

Gramática de la lengua de violencia: Coming of age in R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the necessity of violence: An arcane history of the Oxford translators' revolution*

by

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Abstract

R.F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (referred to as *Babel* hereafter) is a work of eclectic aesthetics that skillfully weaves together elaborate conversations in the fields of literary and linguistic studies to explore themes of colonialism, ethics of translation and language acquisition, and the complex dynamics of power. This thesis aims to unpack *Babel's* commentary on colonialism, imperialism, and violence through the lens of its character development—particularly focusing on Victoire, Ramy, and Robin—and the psychological toll they endure. While Victoire, Ramy, and Robin are not the only characters navigating the moral landscape of *Babel*, their journeys are central to understanding the novel's interrogation of colonialism, imperialism, violence, and resistance.

In the ensuing chapters, I shall embark on an analysis of Victoire, Ramy, and Robin. Each character offers a vivid representation that encapsulates diverse aspects of the colonial experience and the path of resistance. Their transformation from states of subjugation to self-awareness and defiance provides a deep exploration of the novel's primary themes. Furthermore, their narrative arcs do more than illustrate the characters' experiences; they illuminate the profound and enduring existential conflicts born out of the colonial encounter. The narratives of the trio will be explored not just in isolation but also in how they intertwine to form a more holistic picture of the colonial experience and the resistance against it. In this light, *Babel* transcends its literary confines, evolving into a multidisciplinary record that reflects the human condition under the influence of colonialism and its enduring legacies.

Chapter One, entitled "Victoire Desgraves Almost Lost in Translation: Language, Identity, and Power," embarks on an illuminating exploration into Victoire's diasporic account. This chapter focuses on her pursuit of self-discovery and cultural reclamation, examining her trajectory through

the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity, giving voice to her unique experiences and perspectives. The chapter also explores how Desgraves navigates the intersections of language, race, and gender, shedding light on how these factors intersect and affect her during her time in Babel and how they compelled her action toward resistance. Drawing on Spivak's framework, the chapter highlights marginalized individuals' challenges in asserting their agency and reclaiming their cultural heritage.

Chapter Two, titled "Macaulay's Legacy: Decoding Ramy's Arc," embarks upon a critical dissection of Ramy's character and his entanglement with the colonial educational systems championed by Macaulay. This chapter navigates the intricacies of Ramy's experiences, reflecting on how they are inextricably linked to the broader colonial discourse. It scrutinizes the challenges he faces, particularly in terms of mimicry and hybridity, engaging with the theoretical insights of Homi K. Bhabha. This examination sheds light on Ramy's struggles and emphasizes the significance of his identity as a *Muslim* Indian in the narrative.

Chapter Three, titled "Deciphering Robin Swift: A Fanonian Phenomenon and a Late Awakening," delves into the life of Robin Swift. This chapter confronts the themes of violence and identity, examining Robin's transformation from a passive figure to an active resistor of colonial violence. It explores how the violation of his mother, country, and sense of self triggers a profound change in his character. This part is analyzed through the Fanonian framework relating to violence and its impact on the colonized's psyche, revealing how his experiences reflect broader issues of cultural commodification and exploitation under colonial rule.

Why is such a work important and still relevant in the twenty-first century? To answer this question, it is crucial to understand the nature of history and literature, along with the motivations behind their intersection. History is often distorted; it is often biased, shaped by the circumstances

and viewpoints of its recorders. This dynamic is further influenced by the power imbalance, where victors, regardless of their moral standing, dominate the narrative. In such contexts, akin to a black box in the flight of time, literature emerges as an alternative, veiled, and metaphorical history, especially of the oppressed. Authors skillfully weave truths about their era's conditions and critiques of their societies into their narratives. Rhetorical language serves as a protective veil, allowing authors to subtly confront authority without fearing persecution and prosecution. The depth of *Babel* compels me to argue that it will serve as a commentary on the state of the twenty-first century, allowing future generations to fill in the blanks, to observe and analyze why an alternative portrayal of eighteenth-century colonial Britain remains pertinent today. However, it is essential to acknowledge that there will always be unwritten history, concealed by the complexities of human perspectives and power dynamics.

