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**LANGUAGE, EMPIRE, AND RESISTANCE: A POSTCOLONIAL
ANALYSIS OF R. F. KUANG'S *BABEL***

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Abstract

*This study examines the relationship between language, empire, and resistance in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022) through the lens of postcolonial theory. The research investigates how the novel portrays language as a mechanism of colonial domination while simultaneously presenting it as a means of anti-colonial resistance. Employing a qualitative research methodology and textual analysis, the study analyzes selected passages from the novel using the postcolonial theories of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern. The findings reveal that the British Empire in *Babel* maintains its authority through linguistic control, educational institutions, and the production of colonial knowledge, which reinforce cultural hierarchy and racial inequality. The analysis further demonstrates that Robin Swift's experiences reflect the psychological effects of colonialism, including identity fragmentation, internalized oppression, and the struggle for self-representation. At the same time, the novel illustrates that translation and language can become powerful tools of resistance against imperial domination. The study concludes that *Babel* redefines language as both an instrument of colonial power and a medium of liberation, thereby contributing to contemporary postcolonial literary discourse. By integrating the theoretical perspectives of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the intersections of language, empire, identity, and resistance in twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction.*

Keywords: R. F. Kuang, *Babel*, Postcolonial Theory, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Language, Empire, Resistance, Orientalism.

1.0 Introduction

Postcolonial literature critically examines the enduring political, cultural, and ideological consequences of colonialism by exposing the mechanisms through which imperial powers established and maintained domination over colonized societies. It investigates how colonial discourse shapes identities, marginalizes indigenous cultures, and legitimizes unequal power relations while also highlighting the strategies of resistance adopted by the colonized. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have demonstrated that colonialism operates not only through military and economic control but also through language, education, and systems of knowledge that sustain imperial authority (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) reimagines nineteenth-century British imperialism through an alternative historical fantasy in which the British Empire derives its global dominance from translation and linguistic magic. Set primarily at the Royal Institute of Translation at Oxford University, the novel follows Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan educated within Britain's colonial system, whose personal journey reflects the tensions between colonial assimilation and anti-imperial resistance. By portraying translation as both an intellectual practice and an instrument of imperial expansion, Kuang foregrounds the intimate relationship between language, knowledge, and colonial power (Kuang, 2022).

Unlike conventional historical novels that portray empire primarily through military conquest or political administration, *Babel* presents language itself as a mechanism of colonial domination. The novel demonstrates how translation facilitates the extraction of cultural knowledge, economic resources, and political authority from colonized societies while simultaneously creating unequal relationships between colonizers and the colonized. Institutions of higher education, particularly Oxford University, become symbolic spaces where knowledge production legitimizes imperial expansion and reinforces racial and

cultural hierarchies. Through Robin and other marginalized students, the narrative also illustrates how colonial education produces fragmented identities and ultimately generates resistance against imperial oppression (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978).

Recent literary scholarship has increasingly recognized *Babel* as an important contribution to contemporary postcolonial fiction because of its innovative exploration of language politics, colonial knowledge production, and cultural identity. However, much of the existing criticism has concentrated on translation studies, fantasy literature, or the ethics of language, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how the novel integrates language, empire, and anti-colonial resistance within a comprehensive postcolonial framework. By drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern, this study investigates the complex relationship between linguistic power, colonial ideology, and resistance in *Babel*. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to contemporary postcolonial literary criticism by demonstrating that language functions simultaneously as a tool of imperial domination and as a medium through which resistance can emerge (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

1.1 Statement of Problem

Although *Babel* (2022) has received considerable scholarly attention for its treatment of translation, fantasy, and language politics, relatively few studies have examined how the novel systematically portrays language as a mechanism of colonial domination while simultaneously representing resistance through a comprehensive postcolonial framework. Existing research often emphasizes translation theory or fantasy aesthetics, leaving insufficient analysis of the interconnected roles of imperial discourse, cultural identity, and anti-colonial resistance. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by investigating how *Babel* represents language as an instrument of empire and resistance through the postcolonial theories of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

