:

> No stepping back and forth between two worlds, no seeing and not seeing, no holding a hand over one eyer or the other like a child playing a game. You were either a part of this institution, one of the bricks that held it up, or you weren't. (433)

This view shows a clear division between those who support Babel and those who oppose it, which can be extrapolated to more binary dichotomies, such as the concept of "otherness." This is present quite frequently in the book, as it is a constant feeling most characters share: "His eyes flickered up and down Robin's frame before settling on his face, questioning —determining, Robin suspected, just how foreign Robin was in return" (51). The quote belongs to the scene in which Rami and Robin first meet each other. This thread of thought implies that there might be a certain degree of foreignism, a scale that establishes how foreign one can be before standing out in the middle of a crowd. Yet, Rami and Robin experience the feeling of "otherness" in a very distinctive way: "Rami attracted more attention than Robin did. Robin was foreign only when viewed up close and in certain lights, but Rami was immediately, visible other" (55). The term "other" emphasizes the existence of a scale which measures foreignism, but also the implications that come with being visibly different and that affect Rami throughout the course of the novel. Again, this quote brings back the idea of "passing" and enjoying certain advantages just because of a certain skin tone.

Language also plays a key role in this revolution carried out by the most important translators of this alternative Oxford. English is presented both as the embodiment of the opportunities and offers Robin receives, but also as the enemy threatening to dismantle his ideas of identity and belonging. Robin's journey involved being compelled, along with the rest of students but with a focus on his experience, to abandon his native identity and language in order to become the proper English student he is expected to be. However, the learning of English is presented as aggressive since the very beginning, in early passages such as:

> Professor Lovell shook his head. "English. Use your English."
> The boy's throat burned. He coughed.
> "I know you have English." Professor Lovell's voice sounded like a warning. "Use it". (Kuang, *Babel*, 7)

It is the brutality conveyed by Lovell that makes English a language to be feared,

which can be extrapolated to the people —the English— who have it as a native tongue. As Fairclough's aforementioned words offered, power is exercised through the ideology behind language. Moreover, the fact that the professor uses the word "have" portrays the idea of speaking a language as a possession. Robin, who at the beginning of the book has no property of his own, only carries his identity with him. And still, he is dispossessed of his language to speak English instead. Language is seen as a tool at Babel since it is an instrument of study: "Only he could determine the truth, because only he could communicate it to all parties" (16). The message conveyed in these lines is one of connection between different people —something translators have implicit in their job, but that the context in which the novel takes place presents as a weapon for everybody. Although the purpose behind Babel is apparently the exchange of culture and language thanks to translations, the truth behind Babel comes out to the surface soon enough. It is precisely the emphasis on the goodness behind translation that makes it sound odd to Robin's ears and his classmates'. The reality of the project of the Crown is soon discovered, but in the meantime, for the readers and Babel's students it is covered in beautiful lies.

4. THE CHARACTERS' CONSTELLATIONS IN *BABEL*

There are so many fragile things, after all. People break so easily, and so do dreams and hearts.

Neil Gaiman

Regarding the different characters that make *Babel* the complex book that it is, Robin Swift is the protagonist of this story. After accepting Lovell's offer and travelling to England, he is forced to choose a new name, an English one that will make him suitable for fitting in the society:

> "It occurs to me you need a name."
> "I have a name," said the boy. "It's—"
> "No, that won't do. No Englishman can pronounce that. Did Miss Slate give you a name?"
> […]
> "Robin."
> "How about a surname?"

> "I have a surname."
> "One that will do in London. Pick anything you like." (Kuang, *Babel*, 13)

Robin starts to lose his identity right when he conforms to Lovell's standards. However, the connotations of what the professor says give the impression of a choice, as if Robin could actually have a voice when it comes to modifying his identity, his essence. The choice of Robin's surname is also relevant, since it carries a literary connotation:

> [His eyes] landed on a familiar volume on the shelf above Professor Lovell's head — *Gulliver's Travels*. A stranger in a strange land, who had to learn the local languages if he wished not to die. He thought he understood now how Gulliver felt. (14)

It is in this way that the reader gets to know two very important facts about Robin: he is an avid reader, and it is his thirst for knowledge that drives his survival instinct, and how he feels as a foreigner in England. As he grows up and becomes acquainted with London, Oxford, and their rules, his attitude soon changes. He enjoys his position at Babel but hates the consequences of studying at it, most of them related with the loss of identity previously mentioned. Kuang takes a risk in *Babel* by choosing as a protagonist someone with so many divided interests. He suffers the injustices of the Empire towards his kind but hesitates to take a stand against it. He knows he is somehow privileged among the unprivileged and does not want to break down the cycle, because he is afraid of losing everything he cares about —his studies, his friends, his life— in the process. He spends most of his career at Babel in conflict with himself: "He didn't know what life he would have chosen – this one, or a life in which he'd grown up in Canton, among people who looked and spoke like him" (264). His isolation is what slows down his breaking point because he has learned to appreciate what Lovell has done for him ever since he took him out of Canton.