Among numerous cultural instances exploring such intricate discussions, *Babel*, in my view, still stands out for its mastery of navigating and explaining its convoluted codes to reach the minds and hearts of academics and general readers alike. Furthermore, Kuang's capability to create a narrative with a Victorian backdrop with all the era's concerns and significant occurrences—including the Industrial Revolution, class disparities, child labor, Empire building, women's rights, and the opium wars—while concurrently engaging with contemporary societal concerns is remarkable. This approach elucidates the novel's critique of the inadequate attempts to address historical power imbalances and colonial legacies that continue to shape today's world.

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Dedication

For every voice that has been suppressed.

To *Palestine*, and to *all* the oppressed.

You are the reason I have not given up, *yet*,

In your struggles, my own is met.

Chapter 1 - Words Can Kill

This¹ introduction section examines the complex magic system and the significant role of language in *Babel*, underscored from the very beginning by the novel's opening epigraph from Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática de la lengua castellana*: "*Que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio; y de tal manera lo siguió, que junta mente comenzaron, crecieron y florecieron, y después junta fue la caída de entrambos. Language was always the companion of empire, and as such, together they begin, grow, and flourish. And later, together, they fall*" (3). Nebrija's epigraph stresses the thematic significance of language in the novel from the outset, which has informed and inspired the thematic focus and title selection for this thesis. *Babel's* magic system is not

¹ I would like to acknowledge ChatGPT's role in its development and refinement. I have utilized ChatGPT for various purposes, including the organization of content, paraphrasing, assisting with some convoluted ideas, and enhancing the clarity of my language. It is important to note that, while ChatGPT served as an assistant, the initial text and ideas across all outcomes are mine. Furthermore, all outcomes were subsequently revised and critically evaluated to ensure accuracy and coherence with the scholarly perspective of this work. Specifically, I turned to ChatGPT for assistance in refining and organizing the three paragraphs that begin with "Another instance that illuminates another aspect of Victoire's diasporic persona is her interaction with Colin during a University College ball" on page twenty-one, extending to the conclusion of the third paragraph on page twenty-two with "Therefore, Ramy's supportive stance becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative, showcasing the power of allyship as a meaningful tool in combating racism." This was because I found it challenging to articulate my thoughts as precisely as I had hoped. Additionally, I utilized ChatGPT to soften my expression, polish my rough language, and reorganize my ideas regarding the battle of Plassey. This section begins with "Furthermore, the discussion on Plassey reveals a glaring omission: the very question of why the British were in Bengal to begin with, potentially becoming hostages or engaging in military conflict" on page forty-nine and concludes with "The debates between Ramy and Letty offer a profound inquiry into the human condition under the shadow of empire" on page fifty. Further, I employed ChatGPT to structure my analysis on page fifty-one, beginning with "Ramy also grapples with the complex dimensions of religion within the novel's colonial setting" and concluding on page fifty-four with "This elucidates how religion, within the colonial context, becomes a matter of performance rather than a genuine expression of belief." For the entirety of Robin's section, I extensively relied on ChatGPT, providing it with the following instructions: "Please organize the text below into successive, coherent paragraphs with smooth transitions. Ensure all repetitions are eliminated while seamlessly integrating any direct quotes provided. The writing should reflect a postcolonial academic perspective."

merely a fantastical construct; it is intricately intertwined with linguistic nuances and colonial violence, presenting language and power not as abstract concepts, but as tangible, concrete forces that (re)define identities both on individual and collective levels. This introduction serves as a gateway to understanding the profound implications these magic and linguistic systems have on the narrative's exploration of empire, identity, and resistance.

In *Babel*, language transcends its communication role, becoming both a conduit for magical power and a symbol of colonial subjugation. Edward Said articulates the complex relationship between culture, language, and imperial power, noting, "Culture may predispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination" (*Culture* 200). This perspective aligns with the novel's depiction of language as a tool for both domination and resistance. By delving into the specifics of the novel's magic system, this introduction reveals the novel's details and mechanics, setting a foundation for comprehending the depth of *Babel*, and providing necessary context for the complex discussions that unfold in the subsequent chapters.