1.2 Research objectives

1. To examine how *Babel* represents the relationship between language and British imperial power through a postcolonial perspective.
2. To analyze the forms of colonial resistance and identity negotiation portrayed in *Babel* using the postcolonial concepts of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

1.3 significance of the study

This study is significant because it contributes to contemporary postcolonial literary scholarship by offering a comprehensive analysis of R. F. Kuang's *Babel* through the theoretical perspectives of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It expands existing research by demonstrating how language, translation, and educational institutions function as instruments of colonial authority while simultaneously providing spaces for resistance and identity formation. The study further enriches discussions on colonial discourse, linguistic imperialism, and cultural hybridity in contemporary fiction, thereby contributing to broader debates in postcolonial studies and literary criticism. Moreover, it provides future researchers with a theoretical foundation for examining the intersections of language, empire, and resistance in twenty-first-century postcolonial literature.

2.0 Literature Review

R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022) has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its innovative fusion of historical fantasy, translation studies, and colonial critique. Critics generally agree that the novel reimagines nineteenth-century British imperialism by presenting language and translation as central mechanisms through which colonial authority is established and maintained. Rather than treating translation as a neutral linguistic practice, Kuang exposes its political dimensions, illustrating how the production and circulation of knowledge reinforce imperial expansion. Consequently, the novel has been recognized as an important contribution to contemporary postcolonial literature because it interrogates the relationship between language, power, and empire (Kuang, 2022; Venuti, 1995).

Several scholars have examined *Babel* through the lens of translation studies. Venuti (1995) argues that translation is never an impartial act but is deeply embedded within ideological and political structures that privilege dominant cultures over marginalized ones. His concept of the "invisibility" of the translator

provides a useful framework for understanding how translation can naturalize colonial authority while obscuring the unequal power relations underlying linguistic exchange. Bassnett (2014) similarly maintains that translation functions as a site of cultural negotiation in which questions of authority, identity, and representation are constantly contested. These perspectives illuminate Kuang's portrayal of translation as a powerful instrument of imperial domination rather than a purely academic endeavor (Venuti, 1995; Bassnett, 2014).

Postcolonial scholars have long argued that colonialism extends beyond territorial occupation to include the control of knowledge, language, and cultural representation. Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism explains how Western discourse constructs the East as culturally inferior in order to legitimize imperial domination. Likewise, Bhabha (1994) demonstrates that colonial encounters generate hybrid identities characterized by mimicry and ambivalence rather than fixed cultural boundaries. Spivak (1988) further emphasizes that colonial power often silences marginalized voices by denying the subaltern the ability to represent themselves. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide an effective framework for understanding the ideological conflicts depicted in *Babel* (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

Recent criticism has also highlighted the novel's engagement with racial identity, institutional power, and educational systems. The fictional Oxford Institute of Translation symbolizes how elite academic institutions contribute to the production of imperial knowledge while benefiting economically and politically from colonial exploitation. Robin Swift and the other colonial students illustrate the psychological consequences of assimilation, revealing the tensions between loyalty to imperial institutions and commitment to cultural heritage. Through these characters, Kuang critiques educational structures that cultivate intellectual excellence while simultaneously reproducing racial inequality and colonial hierarchy (Ahmed, 2012; Bhabha, 1994).

Contemporary studies further emphasize that *Babel* challenges traditional narratives of empire by foregrounding resistance rather than passive victimhood. The novel suggests that language possesses a dual function: it enables colonial domination but also provides colonized subjects with the intellectual means to question, challenge, and ultimately resist imperial authority. This perspective aligns with modern postcolonial criticism, which increasingly examines resistance as a dynamic process involving cultural agency, identity formation, and the reclamation of marginalized histories rather than merely political rebellion (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Loomba, 2015).

