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Language and Empire: A Post-Colonial Examination of Othering and Identity in *Babel: An Arcane History*

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Abstract:

English has solidified its role as the global lingua franca, largely due to British colonial expansion. This research investigates how English was used as a tool for Empire-building and the subjugation of colonized peoples and their languages. The study addresses the following research questions: How does linguistic Anglo-hegemony contribute to the construction of otherness and identity formation? In what ways are these processes depicted in R.F. Kuang's novel *Babel: An Arcane History*? Employing a post-colonial theoretical framework, this study utilizes textual analysis to examine the novel's portrayal of characters' conflicting loyalties to their native cultures and the British Empire. Key methods include identifying themes of linguistic dominance, othering, and identity conflict through close reading and annotation. The analysis is further contextualized with historical and cultural perspectives to understand the broader implications of these themes. The findings reveal that linguistic hegemony is a central mechanism of colonial power, deeply affecting the characters' sense of identity and belonging. The study uncovers how the imposition of English creates internalized conflicts and reinforces social hierarchies.

Keywords: linguistic hegemony, otherness, identity formation, colonialism, imperialism.

اللغة والإمبراطورية: دراسة ما بعد استعمارية عن التهميش وتشكيل الهوية في رواية "بابل: تاريخ سري"

الملخص:

لقد رسخت اللغة الإنجليزية دورها كلغة عالمية مشتركة إلى حد كبير بفضل التوسع الاستعماري البريطاني. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية استخدام الإنجليزية كأداة لبناء الإمبراطورية وإخضاع الشعوب المستعمرة ولغاتها. وتتناول الدراسة الأسئلة البحثية التالية: كيف تساهم الهيمنة اللغوية الإنجليزية في بناء مفهوم "الآخر" وتشكيل الهوية؟ وكيف يتم تصوير هذه العمليات في رواية "بابل: تاريخ سري" لـ ر.ف. كوانغ؟ من خلال الاعتماد على نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار كإطار منهجي، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل النص لفحص تصوير الرواية للصراعات الداخلية لشخصياتها ورسمها للصراع الداخلي في تلك الشخصيات بين ولائها لثقافاتها الأصلية وولائها للإمبراطورية البريطانية. وتعتبر موضوعات الهيمنة اللغوية والتهميش، وصراع الهوية من الموضوعات الرئيسية في تحديد ورسم الصراعات داخل الرواية من خلال أتباع استراتيجية القراءة الدقيقة والتفصيلية. قام الباحث بوضع التحليل في سياق تاريخي وثقافي لفهم الأبعاد الأوسع لهذه الموضوعات. وتكشف نتائج الدراسة أن الهيمنة اللغوية هي آلية مركزية للقوة الاستعمارية، حيث تؤثر بعمق على شعور الشخصيات بالهوية والانتماء. وتكشف الدراسة كيف أن فرض اللغة الإنجليزية يخلق صراعات داخلية ويعزز التراتبية الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الهيمنة اللغوية، التهميش، تشكيل الهوية، الاستعمار، الإمبريالية.

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Research Objective:

The primary objective of this research is to investigate how English was used as a tool of empire-building, subjugation of colonized peoples, and linguistic dominance. In addition, it explores the role of linguistic Anglo-hegemony in the construction of "otherness" and identity formation as depicted in R.F. Kuang's novel *Babel: An Arcane History*.

Research Questions:

1. How does linguistic Anglo-hegemony contribute to the construction of otherness and identity formation?
2. In what ways are these processes depicted in R.F. Kuang's novel *Babel: An Arcane History*?

Research Methodology:

The methodology of the paper employs a post-colonial theoretical framework to analyze *Babel: An Arcane History*. It involves several key steps: identifying themes, applying theoretical frameworks, and conducting textual analysis.

Steps of Textual Analysis

1. **Selection of Texts**:
    - The primary text for analysis is *Babel: An Arcane History* by R.F. Kuang. This novel was chosen for its rich thematic content and its exploration of linguistic and cultural hegemony.
2. **Reading and Annotation**:
    - **Close Reading**: The text is read closely, paying attention to details such as language, character development, narrative structure, and thematic elements.
    - **Annotation**: Important passages, dialogues, and descriptions are annotated. Annotations focus on instances of linguistic dominance, identity conflict, and colonial power dynamics.
3. **Identification of Themes**:
    - **Initial Reading**: During the first reading, broad themes are identified. These include linguistic hegemony, othering, identity formation, and colonialism.
    - **Focused Reading**: Subsequent readings focus on specific themes. Passages related to these themes are highlighted and categorized.
    - **Coding**: Themes are coded and organized into categories. For instance, passages that reflect linguistic dominance might be coded under “linguistic hegemony,” while those depicting identity conflicts might be coded under “identity formation.”
4. **Application of Theoretical Frameworks**:
    - **Post-Colonial Theory**: This theory examines the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is used to analyze how the novel portrays the imposition of English language and culture on the colonized characters.

- **Key Concepts**:
  - **Othering**: The process by which the colonized characters are depicted as "others" in the narrative. This involves looking at how they are marginalized and their identities fragmented.
  - **Double Consciousness**: A concept developed by W.E.B. Du Bois, referring to the internal conflict experienced by colonized individuals who are torn between their native identity and the imposed colonial identity.
  - **Ethnocentrism and Acculturation**: How the dominant culture (British) judges and influences the subjugated cultures (colonized), leading to a loss of native identity and cultural assimilation.

5. **Detailed Textual Analysis**:
   - **Character Analysis**: Focus on main characters such as Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty. Examine how their identities are shaped by the colonial education and linguistic hegemony they experience.
   - **Narrative Structure**: Analyze how the plot and narrative structure highlight themes of colonialism and resistance. Look at key events that depict the struggle against linguistic and cultural dominance.
   - **Symbolism and Imagery**: Identify and interpret symbols and imagery related to language, power, and identity. For instance, the use of silver bars in the novel symbolizes the exploitation of resources and people by the empire.

How Themes Were Identified

- **Linguistic Hegemony**: Identified through passages depicting the dominance of the English language and its role in maintaining colonial power. Examples include the use of English in academic settings and the marginalization of native languages.
- **Identity Formation**: Explored through the characters' internal conflicts and their interactions with colonial institutions. Themes of identity fragmentation and double consciousness are evident in characters like Robin and Ramy.
- **Othering**: Highlighted through the depiction of characters as "others" in the colonial society. This is seen in their marginalization and the prejudices they face.
- **Colonial Power Dynamics**: Analyzed through the narrative's portrayal of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Key events and dialogues reveal the mechanisms of control and resistance.

Application of Theoretical Frameworks

- **Post-Colonial Theory**: Used to critique the colonial ideologies and power structures depicted in the novel.
- **Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony**: Applied to understand how the English language serves as a tool for maintaining colonial dominance.
- **Bhabha's Notion of Othering**: Used to analyze how the characters are marginalized and how their identities are constructed in opposition to the colonial power.
- **Du Bois's Double Consciousness**: Explored through the characters' experiences of internal conflict and their struggle to reconcile their native and colonial identities.

Literature Review

In examining the role of linguistic Anglo-hegemony in constructing "otherness" and identity formation, numerous theoretical perspectives and case studies have provided a rich foundation for understanding the dynamics of language and power. This literature review explores existing research on post-colonial theory, the concept of linguistic hegemony, identity formation under colonial influence, and the role of literature in critiquing these processes.