Babel's magic system is intricately connected to the subtleties of language and translation, where magic, or "silver-working" (21), is realized through engraving a silver bar with words in two distinct languages. Professor Playfair's insight, "the power of the bar lies in words. More specifically, the stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing – the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language and another. The silver catches what's lost and manifests it into being" (82), captures the essence of this magic system. Playfair's explanation reveals that the true power of these bars does not reside in the direct meaning of the words, but in the ineffable, the nuances and subtleties that evade straightforward expression. It reflects the idea that language and translation are about much more than mere communication; they involve a deeper, almost

mystical connection to meaning, where the unexpressed and the unsaid are as powerful as the spoken word.

Furthermore, the duality of the magic system underscores the idea that reliance on a single linguistic, intellectual, or cultural context is insufficient. This duality does not see the loss in translation as a weakness but rather as a source of strength; it is in the discrepancies, the spaces between languages where meaning shifts and morphs, that the silver bars find their true power. Professor Playfair's explanation that "Because translation can never be perfect, the necessary distortions – the meanings lost or warped in the journey – are caught and then manifested by the silver" (156) illustrates how the system transcends the words themselves. This approach to magic creation underscores a fundamental truth about human communication and understanding: the essence of our words and thoughts cannot always be fully captured or conveyed by direct translation. Instead, it is the exploration of these linguistic and cultural gaps, the embracing of the imperfect and the untranslatable, that activates the magic within the silver bars.

Moreover, the necessity of deep understanding and fluency in the languages used within the magic system underscores another layer of complexity. Professor Playfair remarks, "words have no meaning unless there is someone present who can understand them . . . You need to be able to think in a language – to live and breathe it, not just recognize it as a smattering of letters on a page" (159). This connection is further highlighted by the idea that "words only activated the bars if you meant them. If you only uttered the syllables, they had no effect" (321), showcasing the profound link between linguistic depth, cultural knowledge, and the activation of magical power, thereby explaining Babel's strategy of importing and admitting students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This intricate exploration sets a solid foundation for the

discussions on cultural appropriation, imposition, and resistance, enriching the thesis's analysis of the novel's themes and character developments.

The concept of “resonance” (197) also emerges as pivotal in maintaining the efficacy of these magical artifacts, with Babel acting as a central heart that sustains the magic of linked bars across the country through resonance rods. This system emphasizes the interconnectedness of languages, translation, and magic, suggesting a power of words that extends far beyond their immediate effects. Kuang vividly depicts this interconnectedness: “They stood together at the window. Looking out over Oxford, Robin had the impression that the whole city was like a finely tuned music box, relying wholly on its silver gears to keep running; and that if the silver ever ran out, if these resonance rods ever collapsed, then the whole of Oxford would stop abruptly in its tracks” (200). This imagery not only depicts the complex dependence of Oxford, and by extension, the empire, on magical infrastructure, but also symbolically presents Babel as more than just an academic institution. It is a fundamental and essential aspect of the colonial project, a beating heart that pumps the ideologies and practices of control throughout the empire. Through this narrative device, Kuang subtly critiques the mechanisms of imperialism, using the concept of “resonance” to reflect on how power is maintained and dispersed across the empire.

Similarly crucial to the world-building of the novel is the fortification of the physical space Babel inhabits and the constant remodeling of its security, which closes it off to an esoterically selected elite. This resonates with Caryl Phillips' insight in his collection of essays devoted to the Windrush generations, *A New World Order*, where he states:

Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity. On the inside reside

patriotic Britons, who are British by virtue of the race (white) and their culturally determined ethnicity. On the other side of the wall are the foreigners with their swarthy complexions, or their Judaism, or their smelly food, or their mosques, or their impenetrable accents, or their unacceptable clothes, or their tongue-twisting names, or their allegiance to Rome. (272-273)

Similarly, the architectural and ideological fortification of Babel mirrors the broader societal constructs of the Empire that classifies insiders from outsiders, reflecting the empire's broader strategies of inclusion and exclusion. It illustrates how institutions like Babel not only contribute to but actively shape the discourse of national identity and belonging, using their formidable intellectual and physical architectures to define the contours of power. In summary, "Through [Kuang's] use of architectural imagery, [she] addresses the issue of national identity. She shows how the dynamic boundaries of place affect one's way of inhabiting and sharing space" (Dubion 25).