Professor Lovell is also one of the most important characters in *Babel*. He is a middle-aged white man who embodies the British Empire and the connotations behind it. He works at Babel as a language teacher and his views on languages and their study are directly influenced by his upper class. His superior status can be seen in the first few pages of the novel, when they have not even arrived in England yet, because his persona is severely contrasted with the context Robin comes from: "When Professor Lovell carried the boy [Robin] out of Canton's alleys, everyone

else on his street was already dead" (Kuang, *Babel*, 7). His image as a white savior to Robin's eyes starts there, as the book is focalized from his perspective. However, Lovell is cold towards Robin as he does not see him as a person but as a mere tool for Babel's purposes: "You're claiming me as a son?" "I'm claiming you as a ward. That's different" (24). Lovell wishes to establish a large distance between them so no one can say they are related, though the events of the story progressively unveil that Lovell is Robin's true father. This shows how Robin's life had always been planned to serve the purpose of the Empire, which is why when Griffin reveals to Robin that they are half-brothers and Lovell is their father, Robin reaches his breaking point.

The character of Griffin is another one of the axes that shape *Babel*. He is Robin's half-brother and the face of the revolution. Although they had both been raised in similar circumstances —they abandoned China at a very early age and were forced to study English and later on enrolled at Babel—, their personalities contrast with one another. Where Robin is calm and sensible, Griffin is impulsive and rather violent. Still, it is their similarities that link them together, as their first encounter shows: "'Took you long enough,' said his doppelgänger. 'I've been skulking here all day.' 'Who are you?' Robin demanded. 'What are you —why do you have my face?'" (Kuang, *Babel*, 91). In this instance, readers can already perceive something odd in the atmosphere than surrounds this meeting. After Robin finds out about the existence of the Hermes Society, Griffin drags him in a series of errands whose purpose is to slowly bring Babel down as he is more conscious of what Babel actually stands for:

> "You'll study hard and graduate, and then they'll ask you to do all kinds of unsavory things for the Empire. Or they'll catch you, as you said. It all comes to a head eventually, like it did for us."
> "Does everyone at Hermes leave Babel?"
> "I know very few who have stayed." (137)

This dialogue shows the kind of future Robin has ahead of him, but also what most people at Babel do. Griffin is the character who embodies this belief and pushes Robin to his own limits, even though Robin feels isolated because of the position he finds himself in: "It's such an uneven fight, though. You one on side, the whole of the Empire on the other" (178). This makes the reader realize the magnitude of their

opponent, which embraces the existing world. And despite the fact that Griffin may initially come out as lethal and unfriendly, their relationship reflects the value of human relationships —the importance of brotherhood in a society that despises those who do not fit in according to the standards. He criticizes Robin's false illusions and appeals to an action that will end up in violent terms —the burning of Babel's tower:

> "You see, my colleagues in there are still holding on to this unbelievable faith in human goodness." Griffin cocked the gun and pointed it at a birch tree across the yard. "But I'm a sceptic. I think decolonization must be a violent process." (396)

His character embodies *Babel*'s long title. Although Griffin ends up dying in a brawl, his actions permeate among those around him as they feel called to action in response to their leader's death. Griffin becomes a martyr since his death drives others to react to Babel's corrupted system.

Aside from Griffin, Rami, Victoire and Letty also influence Robin's personality. Although they all start off as friends at the beginning of the book, soon each one follows their own path while remaining in similar circumstances. The mixture of their languages and cultures makes this group of friends so richly diverse, as all of them contribute to opening Robin's eyes in a different way.

> "I don't think you two quite understand how hard it is to be a woman here," said Victoire. […] "Every weakness we display is a testament to the worst theories about us, which is that we're fragile, we're hysterical, and we're too naturally weak-minded to handle the kind of work we're set to do." (Kuang, *Babel*, 153)

Robin is someone who does not pay much attention to how women are treated. This is reflected additionally in the way Letty and Victoire use language. As Joanna Thornborrow studied: "The view that there are more or less powerful ways of speaking underlies much of the early work of language and gender" (8). Her views show how language is directly influenced by gender, and this is unnoticeable for Robin. Despite this, "speaking" in the quote encompasses language, and Letty and Victoire have opinions regarding communication and how it is analyzed at Babel. In fact, the treatment which Letty and Victoire receive from the institution is also very different considering the different colors of their skins, which causes certain fights between them:

> "Because the texts he wants translated are —I don't know, they're special texts. Texts that mean something."
> "Texts so special that they shouldn't even be translated?" Letty asked.
> "They're heritage," insisted Victoire. "They're sacred beliefs—"
> "Not your beliefs, surely—"
> "Perhaps not," said Victoire. "[…] But they're not meant to be shared. Would you be content to sit hour after hour with a white man as he asks you the story behind every metaphor, every god's name, so he can pilfer through your people's beliefs for a match-pair that might make a silver bar glow?" (193)

Victoire is Haitian and therefore her views regarding languages and cultures are very different from Letty's, who has a more privileged view on these issues. The emphasis Victoire places upon "white man" points not only to the sexist context around them, but to the racist one as well. Two individuals who belong to different worlds also have very different social implications regarding their appearance and behaviour. At the end of the day, although Robin is the clear protagonist of *Babel*, the influences his friends leave on him is traceable since the beginning of the novel.

5. Conclusion: *BABEL*'S LEGACY

In the end, we'll all become stories.
Margaret Atwood

In *Babel*, Kuang carefully intertwines themes of identity, power dynamics and resistance of minorities within a context enriched by the importance of language and a colonialist background. Robin is a complex character divided between his own interest and his moral values who is drawn to become a translator even though he had not thought about it before. Because readers experience everything from his perspective, the initial injustices he suffers get minimized due to his own naivety. Robin's friendship with Rami and Victoire breaks the isolation that had been haunting him ever since he first set foot in England, so Robin starts to see his case as what it really is: the life of a boy pulled out of his native country to put his own native language at the service of the Empire. As professor Lovell behaves towards Robin and Griffin like the stereotypical white savior who prioritizes his culture over theirs, and since that perfectly aligns with the spirit that runs along Babel's professors

and white students, a clear rejection is felt by Robin and the other students coming from different nations, starting off the translator's revolution. As Robin, Rami and Victoire navigate in this conflictive context and environment, they manage to solve the struggles concerning their own identity. At the end, there is a clear indicator that all the themes regarding language and the power dynamics that had been created between the students and Babel as a tool for the Empire seem to conclude when they come to terms with who they are, what they stand for and want for their future. The words "Be selfish. […] Be brave" (Kuang, *Babel*, 528) are the last ones Victoire dedicates to Robin to encourage him to do the right thing. Robin sacrifices himself by burning the tower of Babel up so his friends can escape without consequences, but he dies peacefully and proud of what he has done.

It is this feeling of revolution that has conquered the contemporary Young Adult literary market. *Babel* became an instant bestseller right when it was published, and the expectation towards Kuang's new book after the success of her *Poppy War* series attracted many new readers. As it received reviews that praised the complexity of the story for its attention to contemporary issues related to race, gender and oppression, *Babel* also generated a wave of discomfort among certain audiences on TikTok. The controversy was oriented towards how, in their fight against oppression, *Babel*'s characters do what is known as reverse racism, since many white readers felt attacked by the thoughts expressed in the novel. The smear campaign failed, and the series of hate videos only resulted in the novel achieving even more success and sales. However, time has proven such reactions were not an isolated case. The remarkable exclusion of *Babel* in the nomination of the 2023 Hugo Awards was loudly commented upon online literary spheres, especially since it won a Nebula Award. Kuang herself addressed in her Instagram the following:

> I assume this was a matter of undesirability rather than ineligibility. Excluding "undesirable" work is not only embarrassing for all involved parties, but renders the entire process and organization illegitimate. Pity.
> That's all from me. I have books to write. (Kuang, Instagram)

This declaration calls to the lack of clarity of the awards, which provoked a big reaction on the internet. Although the organization never explained anything, this event prompted a number of debates among the transparency of the value of the awards and their implied racism in not nominating *Babel* even though it was one of

the most acclaimed books of the year. What is certain is that Kuang did know how to make an impression not only on her readers, but on the general public. As *Babel* stands for the silenced voiced and minorities, the stories hidden under the luxury and conquests of bigger nations, and the lasting influence of an Empire in every aspect of society, the fact that it is igniting responses of all types among readers is not a surprise. Kuang has managed to weave a tapestry of varied identities that embody more than a single character and story, and reflects the complexity and richness of the world we live in. Through the eyes of the past, she reflects on contemporary issues which resonate within a young audience who feels called to action. In essence, *Babel* illustrates how language serves as a powerful tool in shaping narratives and power dynamics. In her complex story, Kuang manages to demonstrate the deep impact of language in different historical contexts, showing its purpose in creating societal norms. The lasting influence of *Babel* remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that history, as the novel itself attempts to reveal, has been deconstructed, thanks to authors like Kuang.

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