Although existing scholarship has significantly enhanced the understanding of *Babel* from the perspectives of translation studies, fantasy literature, and language politics, relatively little research has synthesized these discussions within a comprehensive postcolonial framework. Most studies examine either translation as a linguistic practice or colonial discourse independently, without fully exploring how language simultaneously constructs imperial authority, shapes colonial identities, and facilitates anti-colonial resistance. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by integrating the postcolonial theories of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to investigate the interconnected relationship between language, empire, and resistance in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the relationship between language, empire, and resistance in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022). Qualitative research is appropriate for literary studies because it enables an in-depth interpretation of texts, meanings, and social contexts rather than relying on numerical data. Through close reading and critical interpretation, the study examines how the novel constructs colonial discourse, linguistic domination, and anti-colonial resistance. The primary source of data is Kuang's *Babel* (2022), while secondary sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly works on postcolonial theory and literary criticism. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the ideological structures embedded within the text (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis design grounded in postcolonial literary criticism. Textual analysis enables researchers to examine themes, symbols, characters, narrative structures, and ideological representations within literary texts. Selected passages from *Babel* are analyzed through close reading to identify textual evidence related to colonial power, language politics, identity formation, and resistance. The analysis is interpretative rather than descriptive, focusing on how literary language reflects broader socio-political realities. This design is particularly suitable because it allows the researcher to explore the relationship between literature and colonial ideology while generating nuanced interpretations supported by textual evidence (Belsey, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Postcolonial Theory, primarily drawing upon the works of Edward Said (1978), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). Together, these theorists provide a comprehensive framework for examining how colonial power operates through language, representation, identity, and knowledge production.

Edward Said's concept of **Orientalism** explains how Western discourse constructs the East as culturally inferior, irrational, and dependent, thereby legitimizing imperial domination. In *Babel*, this concept is reflected in the British Empire's control over linguistic knowledge and its portrayal of colonized cultures as resources to be exploited. Said's framework enables the study to examine how language functions as an ideological instrument that reinforces colonial authority (Said, 1978).

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of **Hybridity**, **Mimicry**, and **Ambivalence** are employed to analyze the experiences of Robin Swift and other colonial students educated at Oxford. Bhabha argues that colonial subjects often occupy an in-between cultural position, simultaneously imitating and resisting colonial authority. These concepts illuminate the characters' fragmented identities and demonstrate how colonial education creates both assimilation and resistance. The framework also explains the instability of colonial power by revealing how mimicry can undermine imperial authority rather than simply reinforcing it (Bhabha, 1994).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the **Subaltern** complements the analysis by examining how colonial systems silence marginalized voices and monopolize the production of knowledge. Spivak argues that imperial discourse frequently prevents colonized subjects from speaking on their own terms, leading to epistemic violence. In *Babel*, the appropriation of linguistic knowledge and the marginalization of non-European perspectives illustrate the unequal power relations embedded within colonial institutions. Spivak's theory enables the study to explore how the novel challenges these structures by foregrounding resistance and reclaiming suppressed voices (Spivak, 1988).

By integrating Said's critique of colonial discourse, Bhabha's analysis of colonial identity, and Spivak's examination of subaltern representation, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing the interconnected themes of language, empire, and resistance in *Babel*. It enables the study to demonstrate that language is not merely a means of communication but also a political instrument through which colonial authority is established, contested, and ultimately challenged.

4.0 Data analysis

The researcher apply the theory of postcolonial different perspective on the novel:

"Even then, Robin was not willing to understand... he had some good that could not be achieved... three guaranteed meals a day, and access to more books than he could read in a lifetime. He did not, he knew, have the right to demand anything more." (p. 52)

This passage illustrates the psychological mechanisms through which colonial ideology secures the obedience of the colonized. Robin has been provided with education, security, and material comfort, yet these privileges function as instruments of imperial control rather than genuine emancipation. According to Edward Said (1978), colonial power legitimizes itself by portraying imperial institutions as benevolent while concealing the unequal relations upon which they depend. Robin's belief that he has "no right to demand anything more" reflects the internalization of colonial authority, demonstrating how imperial discourse

persuades the colonized to perceive limited opportunities as generous gifts instead of recognizing them as tools of domination.