Furthermore, the security system at Babel heavily depends on the use of blood from scholars to power its wards. Professor Playfair explains, "Babel sees more robbery attempts than all of the banks in London combined. The doors keep most of the riffraff out but the wards need some way to distinguish scholars from intruders. We've tried hair and fingernails but they're too easy to steal" (83). This method of security is designed to be impenetrable, relying on something as personal and challenging to acquire as blood. The rationale is that while thieves could potentially steal blood, the effort required to do so would be significantly greater than for hair or fingernails, making the wards an effective barrier against unauthorized access.

The process of collecting blood is described as straightforward yet unsettling:

Professor Playfair led them through the lobby to a small, windowless room hidden behind the shelves, which was empty save for a plain table and four chairs. He gestured for them to sit, then strode to the back wall, where a series of drawers were concealed inside the stone. He pulled out the top drawer, revealing stacks and stacks of tiny glass vials within.

Each one was labelled with the name of the scholar whose blood it contained. (83)

The secret drawers containing tagged vials of blood represent the clandestine and individualized surveillance of individuals, a mechanism of control that is simultaneously intimate and impersonal. Each vial, neatly categorized and stored, symbolizes an individual's reduction to a mere component in the institution's vast machinery of power, stripping away the complexity of their identity and reducing it to a tool for administrative convenience and security measures.

Additionally, Babel's insistence on the collection of blood from its scholars can be interpreted as a metaphor for the colonial extraction of resources from occupied lands and peoples. The students' passive acceptance of this violation mirrors the acquiescence of colonized subjects to their own exploitation, prompted by the promise of protection, education, and inclusion within the colonial power structure.

This system of security highlights the lengths to which Babel goes to protect its assets and secrets, using a deeply personal identifier for its members. It reveals the novel's themes of power, control, and the sacrifices demanded by institutions wielding significant authority and influence. By requiring a part of one's essence—blood—the institution binds its scholars to it in a very literal sense, further blurring the lines between protection and control, between safeguarding knowledge and exerting dominance over those who seek it.

In conclusion, the exploration of the complex magic system and the pivotal role of language in *Babel*, as discussed in this section of the thesis, lays a foundational understanding crucial for

the subsequent chapters. By delving into the novel's magic and linguistic core mechanics, it eliminates the need for repetitive explanations. It allows the analysis to shift focus towards the novel's broader thematic concerns and character developments, all built upon the critical insights into the novel's foundational elements examined here.

Chapter 2 - Victoire Desgraves Almost Lost in Translation:

Language, Identity, and Power

Language is a battleground on which British and West Indian cultures and identities clash and make accommodations. (James 1)

[The] ambivalent liminal space of representation signifies the imbrication of two radically different sites and cultures, their interpenetration and interdependency, or what Paul Gilroy calls “the internality of blacks to the West” (The Black Atlantic, 5). On the one hand, the Westernized, English-educated African is the epitome of the hybridized colonial subject. On the other, his presence in London, the heart of Empire, is suggestive of Britain’s dependency on her colonies in the dynamic construction of a national identity (as a powerful and prosperous insular State). [The author] thus goes beyond the binary logic of polarities, the dialectic of center and margin organized into a hierarchy, and stresses in oblique ways the commonalities shared by British people and their fantasized “others.” (Dubion 18)

In *Babel*, Victoire Desgraves emerges as a complex and multi-dimensional character, intricately connected to themes of exploitation, cultural resistance, racial stereotyping, diasporic experiences, and transformative self-discovery. Her role extends beyond simple characterization, evolving into a symbol of marginalized individuals’ diverse challenges in (post)colonial contexts. Victoire’s experience is a powerful example of linguistic exploitation, where her identity and cultural heritage are commodified for the benefit of *Babel*’s colonial and academic objectives. Marx and Engels shed light on the commodification of labor in capitalist societies, noting, “The work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the

workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine.” A similar theme is echoed in Victoire’s experiences, where her roles as a translator and cultural informant for Babel demand her participation in the colonial ambitions of Oxford’s silver-working scholars. Her linguistic talents are exploited to bolster the empire’s control and dominance, overshadowing her Haitian identity and reducing her to a mere instrument of colonial power. Through Victoire’s arc, *Babel* critically examines the educational strategies employed by the institution, revealing how they inflict epistemic violence upon indigenous knowledge systems and individuality by commodifying them, thus unveiling a broader critique of educational complicity in colonial domination.