Post-Colonial Theory and Language as a Tool of Empire

Post-colonial theory offers a critical framework for analyzing the impact of colonialism on culture, language, and identity. Edward Said's groundbreaking book, *Orientalism* (1978), laid the foundation for understanding how the West created a cultural "Other" through discursive practices that justified colonial domination. Said emphasized that language was one of the primary tools used by imperial powers to assert control over colonized peoples, constructing them as inferior, uncivilized and requiring the civilizing mission of the West. This construction of otherness is not only cultural but also linguistic, as the colonial power's language becomes a symbol of superiority (Said, 1994).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) adds depth to the discussion of language and colonialism by exploring how language functions as a carrier of culture. Wa Thiong'o critiques the imposition of English on African societies during colonial rule arguing that this imposition served to undermine indigenous languages and cultures, thereby reinforcing colonial domination. He asserts that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13). The systematic replacement of local languages with English led to the erosion of local cultures, alienating colonized individuals from their own heritage.

Drawing on this, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces the concept of "othering" as a central process in colonial discourses. Bhabha contends that colonial powers not only dominate through military and economic means but also by constructing the colonized as inherently different and inferior. This "othering" occurs through language, where the colonizer's language is positioned as superior, and the colonized's language is marginalized. This marginalization is internalized by the colonized, leading to what Bhabha refers to as "ambivalence" and "mimicry," where the colonized attempt to adopt the colonizer's language and customs, though imperfectly, resulting in a fragmented sense of identity.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) provides a psychological perspective on the effects of linguistic hegemony, especially in the context of identity formation. Fanon argues that the colonized individual experiences a split consciousness—what W.E.B. Du Bois famously termed "double consciousness"—where they are forced to navigate between their native identity and the imposed colonial identity. Fanon's analysis highlights the role of language in this psychological division, as the colonizer's language becomes associated with power, progress, and civilization, while the native language is devalued and associated with backwardness (Fanon, 1963).

Linguistic Hegemony and the Global Lingua Franca

The concept of linguistic hegemony refers to the dominance of one language over others in a particular socio-political context, often resulting in the marginalization or suppression of other languages. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (1971) is instrumental in understanding linguistic hegemony as it explains how dominant groups maintain control not only through coercion but also by winning the consent of the subordinate groups. In the context of language, this means that the dominance of English in global communication is not only imposed but also accepted and internalized by non-English speakers as a natural or inevitable phenomenon.

The rise of English as the global lingua franca is a direct result of British colonial expansion and the subsequent rise of the United States as a global superpower. Robert Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992) offers a detailed critique of how English has been promoted as a superior language through institutions such as the British Council and American cultural diplomacy. Phillipson argues that this promotion of English reinforces global inequalities as it privileges English-speaking nations while marginalizing others. He describes this process as "linguistic imperialism," whereby the spread of English is not neutral but a form of cultural domination that perpetuates the power dynamics established during colonial rule (Phillipson, 1992).

Moreover, Phillipson (2009) highlights how English has come to be seen as the language of globalization, international business and scientific discourse. This perception creates a situation where non-English speakers feel compelled to learn English to participate in global economic and cultural exchanges, further entrenching English as the dominant language. This dominance contributes to the marginalization of other languages and, by extension, the cultures and identities associated with them.

The role of linguistic hegemony in perpetuating colonial power structures is also evident in academic settings. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2007) discuss how English has become the default language of academia, particularly in post-colonial studies. This dominance of English in academic discourse marginalizes scholars from non-English-speaking backgrounds, limiting their ability to participate fully in global academic debates. The authors argue that this linguistic dominance reinforces the colonial hierarchy where English is seen as the language of knowledge and intellectual authority while other languages are relegated to the margins (Ashcroft et al., 2007).

Identity Formation and Language Attrition

Language plays a critical role in identity formation, particularly in post-colonial contexts where the imposition of a colonial language often leads to a loss of native identity. Jean-Paul Sartre (1964) and Sigmund Freud (1915) both provide valuable insights into the psychological effects of losing one's native language. Freud's concept of "the unconscious" suggests that suppressed languages and identities continue to influence individuals even when they adopt a new language. This aligns with Sartre's notion of existential anguish where colonized individuals experience a profound sense of alienation as they are forced to adopt the colonizer's language leading to an internal conflict between their native identity and their imposed colonial identity (Sartre, 1964).

Language attrition, or the gradual loss of a language due to lack of use, is a key issue in post-colonial contexts. Schmid (2011) defines language attrition as the process whereby individuals lose proficiency in their native language due to prolonged exposure to a dominant language. In colonial and post-colonial societies, language attrition often results from the pressure to conform to the linguistic norms of the colonizer. Schmid notes that this loss of language is not merely a linguistic issue but also a cultural and psychological one, as language is deeply tied to identity and community (Schmid, 2011).

Berry's (1997) model of acculturation strategies provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals navigate the linguistic and cultural pressures of colonialism. Berry identifies four acculturation strategies: **assimilation** where individuals adopt the colonizer's culture and language while abandoning their own; **integration** where individuals attempt to maintain their native culture while also engaging with the colonizer's culture; **separation** where individuals resist adopting the colonizer's culture; and **marginalization** where individuals feel alienated from both their native and colonial cultures (Berry, 1997). These strategies help to explain the diverse responses of colonized individuals to linguistic hegemony from full assimilation to resistance.

The Role of Literature in Critiquing Linguistic Hegemony

Literature has long served as a powerful medium for critiquing the effects of linguistic hegemony and colonialism on identity formation. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have explored how language plays a central role in maintaining colonial power structures and shaping post-colonial identities. Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) is often cited as a key example of how colonial language disrupts native culture and identity. Through the protagonist Okonkwo, Achebe illustrates the tensions between traditional Igbo culture and the imposition of British colonialism including the use of English as a tool of cultural domination (Achebe, 1958).

Rushdie, in his essay Imaginary Homelands (1991), explores the complexities of writing in English as a post-colonial subject. He argues that while English is the language of the colonizer, it can also be appropriated and transformed by post-colonial writers to express their own identities and resist colonial narratives. Rushdie's concept of the "chutnification" of English—where post-colonial writers blend English with indigenous languages and cultural references—demonstrates how the colonizer's language can be subverted and used as a tool for resistance (Rushdie, 1991).

In a similar vein, R.F. Kuang's Babel: An Arcane History (2022), the primary text analyzed in the current research, uses speculative fiction to explore the relationship between language, colonialism, and identity. Set in a fictionalized version of 19th-century Oxford, Kuang's novel centers on a group of students studying at the Royal Institution of Translation which uses linguistic magic to fuel the British Empire's imperial ambitions. The novel critiques the ways in which language is weaponized to subjugate colonized peoples as the translation magic system relies on exploiting the "lost meaning" between languages—much like how colonial powers exploited the cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and their subjects (Kuang, 2022).

Kuang's novel also reflects the post-colonial theme of fragmented identity as the characters struggle with their loyalty to their native cultures and their roles within the British Empire. The novel's protagonist, Robin Swift, exemplifies the internal conflict experienced by many colonized individuals who are torn between their native identity and the imposed colonial identity. Kuang's exploration of double consciousness, linguistic hegemony, and identity fragmentation mirrors the work of post-colonial theorists like Du Bois, Fanon, and Bhabha.

Language, Power, and Resistance in Post-Colonial Studies

The relationship between language and power is a central theme in post-colonial studies. Language is not merely a means of communication but also a tool for exercising power and control. Michel Foucault's (1972) work on discourse and power emphasizes that language is deeply intertwined with power structures, as those who control language also control knowledge and, by extension, power. In colonial contexts, this meant that the colonizer's language became the language of authority, education, and governance, while the colonized's language was devalued and marginalized (Foucault, 1972).

Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*? (1988) further complicates the discussion of language and power by exploring the ways in which the colonized, or "subaltern," are rendered voiceless within the colonial discourse. Spivak argues that the colonized are often unable to speak in their own language or on their own terms, as their voices are filtered through the language and framework of the colonizer. This silencing of the subaltern is not merely linguistic but also epistemological, as the knowledge and experiences of the colonized are systematically excluded from the dominant discourse (Spivak, 1988).