From Homi Bhabha's (1994) perspective, Robin occupies a hybrid identity. He has been culturally shaped by British education while remaining ethnically Chinese, placing him between the colonizer and the colonized. His gratitude toward Oxford coexists with an unarticulated sense of injustice, revealing the ambivalence that characterizes colonial subjects. The quotation shows how mimicry initially produces compliance but also contains the potential for resistance as Robin gradually recognizes the inequalities embedded within the imperial system.

Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern further explains Robin's condition. Although he receives an elite education, he remains excluded from genuine agency because the colonial institution defines both his opportunities and his limitations. His silence regarding his own desires demonstrates epistemic violence, where the colonized subject accepts the authority of imperial discourse rather than speaking from an independent position.

Simillarry by following so

"'Babel,' Robin repeated. 'Is that why they call us Babblers?' Anthony nodded. 'A joke as old as the Institute itself. But some first-year at Balliol thinks he conceived it for the first time every September, and so we have been doomed to that unwieldy moniker for decades.'" (p. 95)

This quotation demonstrates how language functions as a subtle mechanism of colonial power. The nickname "Babblers" appears humorous, yet it reduces the students' scholarly identities to a label imposed by the dominant academic culture. Said (1978) argues that colonial discourse constructs the colonized through systems of naming and representation that reinforce unequal power relations. By assigning this nickname, the institution symbolically asserts its authority to define the identities of those associated with translation and, by extension, those connected to colonized cultures.

Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry is equally relevant. The students belong to Oxford's intellectual elite but are never regarded as complete equals. Their institutional identity is shaped by labels created within the dominant culture, illustrating how colonial subjects remain only partial participants in imperial society. The nickname reinforces their position as individuals who are accepted for their usefulness but simultaneously marked as different.

From Spivak's perspective, the quotation reflects how institutional discourse speaks for marginalized individuals rather than allowing them to define themselves. The students do not choose the identity imposed upon them; instead, they inherit a label created by others. This process exemplifies the symbolic silencing of subaltern voices through everyday academic practices.

The other text follow the post colonial perspetive:

"'Oh Robin,' Professor Lovell glanced up. 'Tell Mr. Piper we would like some coffees before you go, will you?' Robin grabbed his coat and left the room.'" (p. 146)

This seemingly ordinary interaction reveals the hierarchical structure of colonial authority operating within Oxford. Professor Lovell exercises unquestioned power by assigning Robin a servant-like task unrelated to his academic role. Although Robin is one of the institution's brightest students, he is positioned as subordinate, demonstrating that colonial hierarchies persist despite intellectual achievement.

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism explains this unequal relationship as part of a broader system in which the colonizer assumes natural authority over the colonized. Robin's immediate compliance reflects the normalization of imperial dominance, where acts of command and obedience become embedded in everyday institutional life.

Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry further illustrates Robin's position. Despite adopting British education, language, and academic values, he is never fully accepted as an equal member of the institution. His education grants him access to knowledge but does not eliminate racial and colonial distinctions. Consequently, mimicry produces an identity that is "almost the same, but not quite," leaving Robin permanently positioned between inclusion and exclusion.

Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern also applies to this scene. Robin does not question Professor Lovell's authority or express dissatisfaction with the command. His silence reflects the unequal distribution of power within colonial institutions, where marginalized subjects often lack the ability to challenge dominant authority openly. The episode demonstrates that colonial power is sustained not only through political control but also through routine interpersonal interactions that normalize obedience and suppress dissent.

5.0 Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that R. F. Kuang's *Babel* presents language as a central instrument through which the British Empire establishes and sustains colonial power while simultaneously creating opportunities for resistance. Through the postcolonial perspectives of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the selected passages reveal how imperial institutions manipulate education, naming practices, and everyday social interactions to reinforce unequal power relations and shape the identities of colonized subjects. Robin's experiences illustrate the internalization of colonial ideology, the emergence of hybrid identity, and the silencing of marginalized voices within the structures of empire. However, the novel also demonstrates that the same linguistic and intellectual tools employed to maintain colonial dominance can become powerful means of challenging oppression. Ultimately, *Babel* critiques the inseparable relationship between language and empire while affirming that resistance begins with recognizing and confronting the ideological systems that sustain colonial authority.

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