Jessica L. Golden elucidates the connection between the education system and colonialism, stating: “The university system has been intimately connected to colonialism and was a tool for forcing Indigenous peoples to give up their culture and customs” (77). Victoire’s journey in the magical world of *Babel* mirrors this critique of the power dynamics involved in translation. In one exchange with her cohort, Victoire reveals that her advising professor, “Leblanc[,] doesn’t have a dictionary – there is no dictionary, not yet – so I’m the next best thing” (191), shedding light on the exploitative and commodified nature of her position. Her statement underscores the colonial practice of viewing individuals like her as mere resources for academic advancement, highlighting the lack of genuine collaboration and the exploitation in the colonial quest for knowledge. Victoire’s role in this magical context symbolizes the systemic exploitation which serves as a reminder of the lasting impacts of colonialism on power relations within linguistic and academic spheres.

A pivotal moment in Victoire’s journey unfolds within a scene that intricately navigates the complexities of postcolonial discourse, power dynamics, language, and identity. Her relationship with Professor Hugo Leblanc faces significant strain due to his perspective on

studying Kreyòl and Vodou. Initially, their academic partnership focused on French studies. However, Leblanc's shift of interest toward Vodou—often regarded in Western contexts as a “pagan religion”—and Kreyòl, which he derogatorily labels as “degenerate” (191), represents a critical turning point in their relationship. This shift belittles Victoire whose culture and heritage are trivialized and adapted to suit Leblanc's academic pursuits.

Leblanc's characterization of Kreyòl as a “degenerate language” (191) serves as an embodiment of enduring colonial attitudes, mirroring the legacy of linguistic imperialism. Such a stance finds echoes in historical perspectives like those of Thomas Macaulay, who, in his “Minute on Indian Education,” asserts, “The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education” (Macaulay). Such views have long fueled marginalization and perceived inferiority of non-European languages and cultures. Against this backdrop, Victoire's decision to embrace Kreyòl symbolizes an act of resistance and recovery. By doing so, she contests the linguistic hierarchies entrenched by colonialism and underscores the significance of her cultural legacy. Her actions are in concert with the broader endeavor to decolonize knowledge, advocating for the acknowledgment and appreciation of varied linguistic and cultural narratives.

The tension between Victoire and Professor Leblanc reaches a critical point when he expresses his intention to translate sacred texts essential to Haitian spiritual tradition. She insists that these “special texts” are “not meant to be shared” (191), arguing their cultural value is profoundly ingrained and meant solely for those within the Haitian community. Despite Victoire's efforts to underscore the inappropriateness of his endeavor, Leblanc doesn't back down, further complicating the situation with his keen interest in Vodou's “spells and poems” (191). Leblanc's interest illustrates the problematic nature of cultural appropriation and the enduring influence of

the colonial gaze, demonstrating a clear lack of genuine appreciation for the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Vodou and embodying a form of epistemic violence. Victoire's discomfort becomes emblematic of a larger struggle for the recognition and respect of subaltern voices in spaces where colonialism effectively exoticizes and marginalizes the subaltern view on life. Furthermore, Leblanc's dismissive attitude towards the sacredness of the texts mirrors the broader pattern of Western academia's failure to genuinely engage with the cultural and spiritual contexts of non-Western societies.

Anthony Ribben's insights on language and colonialism in the novel highlight the far-reaching influence of the colonial gaze. As a key character in Victoire's journey of self-discovery, Anthony initially fakes his death only to be later revealed as alive and actively involved with the revolutionary Hermes society's operations against the British Empire's colonial endeavors. His observation, "it's really the colonies and the semi-colonies – Robin and China, Ramy and India; boys, you're uncharted territory. You're the stuff that everyone's fighting over" (164), metaphorically positions the duo as territories in the colonial contest, exposing the objectification and commodification of cultures and languages in the colonial scheme. This analogy reveals a profound insight into the colonial mindset which reduces the richness of linguistic and cultural diversity to mere resources to be dominated and exploited. Such a viewpoint not only trivializes the value of diverse cultures but also perpetuates the historical pattern of viewing non-Western societies as mere pawns in a larger *game* of power and control.