The idea of linguistic resistance, however, is central to much of post-colonial literature and theory. As noted by Bhabha (1994), while language is used as a tool of domination, it can also become a site of resistance. The act of writing or speaking in one's native language, or even appropriating the colonizer's language to critique colonial power, can be seen as acts of resistance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decision to write in his native Gikuyu instead of English is one such example of linguistic resistance. By rejecting English, Wa Thiong'o not only reclaims his cultural heritage but also challenges the linguistic hierarchy that privileges English over indigenous languages (Wa Thiong'o, 1986).

In the context of *Babel: An Arcane History*, the characters' attempts to resist the British Empire's linguistic and cultural domination can be seen as acts of linguistic resistance. The Hermes Society, a secret group that opposes the empire's use of translation magic for imperial purposes, seeks to disrupt the empire's linguistic hegemony by stealing and redistributing the magical resources that enable the empire's dominance. This reflects the broader theme in post-colonial studies of language as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance (Kuang, 2022).

Linguistic Imperialism in the Modern Era

While much of the literature on linguistic hegemony focuses on the colonial period, scholars have noted that linguistic imperialism continues to persist in the modern era. Phillipson (1992) argues that the spread of English as the global lingua franca is a form of neo-colonialism, as it reinforces global inequalities and marginalizes non-English speakers. In contemporary contexts, the dominance of English in international business, science, and technology creates barriers for non-English-speaking nations, limiting their ability to fully participate in global economic and intellectual exchanges (Phillipson, 1992).

Kumar (2024) adds that the digital age has further entrenched English as the dominant language, particularly in global communication and social media. This "digital linguistic imperialism" poses new challenges for linguistic diversity, as languages that are not widely used online risk extinction. Kumar notes that while the internet has the potential to promote linguistic diversity, it also reinforces the dominance of English, as most digital platforms and resources are in English (Kumar, 2024).

However, there are also efforts to resist this modern form of linguistic imperialism. Organizations such as UNESCO have advocated for the preservation of endangered languages and the promotion of multilingualism. Additionally, scholars like Pennycook (1994) have called for greater recognition of "world Englishes," or the diverse forms of English that have emerged in post-colonial societies, as legitimate and valuable linguistic forms. By acknowledging the diversity of English and other languages, Pennycook argues that we can begin to challenge the dominance of any one form of language in global communication (Pennycook, 1994).

To conclude, the literature on linguistic hegemony, colonialism, and identity formation reveals the deep connections between language and power. Through post-colonial theory and literary critique, scholars have explored how the imposition of the colonizer's language contributes to the construction of otherness and the fragmentation of identity. The dominance of English as a global lingua franca, both during the colonial period and in the modern era, continues to reinforce global inequalities and marginalize non-English-speaking cultures. However, as seen in the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, R.F. Kuang, and others, language can also be a site of resistance, where the colonized reclaim their cultural identities and challenge the hegemonic structures that seek to suppress them. By analyzing texts like *Babel: An Arcane History* through the perspective of post-colonial theory, this research contributes to our understanding of how linguistic hegemony functions in both historical and contemporary contexts, and how individuals and communities can resist this dominance to preserve their cultural identities.

Author´s Background:

Babel: An Arcane History is a novel by the Chinese American author R.F Kuang. She published her first book when she was 22 and has since published five more books, including the book in question. She has a MPhil in Chinese studies from Cambridge and a MSc in contemporary Chinese studies from Oxford. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD

in East Asian languages and literature at Yale. The significance of her academic background is highly evident in her work. It is observed in the world-building, the dialogues, and the vivid description of Oxford, where the novel takes place. Kuang, as a marshal scholar, produced a heavily researched book. The fount of her knowledge pours out to the reader, embracing the novel's major linguistic and translation themes. The Dark Academia mood is incorporated because of the author´s interest in the history of the established academic institutions. As she said in an interview: *"I am interested in the history of institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard, and the ways that they had perpetuated and upheld projects of colonialism and imperialism"(Kuang)*. The author highlights the dark side of such institutions, as they, in their essence, serve colonialism and imperialism. People pay tribute to the history and authenticity of these institutions and remain unconscious of their hidden colonial purpose. As for the title of the novel *Babel: An Arcane History*, the author cleverly used the adjective "Arcane", which can be defined in simple terms: known or knowable only to a few people. The real side of such academic institutions is arcane. Only a few people know the truth about these colonial and historical buildings. Also, the sufferings of the colonised are arcane; they are vague and only felt by minor social groups.

Novel synopsis:

Babel is a historical fiction that is set in Victorian Britain. It sits in that revolutionary bridge period of 1830 - 1840 when Britain thrived on new technological innovations representing the foundation of the Industrial Revolution. The age witnessed the expansion of railways and the opening of electric telegraph offices. Hence, industrialisation was a catalyst to imperialism, as the empire became restless and wanted to fulfil its needs for natural resources which were conveniently possessed by other countries. The mighty British empire was needy for the resources it lacked which was enough of a motive for its colonial conquest. The exploitation of the asymmetrical power dynamic is the heart of the novel. Kuang's characters unravel the Anglo centric and colonial intentions of Oxford's royal institution of translation, and in doing so, they underline the clear tie between academia and colonialism. Babel's genre could be easily identified as a classic dark academia novel.

The intricacies of the translation magic system in Babel primarily construct the fictional sect of the novel, given that silver and silver bars are the magical vessels of choice. Activating said bars requires a translator to inscribe two words that are similar in meaning and different in language. The translator must be fluent in both languages to a certain degree. For it to work, they must achieve a level of fluency in thinking and dreaming in the language. The translator's utterance of the inscribed words triggers the magic of the silver bars which captures the meaning lost during the translation process. For instance, idiot in Greek can mean a fool, which has the same meaning in English. Still, in Greek, an idiot connotes someone unengaged with worldly affairs, painting him as relatively

ignorant by choice or lack of education. Translating both words would capture the lost connotative meaning and remove someone's knowledge or make someone abruptly forget what they know by heart. Babel's Britain ran on silver, from the minuscule things like using silver bars to maintain one's garden to using silver in endorsing weapons and naval power. Such silver dependence was enough reason to establish the royal institution of translation in Oxford, known as Babel. The invisible string between language and imperial ideologies materialises in the novel, making it clear how powerful language can be. Binding the magical system to the lost meaning during translation justifies why Babel, the institution, turned its attention to the Eastern world, seeking foreigners from South and East Asia. The attention fell on countries with culturally rich languages, guaranteeing the inevitability of capturing lost meaning and enlivening the silver. Our characters represent those foreigners who left their homelands to pursue the noble goal of becoming well-respected translators and creating magic by working with silver bars. They struggle with their loyalty towards their native land and their gratitude towards England, where they receive proper education and accommodation; throughout their academic years, they realise that the institution's ulterior motive is to aid Britain's global and colonial ascendency. They uncover the shameful history of the British empire, along with the history of Babel. Consequently, any prior goals to their discovery transform into one: the goal of putting an end to Babel.

Unravelling the fabricated truth by post-colonial narrative:

"Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously "born" in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, or irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion- a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality…"
(Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 423)

Post-colonial theory is a response to the complex ramifications of colonialism and imperialism by condemning and exposing exploitative practices. Its primary aim is to deconstruct colonial ideologies, revealing the concealed motives and masked intentions of Western powers. Post-colonial studies endeavor to uncover social phenomena and dogmas constructed by colonizers to serve their possessive greed. Antonio Gramsci, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, highlights the origins of 'colonial truth,' demonstrating how it was engineered to meet with the colonizers' interests. Gramsci argues that truth is not naturally born, but rather shaped and twisted by hegemonic powers (Gramsci 423). Such colonial dogmas manifest in various forms, including forged truth, identity fragmentation, white saviorism, and othering. As a result, post-colonial theorists have increasingly questioned the concept of truth, fostering a growing disbelief in the narratives constructed by colonial powers. In addition, post-colonial theory seeks to elucidate marginalized voices that have been suppressed by these fabricated truths. The counter-narratives built by post-colonial theory work to unfold the buried stories of those

whose histories were manipulated to serve colonial interests. This critical approach challenges the perception of history, which has been dominated by colonial and Western viewpoints without sufficient investigation or critique. Post-colonial thinkers, therefore, dedicate themselves to constructing a counter-narrative that exposes the exploitative motives underlying colonial 'truth.'"