The ensuing interaction between Letty and Victoire crystallizes the essence of diasporic identity struggles and the dismissal of non-Western perspectives. Letty's inability to grasp the cultural and spiritual significance of the texts Victoire hesitates to translate foregrounds a deeper postcolonial critique within the novel. Letty's confusion about the distinction between French and

Kreyòl, coupled with her dismissal of Vodou as a “pagan religion” (191), clearly exemplifies a profound cultural insensitivity. Generally, over the course of the novel, encounters between Letty and the trio highlight the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities, particularly in a diasporic context, where individuals like Victoire grapple with the intersection of their heritage and the dominant culture. Moreover, Letty’s questioning of Victoire’s connection to her Haitian heritage and her assertion that Victoire is *civilized* because of her *Frenchness* reveals a colonial mindset that views Western culture as superior and fails to respect the richness and validity of other cultures.

Letty’s insistence on labeling Victoire as “French” rather than Haitian is not a mere misrecognition; it is emblematic of a deeper colonial legacy that seeks to overwrite and diminish diasporic identities. This erasure is a form of violence that negates the richness of diasporic existence. Shaped by her Haitian roots and upbringing in France, Victoire vividly embodies the diaspora’s experience of the convergence of different cultural influences. Her identity transcends a simple binary; it is a tapestry woven from various cultural threads, each thread constituting an aspect of her heritage and experience. In this context, Letty’s refusal to acknowledge Victoire’s Haitian heritage represents more than a personal insult, embodying a smaller scale representation of the widespread problem of cultural erasure prevalent in (post)colonial societies. Such denial is a continuation of colonial attitudes, perpetuating the marginalization and invisibility of diasporic communities, and upholding the structures of power that privilege certain identities over others.

This superiority complex is reminiscent of colonial discourse that devalues indigenous knowledge and belief systems, suggesting the superiority of Western education and spirituality. For instance, in Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education,” he states:

We are to teach false History, false Astronomy, false Medicine, because we find them in company with a false religion. We abstain, and I trust shall always abstain, from giving any public encouragement to those who are engaged in the work of converting natives to Christianity. And while we act thus, can we reasonably and decently bribe men out of the revenues of the state to waste their youth in learning how they are to purify themselves after touching an ass, or what text of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing a goat? (Macaulay)

Reflecting on Macaulay's views, Letty's remarks reveal similar underlying biases. Her attitude suggests an implicit assumption that elements of Victoire's Haitian heritage are less developed or less significant than European languages and belief systems. In her mind, the West serves as a touchstone for civility, while she relegates other cultures to the status of a static, backward, and unchanging *Other*.

Letty's perspective, shaped by a colonial education system that promotes Western-centric ideologies, resonates with Chakrabarty's critique in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. He states: "The inhabitants of the colonies, on the other hand, were assigned a place 'elsewhere' in the 'first in Europe and then elsewhere' structure of time. This move of historicism is what Johannes Fabian has called 'the denial of coevalness'" (7-8). This critique addresses Eurocentric historicism that centers European development, relegating colonized societies to a perpetual "elsewhere" and "not yet," thereby denying them a simultaneous existence in history. Contrary to the narrative promoted by the colonizer, which positions them as pioneers of progress while portraying the colonized as stagnant, in reality, it is the colonized who seek change to improve their conditions. This reality sharply contrasts with the colonizer's

preference for stasis, enabling them to sustain their dominance and reap the benefits of the colonial exploitation system.

Kuang skillfully uses Letty's insistence on taking a group portrait to metaphorically express the colonial wish to "freeze" non-Western cultures in a moment, capturing them in ways that conform to Western expectations. Her desire for a photograph to memorialize their cohort "exactly how we were now, in this year, in 1837" (171) signifies a craving for an unchangeable reality. The photograph, by capturing artificial expressions and simplifying the subjects' essence, exemplifies the colonial habit of reducing the complexities of non-Western cultures to a translation lacking original vitality and dynamism.