Fragments of Authentic Identity:

"Their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate. We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who taken all round resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges…"
*(*Freud, *The Unconscious, 190, 191)*

'The Unconscious' by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud demonstrates how undesirable feelings are suppressed in the unconscious mind and thus influence one's life. He used the term *"*Double consciousness*"* to refer to the splitting of mental activities into two groups *(Freud 121).* The term developed later on to describe the feeling of possessing more than one identity while lacking a sense of self, as introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 8).* Double consciousness as a concept that gives an insight into the psyche of the colonised, who is considered as the other, revealing that an intense instability is imposed on his authentic identity because of losing his sense of belonging. To illustrate, Homi Bahaba describes these fragmented identities in his book, *The Location of Culture. "Almost the same but not white"(Bahaba, 89).* The oppressed people can never fully belong to the hegemonic culture, nor can they retain their authentic identity. The other is destined to live in an infinite in-betweenness, hence losing the sense of his existence. As displayed, one of the major concerns of post-colonial theory is the imposition of colonial identities and language on the confined people. Such imposition leads to language attrition and, consequently, identity fragmentation. As Noam Chomsky stated, "*Language is not just words; it's culture, it's tradition, and it's a vital contributor to one's community, and thus identity…"(We Still Live Here – Âs Nutayuneân[1]).* The tremendous stigmatisation attributed to their native language results in its gradual loss, consequently paving the way for the colonial language to prevail and dominate the mentalities of the colonised. Post-colonial theorists shed light on the conflicting thoughts of the colonised on whether to retain their language and bear the shameful connotation attached to it or to surrender to the colonial language and thus lose their native identity, language, and heritage. The subjected people have lost their sense of belonging and suffer from identity fragmentation; in other words, they fall victim to the Western assumptions concerning their culture and history.

[1] A 2011 documentary on the Wampanoag people's journey to reclaim and revive their language.

Otherness and Subalternity:

"Cultures recognise themselves through their projections of othering."
(Bhabha, *1994*, p12)

Othering is a social process of reducing a group of people to a mere sum of negative characteristics that do not fit a certain standard. It easily divides mankind into two groups: one that embodies the normal civilised identity considered valuable and another defined by its faults and stigmatisation. The main design of this categorisation is to fight the anxieties caused by the colonial pride to be superior and on the top of the social hierarchy. *"Cultures recognise themselves through their projections of otherness" (*Bhabha, 1994, p12*).* The concept of othering depends on "in-group" and "out-group" relations, where the other, them, and the out-group are only defined in relation to the self, us, and the in-group. The term can be used broadly when talking about a particular ethnicity or part of the world. Edward Said discusses this generalisation in his critique of the forms of Orientalism. Orientalism is an intellectual approach to defining and constructing a specific Image of the Orient painted by Western countries."*From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself* (Said, 1978, p. 292). The goal is to highlight the vast difference between the West and the East, thus creating the image of the other in relation to the Western self. Othering is a multidimensional concept that is classed, raced, and gendered. It certainly gained popularity in post-colonial studies, but human rights activists also use it to highlight the struggles of the oppressed. We could be discussing colonisation or workplace discrimination and use the term to refer to those who are silenced by the burden of their prejudice. While otherness refers to being labelled as drastically different, the term subaltern refers to those socially, politically, and geographically marginalised from the power structure. In the subaltern context, otherness is seen in the experience of being excluded, whether it is because of class, race, or gender. Post-colonial theorists addressed the poor representation of the subaltern[2] deeming them as voiceless in many narratives in which they did not have a say. Spivak, one of the pioneers of post-colonial studies, addressed those narratives in her original essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak*?" She adopted a deconstructive approach by analysing existing narratives and raising questions regarding the vocality of the subaltern: "*In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"* (Spivak, 1988, p 287*).* She criticises the metanarrative set by the West and highlights how it is incorporated into the political, social, and legal system. The concept of the subaltern illuminates how oppression does not appear in a single form but has different levels that may never be known.

[2] A term conceived by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who because he was in prison and his writings subject to censorship used it as a codeword for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class. The term has been adopted by a group of Postcolonial Studies scholars, thus forming a sub-discipline within the field known as Subaltern Studies.

Imperial engendering of ethnocentrism and acculturation:

"*Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.*"

(Said, 1994, p7)

Colonialism, on the one hand, refers to the physical invasion of land by a hegemonic power to serve the interests of the empire, often disregarding the inevitable suffering of the colonized populations. **Imperialism**, on the other hand, is linked to the concept of empire and originally referred to the European expansion during colonial conquests. Over time, the term has acquired negative connotations due to its exploitation on political, economic, and ideological fronts. Imperialism is considered a more advanced stage of colonialism. It extends beyond territorial invasion and manifests in the political, economic, and ideological dominance over a nation's structures. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, ideological imperialism involves not just physical domination but a deep cultural infiltration.

The imperial system began with the occupation of foreign lands, but over time, it evolved into an attempt to erase native cultures through the gradual filtering of their roots, ignoring any social ties that do not align with the dominant hegemonic culture. **Imperialism** infiltrates the very existence of native cultures, leading to the erasure of indigenous beliefs and values. **Ethnocentrism** and **acculturation** are two phenomena often produced by imperialist actions. The American social scientist William Graham Sumner defined ethnocentrism in his book *Folkways* as "the view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it… Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders" (Sumner, 1906, p. 13). Ethnocentrism reflects how the dominant culture judges others through a singular, biased lens, often resulting in the modification of indigenous cultures. With the passage of time, the colonized cultures lose their authenticity and begin to adopt the beliefs and practices of the dominant culture.

This process leads to **acculturation**, a social phenomenon that occurs when an individual adapts to a new culture and employs strategies to cope with the stress of cultural transition. According to John W. Berry's acculturation model, these strategies include **assimilation**, **integration**, **separation**, and **marginalization**. Assimilation occurs when an individual neglects their original culture and fully adopts the host culture. Integration involves maintaining one's heritage culture while simultaneously participating in the new culture. Separation is characterized by a desire to preserve the original culture without engaging with the host culture, and marginalization occurs when an individual rejects both the original and host cultures (Berry, 1997, p. 24). These strategies are reflected in Kuang's characters as they navigate British culture, adopting the ideologies of the colonizer due to the legitimization of educating the "uncivilized" natives.

In conclusion, the ideological expansion of imperialism represents a more sophisticated form of colonialism—one that penetrates not only physical territories but also the cultural identity and beliefs of its subjects.

Discussion:

Language was always the companion of empire, and as such, together they begin, grow, and flourish. And later, together, they fall.

Antonio de Nebrija, *Grammar of the Castilian Language*

Language was used as a predominant tool of the British Empire. From the beginning of the novel, it is evident that the primary purpose of establishing academic institutions such as The Royal Institute of Translation is to serve the colonial empire and reinforce its dominance over the world. As Kuang notes, "...such is the project of the empire – and why, therefore, we translate at the pleasure of the crown" (Kuang, 2022, p. 157). The Royal Institute of Translation, referred to as Babel, is where four students were brought from their homelands to study translation, thereby implicitly securing the status of English as the language of the empire and subjugating other native languages for its benefit. In addition to using language to hegemonize other territories, learning the native languages of the colonized is essential to sustaining such hegemony. "Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools of – nay, the centres of – great civilisations. In 1527, Charles V of Spain created the Secretaría de Interpretación de Lenguas, whose employees juggled over a dozen languages in service of governing his empire's territory…" (Kuang, 2022, p. 86). These were the first words the students encountered on their first day at Babel. "...the end of the war of the Spanish succession, after which the British decided it might be prudent to train young lads to speak the languages of the colonies the Spanish had just lost…" (Kuang, 2022, p. 86).

Throughout their academic years at Babel, the characters undergo intense inner conflict. They begin to question whether they are brought to Oxford to learn and help their native lands, or if they are mere contributors to fortifying the empire's unjust power. This unrest is best embodied in Robin, the central character and narrator of the novel. Robin was brought from China to study at Babel. Having grown up in Canton (now Guangzhou), Robin's life before arriving in Oxford remains vague throughout much of the novel, with only fragments of his past revealed to readers. What is known is that after his mother's death, Professor Lovell, who later turns out to be Robin's father, brought him to England and became his guardian. Professor Lovell symbolizes the colonizer and plays a significant role in maintaining Anglo hegemony, which will be explored further in subsequent paragraphs. As Kuang writes, "His mother had perished that morning. He lay beside her body, watching as the blues and purples deepened across her skin…" (Kuang, 2022, p. 12).

Robin was already well-versed in English before arriving in England due to his exposure to English literature in China. "For someone who had never left Canton in his life, the boy's English was remarkably good. He spoke with only a trace of an accent...He could read the language better than he spoke it. Ever since the boy turned four, he had received a large parcel twice a year filled entirely with books written in English" (Kuang, 2022, p.

16). Robin's early exposure to English books was not a coincidence but part of a systematic plan by Professor Lovell to shape him into a hybrid personality to serve the empire.

As Robin struggles with his role at Babel, he confronts the internal contradiction between his success and the empire's injustices: "...And because he himself could not resolve the contradiction of his willingness to thrive at Babel even as it becomes clearer, day by day, how obviously unjust were the foundations of its fortunes…" (Kuang, 2022, p. 149).

Robin is a layered character, meaning that he possesses many complexities and evolves throughout the novel. A layered character changes significantly across different life stages, often appearing as though multiple personalities inhabit the same body. This gradual yet radical development is reflected in Robin's ideological and personal growth. Each stage of his life reflects an evolution in his identity and ideology, shaped by the strategies employed by the colonizers to make their language and culture dominant over others. Throughout Robin's journey, his ambivalence and inner conflict manifest in different forms. His journey can be classified into three distinct stages: ignorance and awe, exposure and uncertainty, and truth and resignation.

The first stage of "ignorance and awe" started with the death of Robin´s mother. Her death constitutes literally and figuratively the total loss of Robin´s connection to his culture and homeland. Firstly, Robin went to England with Professor Lovell because he had no one to stay with in Canton. This is clear in Professor Lovell´s words when he proposes an offer to Robin: *"I propose to bring you with us. You will live at my estate, and I will provide you with room and board until you´ve grown old enough to make your own living…" (Kuang,* 2022, p *19). "...Your mother and grandparents are dead, your father unknown, and you have no extended family. Stay here, and you won´t have a penny to your name…"* (Kuang, 2022, p 20). Secondly, Robin´s mother was the last and the only one who pronounced his Chinese name on her deathbed. *"The last thing she´d said to him was his name, two syllables mouthed without breath. Her face had then gone slack and uneven. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth..,"* (Kuang, 2022,p 12). Professor Lovell, a great contributor to the Anglo hegemony, insisted that Robin change his Chinese name. *"One more thing, it occurs to me you need a name"* (Kuang, 2022,p 20). Furthermore, when Robin tried to explain that he had his name, Professor Lovell[3] implicitly attributed stigma to the name. *"No, that won´t do. No Englishman can pronounce that.."* (Kuang, 2022, p 21). Professor Lovell degraded Robin's Chinese name as peculiar and inferior to

[3] Professor Lovell´s quotation attributes supremacy to English and its speakers. Moreover, it devalues the other languages and their native speakers.

the English people. Consequently, Robin lost his linguistic identity, which is in his name. Professor Lovell stated what the relationship between him and Robin would be like. Their relationship represents a bigger picture— the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Furthermore, how the colonised is immersed in indefinite trials to satisfy and meet the needs of the coloniser. Robin's total exile from his country and the Anglicisation of his name are two colonial methods to tyrannise the others. This early phase of Robin´s life shows how the colonisers exploit truth for their interest. Professor Lovell has often informed Robin that his father is unknown. "...Your father unknown, and you have no extended family…" (Kuang, 2022, p 20). Despite being Robin´s father, Professor Lovell easily and sarcastically negated this truth. When Robin suggested taking Professor Lovell´s surname, he told him that people would think he was Robin's father[4]. "...They´ll think I´m your father" (Kuang, 2022, p 21).

Furthermore, Professor Lovell insisted that Robin speaks in English instead of Chinese. This is another way to degrade the native language of the other. *English. Use your English" (Kuang,* 2022, p*14).* When Robin migrated to London, he marvelled at the civilisation and culture of the city. Speaking English in a native-like accent was a key to integration in the English society. He felt like an outsider whose roots hindered him from blending into such a hegemonic culture. Additionally, Robin´s insecurities navigated his feelings toward a mental detachment from his origin. He wished he had been born as a native English speaker. Thus, He could naturally utter its codes. *"Still, Robin could not help but envy those boys – those born into this world, who uttered its codes as native speakers…) (Kuang,* 2022, p*159).* Robin suffered from severe anxieties innately inherited from his unjust and oppressive social classification as the other to the English people. *"Your languages determine how interesting you are.." (Kuang,* 2022, p *89).* The concept of accentism[5] is represented in the first stage. The perfect accent was obligatory to partially fit in as a non-native speaker.*"Fluency also entailed a whole host of social rules and unspoken conventions that Robin feared he might never fully grasp" (Kuang*, 2022,p *157).* Over and above, his only wish was to belong and never be treated as an outsider. *".... He could not help but imagine, just for a moment, what it might be like to be a part*

[4] Professor Lovell is ironically Robin´s father in spite of denying the truth.

[5] Accentism: means the attribution of certain negative connotations to the accent of non-native speakers. Moreover, accentism is a linguistic discrimination that deprives the immigrants from the sense of belonging to the host country.

of that circle…And he would no longer be the foreigner, second-guessing his pronunciation at every turn, but a native whose belonging could not possibly be questioned or revoked" (Kuang, 2022, p *159). At this stage,* Robin was unaware of the real reason behind his migration to England.[6] He could not infer the veiled colonial and imperial aims. In brief, the first stage of Robin´s life was characterised by unawareness and reverence for the colonial world. This absolute lack of colonial cognisance will lead to Robin´s language attrition in the second stage.

"You know how it feels for your native tongue to slip away…"

(Kuang, 2022, p 204)

The next stage of Robin's life, "exposure and uncertainty," began after his immersion in English culture. Despite feeling a partial sense of belonging, Robin could never escape the hybridity deeply rooted in his identity. "You do speak the words, but more importantly, you hold two meanings in your head at once. You exist in both linguistic worlds simultaneously, and you imagine traversing them" (Kuang, 2022, p. 217). He could never be fully considered English, yet he was not purely Chinese either. This sense of hybridity stripped him of his linguistic identity and led to a detachment from his Chinese heritage, as if it had never existed.

As he increasingly adopted the colonial language, Robin began to experience language attrition, gradually losing his Chinese. This language attrition, a natural consequence of being dispossessed of his homeland and culture, became evident when Robin realized that the colonizers knew more about China and the Chinese language than he did. "Struck with the unsettling realization that Professor Lovell – a foreigner – knew more about his mother tongue than he did" (Kuang, 2022, p. 92). Robin grew frustrated with the fact that grammar books about Chinese and other Oriental languages were authored primarily by white British men, with little to no contribution from native speakers. "This was a pattern Robin noticed – the initial authors all tended to be white British men rather than native speakers of those languages" (Kuang, 2022, p. 91).

The next stage of Robin's life began after his immersion in English culture. In the "exposure and uncertainty" stage, the darker colonial realities could no longer remain concealed. Robin gradually encountered situations that revealed these colonial aspects. The unveiled truth contradicted all of Robin's fantasies and admiration for Oxford, giving rise to a severe inner conflict. This conflict disrupted his inner peace and led to many

[6] Which is the exploitation of his native knowledge of chinese to serve the great purpose of the British Empire.

realizations he had not previously considered. Robin, who had been seeking affection and love after losing his family, sometimes felt that Babel was like home to him. “He was a child starved of affection, which he now had in abundance…” (Kuang, 2022, p. 147).

The real conflict in the second stage of Robin's life began after he met Griffin for the first time. Griffin, Robin’s half-brother, had come to England under similar circumstances and for the same colonial purpose. Like Robin, Griffin was a product of the empire's manipulation, but he had taken a different path. Griffin was a member of a clandestine scholars’ group called the Hermes Society, whose primary goal was to stop Britain’s imperial expansion worldwide. The Hermes Society relied on the academic resources provided by Babel, the very same resources that supported the British Empire's power. Through their conversations, Griffin exposed Robin to the atrocities committed by the empire and revealed the imperial motives behind the institution Robin had grown to admire. Ultimately, Griffin represented the undeniable truth that weighed heavily on Robin’s mind, leading him to question everything he once believed. Griffin’s influence symbolized the voice of reason that illuminated Robin’s internal struggle and guided him toward a deeper understanding of his role in the empire.

As Robin reflects on Griffin's revelations, he recognizes the futility of resistance: “Griffin was right to be angry, thought Robin, but he was wrong to think he could do anything about it. These trade networks were carved in stone…but the people who had the power to do anything about it had been placed in positions where they would profit, and the people who suffered most had no power at all” (Kuang, 2022, p. 330).

The “truth and resignation” phase marks the third stage of Robin’s life and reflects significant development in his personality. During this stage, Robin evolved into a version of Griffin, his half-brother, though with some differences. He adopted Griffin’s skeptical view of Babel, England, and the colonizers. Griffin, the symbol of resistance, had long exposed the harsh realities of colonialism, and his influence on Robin became undeniable. As Griffin put it, “I’m your failed predecessor, you see. Dear old Papa took me out of the country too early” (Kuang, 2022, p. 203). Griffin served as Robin’s alter ego, embodying the ideological resistance that Robin would later embrace.

Griffin successfully uncovered the colonial ambitions embedded within Babel’s academic structure. He revealed to Robin the true purpose of their education: “You’ll study hard and graduate, and then they’ll ask you to do all kinds of unsavoury things for the empire” (Kuang, 2022, p. 152). Griffin’s insights into the relationship between colonizer and colonized further exposed the reality of exploitation, as he observed, “We’re trapped in a symbiotic relationship with the levers of power” (Kuang, 2022, p. 154).

Robin’s moment of truth occurred when he was sent to Canton—his homeland—as an interpreter to facilitate political and diplomatic negotiations between England and China. This visit solidified the doubts that Griffin had planted during the previous stage. The truth about the empire’s ambitions became undeniable. Robin realized that England’s interest was solely in expanding its territories and boosting its economy, even at the cost of fabricating treaties while secretly waging war. He also came to understand that academic institutions like Oxford and Babel were complicit in these colonial ambitions.

Robin was struck by the realization that he and his friends were brought to England not for intellectual growth, but to serve as tools for the empire. Their contributions in translating words and navigating diplomatic negotiations only benefited the colonial regime. As Robin fully adopted Griffin's ideology, he embraced the harsh truth: "He had fully converted to Griffin's theory of violence, that the oppressor would never sit down at the negotiating table when they still thought they had nothing to lose. No; things had to get bloody" (Kuang, 2022, p. 519).

By this stage, Robin had transformed from a mere witness to the empire's atrocities into a rebel, fully embracing Griffin's revolutionary ideology. His sole objective became resisting the oppressive colonial system. "Robin's heart was beating very quickly. He felt seized by a sudden urge to discover all he could to determine the full extent of this conspiracy" (Kuang, 2022, p. 600).

Robin's visit to China not only enlightened his understanding of the empire but also exposed the true nature of his father, Professor Lovell. Professor Lovell was not simply an academic provider of linguistic resources; he directly benefited from the war and was a fervent supporter of colonial exploitation. Far from being a passive scholar entangled in the war, he had played an active role in designing it. As Robin realized, "His father had not simply been a scholar caught up in trade hostilities. He had helped design them" (Kuang, 2022, p. 599). After Robin uncovered the truth about his father's involvement, their relationship deteriorated, culminating in several heated arguments. In a particularly vicious confrontation, Robin unintentionally killed his father. Though he insisted it was not deliberate, his peers believed him but acknowledged that no one else would. The death of Professor Lovell was significant as it marked the first step in Robin's journey to break free from the Anglo hegemony that his father represented. This act symbolized partial liberation from the dominance Lovell embodied. Thus, the third stage of Robin's life is characterized by his resignation to the truth, his personal growth, and his resistance against Anglo-imperialism.

Robin's internal conflict, alongside the collective struggles of his cohort, reflects the broader theme of **otherness**, which represents the shared experience of marginalization by the oppressors. This dynamic manifests in the complex interplay of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that define "us" versus "them" binaries. While the experience of oppression unites the marginalized, the notion of a universal experience is misleading, as it implies an identicality that does not exist. Kuang's characters, through their internal and external struggles, embody different forms of otherness for distinct reasons. After undergoing years of intense preparation under their respective English guardians, Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty were accepted into the Royal Institute of Translation, referred to as Babel. At Babel, they received accommodation, allowances, and unlimited access to academic resources. However, the cost of these privileges was their role as aspiring translators serving the interests of the British Empire.

The shared experience of abandoning their homelands and dedicating their adolescent years to Babel shaped their relationship as a cohort. Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty—described as "a chink, a brown Hindu, a former slave, and a righteous feminist"—were marginalized and stigmatized in Oxford. Despite their differences, they found comfort in each other's company as they realized their shared experience of otherness. "One thing

united them all – without Babel, they had nowhere in this country to go. They had been chosen for privileges they couldn't have ever imagined, funded by powerful and wealthy men whose motives they did not fully understand, and they were acutely aware these could be lost at any moment. That precariousness made them simultaneously bold and terrified. They had the keys to the kingdom; they did not want to give them back" (Kuang, 2022, p. 102).

As they grew closer, the characters came to understand that their stigmatisation, though distinct, was comparable, and their individual forms of otherness would require different forms of agency. This complexity is particularly evident in Robin's relationship with his father, Professor Lovell. Robin eventually realized that he could never be seen as a person in his father's eyes: "It was so obvious now that he was not, and could never be, a person in his father's eyes. No, personhood demanded the blood purity of the European man, the racial status that would make him Professor Lovell's equal. Little Dick and Philippa were persons. Robin Swift was an asset, and assets should be undyingly grateful that they were treated well at all" (Kuang, 2022, p. 344). This moment solidified Robin's understanding of the oppressive structures around him and catalyzed his resistance against them.

Robin Swift is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He spent nearly the first decade of his life in his homeland before the Asiatic cholera epidemic struck Canton, leading to the death of his family and community. Robin's survival can only be described as a miracle, made possible by a "white savior" figure who found him, provided a magical cure, and saved him from certain death. This savior was Professor Lovell, who, under a contractual agreement, took Robin to England. Out of desperation, Robin consented to the professor's terms, which included migrating to England, studying specific curricula, and dedicating his time to his academic work. In return, Robin enjoyed a comfortable life, though it came at the cost of his labor. After years of hard work under Professor Lovell's supervision, Robin was finally admitted to the Royal Institute of Translation, where he expected to see the fruits of his labor. To his surprise, life at the institution was highly rewarding. He loved his cohort, his lessons, and his life at Oxford. The world outside the institution seemed irrelevant, as if he were suspended in time and space.

However, Robin was careful not to question the reality behind his presence in a systematically racist institution. He put considerable effort into "toning down" his foreignness and often wished to be an Englishman so that his presence wouldn't be questioned. He did not mind being invisible, and whenever his foreignness was acknowledged, he quickly internalized the stigmatization and othering that marked him. Despite his efforts to blend in, Robin always felt uncomfortable playing the role expected of him by the British. Not only did he dismiss their discriminatory behavior, but he also embraced the curse of not being white.

Robin lived in this state of oblivion until he met his half-brother, Griffin, who exposed the atrocities of the empire and revealed the imperial motives behind the institution Robin had grown to admire. Griffin also confirmed Robin's suspicions about Professor Lovell, who, as it turned out, was indeed their father. Once Robin's illusions were shattered, he found himself in an internal struggle between ignorance and resistance. He realized that, in the eyes of the colonizers, he was merely a pawn, a disposable asset in their imperial ambitions. Any deviation from their terms was seen as a lack of gratitude. Time and again, they reminded him how fortunate he was, how he had a better life than his "kind" could ever hope for, and how he was an exception to an otherwise lazy, filthy, and inferior race.

Robin's growing unease with his existence and the derogatory treatment he had endured his entire life began to suffocate him. The role he had once accepted now felt like a prison. Initially, Robin believed that resistance was futile, but he soon realized that resistance was inevitable. His realization that his "otherness" had shaped his identity, thoughts, and feelings transformed him. He resolved that he would no longer allow himself to be manipulated as a mere piece in the empire's grand game. Instead, he would shape his own reality, making his otherness cost the empire much more than it had cost him.

This sentiment of resistance is echoed in Ramy's words:

> Everything I've worked for is this!" Ramy exclaimed. "What, you think I came to Babel because I want to be a translator for the Queen? Birdie, I hate it in this country. I hate the way they look at me, I hate being passed around at their wine parties like an animal on display. I hate knowing that my very presence at Oxford is a betrayal of my race and religion because I am becoming just that class of person Macaulay hoped to create. I've been waiting for an opportunity like Hermes since I got here (Kuang, 2022, p. 306).

Ramiz Rafia Mirza came from a once-wealthy family, one of many Muslim families in Bengal that lost their properties due to the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. As a result, they sought employment in the household of Mr. Horace Hayman Wilson, secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta. Ramy, being a young boy, did not fully grasp the gravity of their situation or the speed of their family's decline in status. He was a clever child with an extraordinary talent for acquiring languages. Ramy did not need to understand a language to pronounce its syllables perfectly after hearing them, a talent that did not go unnoticed.

Wilson and his peers were fascinated by Ramy's abilities, so much so that in their household, "they called him the little professor. Blessed Ramy, dazzling Ramy. He had no idea what the purpose was of anything he studied, only that it delighted the adults so when he mastered it all. Often, he performed tricks for the guests Sir Horace had over to his sitting room" (Kuang, 2022, p. 147). While his parents grew concerned about the situation, they were cautious not to protest against a white man's indulgence. Sir Horace's interest in Ramy extended beyond mere amusement; he proposed to take Ramy to England, a decision that stemmed from a long-standing debate between Orientalists and Anglicans. Orientalists advocated teaching Indian students Arabic and Sanskrit, while Anglicans preferred English to serve colonial purposes, as summarized by Macaulay: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835, p. 8).

Sir Horace assured Ramy's parents that he would be raised among his staff in Yorkshire until he was old enough to enroll at the University of Oxford. This agreement severed Ramy from his homeland, forcing him to adapt to an environment where he was clearly unwelcome. During his adolescent years, Ramy learned to navigate his identity in relation to the white English society around him. He adapted his behavior depending on the assumptions others had of him, often feeding into the narratives constructed by the English. He realized that playing the desired role came at the cost of his true identity, yet

he had little choice, as survival depended on fitting into the mold shaped by white people's expectations.

Despite his efforts, Ramy knew he could never fully blend in, as his skin color alone marked him as foreign and inferior. He understood that his very existence in England was precarious and life-threatening. In discriminatory situations, Ramy was forced to alter his behavior to accommodate the "othering" imposed upon him. Paradoxically, this burden of heritage made him cling to it more. He never forgot his father's words: "Forget not who you are, Ramiz." Ramy never questioned his identity but constantly challenged the British Empire and its manipulation of power. Even at Babel, Ramy could not escape the harsh realities of the empire. This lack of hesitancy is evident when he readily accepted the offer to join the Hermes Society, an underground organization resisting British imperialism.

Ramy remained true to his roots and became a voice of reason in Robin's life, inspiring him to stand for what he believed in. Ramy embodied resistance, steadfast in his conviction that the colonial system was unjust. Ultimately, Ramy died fighting for his beliefs, solidifying his role as a symbol of defiance against imperial oppression. His struggle reflects the broader resistance of colonized people, such as Victoire, whose own story highlights the disbelief surrounding the liberation of her homeland: "The liberation of her motherland was unthinkable even as it happened, for no one in France or England, not even the most radical proponents of universal freedom, believed that slaves – creatures they never thought fell under their categories of rational, rights-holding, enlightened men – would demand their own liberation" (Kuang, 2022, p. 568).

Continuing with the theme of resistance and revolution, Victoire Desgraves, like Ramy, faced systemic oppression but from a different historical and cultural context. Born into a revolutionary world where slaves fought for liberation and claimed human rights, Victoire was born at the peak of the Haitian Revolution. The revolution, initiated by the unimaginable brutality of slavery, was deeply inspired by the radical abolishment of the unjust system during the French Revolution. Although Victoire's birth came a decade after the official abolition of slavery in 1807, she and her mother were still subjected to a domesticated form of slavery. Her mother, a free-born woman, fled to Paris to escape the turmoil of the Haitian revolution and worked for Professor Desjardins, a retired academic. Tragically, when her mother fell ill, she was denied medical attention, left to die in isolation, and Victoire was locked in a cupboard to avoid contagion. As Kuang (2022) writes, "She knows only that in Paris, at the Desjardins estate, they were not allowed to leave – for here, forms of slavery still existed, as they did all over the world; a twilight condition, the rules unwritten but implied" (p. 569).

Despite her survival, Victoire was alone and trapped in a household that implicitly still viewed her as a slave. She was assigned housekeeping tasks, beaten, and reprimanded for any negligence. Constantly reminded that she had it better than she would in her "barbaric" Haitian motherland, Victoire was also forbidden from speaking Kreyòl, her mother tongue. This absolute isolation did not stop her from questioning the unjust dynamics of superiority and inferiority. She searched through Professor Desjardins's letters, looking for proof that he legally owned her and her mother but found none. Instead, she discovered something else: "She did learn about a place named the Royal

Institute of Translation, a place he'd trained at in his youth, a place he'd written to about her, in fact. He'd told them about the brilliant little girl in his household, about her prodigious memory and talent for Greek and Latin" (Kuang, 2022, p. 570).

Victoire sought escape through education at the Royal Institute of Translation, but even there, she could not ignore the systematic racism that permeated the institution. Babel not only aided the empire's colonial ambitions but also played a role in supporting the slave trade. Victoire, having been acquainted with revolution from an early age, believed in the power of resistance and was convinced that no empire was invincible. Those enslaved by the empire would eventually break free from the shackles of oppression. Her belief in a liberated future gave her the strength to endure the discrimination and othering she faced throughout her life. Consequently, she joined the Hermes Society, determined to contribute to a revolution that would bring freedom for herself and others. As Kuang (2022) describes, "She learned revolution is, in fact, always unimaginable. It shatters the world you know. The future is unwritten, brimming with potential. The colonisers have no idea what is coming, and that makes them panic. It terrifies them" (p. 571).

Victoire's dream extended beyond mere survival. She envisioned a life where she and her people thrived and worked to witness the realization of that future.

This struggle against the oppressive forces of colonialism and the institutionalized discrimination at Babel is echoed in Letty's experience as a woman scholar at Oxford. Letty was painfully aware of the double standards she faced. "None of this came as a surprise to Letty. She was, after all, a woman scholar in a country whose word for madness derived from the word for a womb. It was infuriating. Her friends were always going on about the discrimination they faced as foreigners, but why didn't anyone care that Oxford was equally cruel to women?" (Kuang, 2022, p. 466).

While Victoire's struggles were shaped by her race and gender, Letitia Price faced the challenges of navigating a patriarchal society where her intelligence and capabilities were constantly undermined. Letitia Price was too bright and ambitious to be confined by the constraints of patriarchy. Throughout her life, she struggled to understand why her gender automatically made her secondary to her brother, Lincoln. Letty had an exceptional ability to absorb languages, mastered grammar rules effortlessly, and devoured books with insatiable curiosity. However, it was Lincoln, as the male heir, who received all the academic resources necessary to secure a place at Oxford. Letty, on the other hand, could not help but feel the "venomous jealousy gnawing at her," but this jealousy never stopped her pursuit of knowledge. She even resorted to sneaking into Lincoln's lessons to continue her learning (Kuang, 2022, p. 169).

As the daughter of an admiral, Letty enjoyed a privileged life, one many envied. Society's expectations of her were clear: she was destined for marriage and domesticity. Yet, despite these privileges, Letty refused to be submissive to the patriarchy. Through sheer willpower, she managed to gain admission to the Royal Institute of Translation, a feat that, at first, seemed to be the result of her determination. However, it was later revealed by Victoire that Letty's father only allowed her to pursue higher education after Lincoln's death. As Victoire noted, "Her father kept refusing to let her go to school. It wasn't until

Lincoln died that her father let her come and take his place. Bad to have a daughter at Oxford, but worse to have no children at Oxford at all" (Kuang, 2022, p. 169).

Once admitted, Letty vowed never to take her presence at such a prestigious institution for granted. She worked tirelessly, feeling as though she had to constantly prove her worth. However, her experience at Oxford was far from easy, and if it weren't for her friendship with Victoire, she might have found the misogyny overwhelming. Letty and Victoire grew closer as they both navigated the oppressive environment of Babel, where women were considered an "obscene sight." This sentiment was reflected in Robin's and Ramy's reactions upon first meeting the other half of their cohort: "Two slim youths awaited them on the green – the other half of their cohort, Robin assumed. One was white; the other was Black…Robin gaped at her...'You're a girl...Ramy was less subtle. 'Why are you girls?'" (Kuang, 2022, p. 83).

The challenges faced by Letty and Victoire were not limited to casual sexism. They were only allowed to borrow books when accompanied by Ramy or Robin, were required to dress conservatively to avoid "distracting" the men, and were not even permitted to live on campus, instead residing in the servants' annexe. These restrictions weighed heavily on them, but they learned to endure in silence. "I don't think you two quite understand how hard it is to be a woman here," Victoire pointed out. "They're liberal on paper, certainly. But they think so very little of us. Our landlady roots through our things when we're out as if she's searching for evidence that we've taken lovers. Every weakness we display is a testament to the worst theories about us, which is that we're fragile, we're hysterical, and we are too naturally weak-minded to handle the kind of work we're set to do" (Kuang, 2022, p. 169).

Letty found solace in the assumption that she and Victoire faced similar struggles, believing that their shared marginalization was parallel. However, she failed to recognize that Victoire was not only marginalized as a woman but also as a Black woman, making her oppression even more complex. Naively, Letty thought that sexism transcended race and did not fully understand the depth of racial discrimination Victoire endured. Victoire, in turn, struggled with this dynamic, feeling unable to confide in Letty. As Kuang (2022) noted, "Victoire only had Letty, who professed always to love her, to absolutely adore her, but who failed to hear anything she was saying if it didn't comport with how she already saw the world" (p. 379).

Letty's white privilege blinded her to the deeper layers of discrimination that plagued her friend. Despite her love and support for the cohort, her privilege sometimes led her to be dismissive of their struggles. As the group became more involved with the Hermes Society and its resistance against the empire, Letty struggled to reconcile her loyalty to her friends with her inability to fully grasp the importance of their fight. "But Babel gave you everything,' Letty seemed unable to move past this point. 'You had everything you wanted, you had such privileges—" (Kuang, 2022, p. 550).

Letty's loyalty ultimately wavered when the weight of her white superiority clouded her judgment. No longer seeing her friends as equals, Letty betrayed them, turning them in for their involvement with the Hermes Society. In a tragic culmination of her internalized superiority, she shot and killed Ramy for daring to resist the empire's authority.

This tragic moment epitomized the central conflict of identity and belonging in the novel. As Robin reflects, “Because we’ll never be British. How can you still not understand? That identity is foreclosed to us. We are foreign because this nation has marked us so, and as long as we’re punished daily for our ties to our homelands, we might as well defend them” (Kuang, 2022, p. 550).

The dominance of the English language holds an unchallenged historical legacy as a symbol of imperial power, a hegemony that has generated numerous consequences. Ethnocentrism and white supremacy are key outcomes of Anglo-hegemony. Ethnocentrism, the act of judging other cultures based on the standards of a dominant culture, leads to the societal expectation that one must adapt to this dominant, non-stigmatized culture. As a result, acculturation becomes inevitable for those exposed to British culture. This is evident in the experiences of Robin, Ramy, and Victoire, who faced the challenge of acculturation as they struggled to assimilate into British culture while maintaining their own values and beliefs. However, their attempts at assimilation proved nearly impossible in an empire where white supremacy functioned as the prevailing ideology.

The foundation of this ideology was rooted in the legitimization of English linguistic superiority. The widespread belief that the English language represented civilization gave the British a sense of entitlement to "save" and "civilize" the so-called uneducated and savage natives of the colonies. This sentiment is well-captured in Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden*: “Your new-caught, sullen peoples / Half devil and half child” (Kipling, 1899, lines 7-8). The linguistic expansion of English empowered the concept of white saviorism, transcending mere territorial conquest and extending to the intervention in the cultures and languages of the colonized.

Throughout the novel *Babel*, it becomes clear that while the characters' native languages—whether Cantonese, Haitian Creole, Arabic, or Sanskrit—are valued as tools for the British Empire, they are otherwise dismissed. The British perceived English as the only "civilized" language, relegating the mother tongues of the colonized to mere academic subjects, useful only when they served the interests of the empire. As Kuang portrays through her characters, this internal linguistic battle is brutal. Their native languages become stripped of their cultural significance, turning into tools of imperial control while English remained dominant throughout their lives.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *Babel* distinguishes itself within the realm of dark academic fiction by revealing unspoken narratives of the "other" and exploring imperial dominance alongside themes of resistance. The novel’s emphasis on Anglo-hegemony, fragmented identity, stigmatization, and enforced otherness shines a spotlight on the multifaceted nature of imperialism. Through this lens, Kuang highlights the necessity of challenging hegemonic structures to preserve authentic identity and embrace linguistic diversity.

By delving into the psyches of Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty, Kuang provides readers with a multi-perspective exploration of the novel's complex themes. Her work encourages readers to question the existing structures of academic institutions, language, and history. While the characters endure various tragedies, the novel offers hope by demonstrating that fixed realities can be altered through resistance. As *Babel* reminds us, colonialism—whether overt or concealed—remains a powerful force, but resistance to it is equally powerful.

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