The group's reaction to the completed photograph further emphasizes this theme of distortion and misrepresentation. Victoire's remark, "That looks nothing like us at all" (172), underlines the inaccuracies in the Western attempt to capture and translate other cultures. The photograph's failure to accurately represent them reflects the general tendency in colonial narratives to oversimplify and misinterpret non-Western cultures. This portrayal, with its artificial expressions and absence of authenticity, symbolizes the potential loss of essence in cultural translation. In contrast, Letty's approval of the photograph, despite its flaws, reveals a colonial inclination towards manageable, simplistic depictions of others. Meanwhile, Robin's observation that "the camera had distorted and flattened the spirit that bound them" (172) and Ramy's description of the photograph as "unnerving" (172) illustrate the discomfort and estrangement stemming from such misrepresentations. These responses expose the unease and disconnection felt by those whose cultures are inaccurately portrayed.

Robin's insight, "photography . . . was also a kind of translation, and they had all come out the poorer for it" (172), succinctly captures the colonial effort to translate other cultures. This comparison between photography and translation aptly illustrates the process of cultural translation in the colonial project, a process that often distorts, simplifies, and diminishes the complexity and richness of non-Western cultures. Consequently, both the represented and representing cultures suffer losses, as the genuine spirit and depth of their interactions are obscured. Letty's decision to frame and display the photograph, disregarding the discomfort it causes others, further exposes a colonial indifference to the lived experiences and viewpoints of those depicted, highlighting the entrenched biases and power imbalances present in colonial narratives and cultural representations.

In another scene, the narrative delves into the lasting impact of colonial exploitation through an exchange where Victoire confronts Letty with a troubling reality. She states, "You think British manufacturers don't still profit from shackles and irons?" (354). This sheds light on how current economic practices are entwined with colonial histories. Victoire's rhetorical question reveals a profound moral disengagement in society, where individuals and institutions continue to reap benefits from practices rooted in oppression and suffering. This dialogue not only functions as a critique of economic systems that perpetuate colonial legacies but also underscores the nuances of historical accountability and the moral implications of profit derived from human suffering.

Moreover, the scene deepens its exploration of postcolonial themes when Victoire shares her experience with her supervisor, who suggested that she might have "special insight" (354) on the effectiveness of "chattel bars" on "Negroes" (354) due to her black identity. This request for Victoire to wear the shackles herself is emblematic of the dehumanization and racism aspects of the colonial ideologies. The supervisor's assumption that Victoire could provide "special insight"

is not only offensive but also highlights the objectification and commodification of marginalized bodies. Victoire's revelation about Babel's involvement in selling bars to slave traders shocks Letty and forces her to confront the uncomfortable truth about the institution she holds in high regard. This revelation challenges her preconceived notions and introduces her to the darker side of her privileged world.

In another profound exchange, Victoire underscores the exhausting fight against slavery, referencing the significant efforts of the Quakers in 1783 and Olaudah Equiano's memoir in 1789, to illustrate the extensive campaign required to make the British public acknowledge the horrors of slavery. She recounts, "The Quakers presented the first antislavery petition to Parliament in 1783," said Victoire. "Equiano published his memoir in 1789 . . . And even then, it took them decades to finally outlaw the trade" (356). This historical recounting situates the current conversation within a broader historical context of resistance against exploitation. Victoire's narrative suggests that while the manifestations of oppression may change, the challenge of rallying public support to combat such injustices remains daunting.

The dialogue between Letty and Victoire further explores the theme of public awareness and its potential to incite change, revealing an examination of societal apathy. Victoire elucidates the monumental efforts required to merely draw attention to the inhumanity of slavery, saying, "the abolitionists were telling the British public stories of the cruelest, most awful tortures you can inflict on a fellow human. Because the mere fact that Black people were denied their freedom was not enough. They needed to see how grotesque it was. And even then, it took them decades to finally outlaw the trade" (356). This reflection leads into a broader discussion where Victoire and Ramy argue that "the public merely want[s] all the conveniences of modern life without the guilt of knowing how those conveniences [are] procured" (462). This discussion underscores the theme

that societal apathy and self-interest can perpetuate injustices. Victoire argues that similar apathy and self-interest are likely to undermine efforts to address contemporary injustices, such as those faced by her cohort. This exchange critiques the continued societal indifference towards structural issues, especially when addressing them risks the convenience and comfort of the privileged.

The dialogue also mirrors the significant gap between those who are shielded from the world's injustices by their privilege and those who are forced to face them head-on. Victoire's reference to the historical struggle against slavery juxtaposed with their present debate about trade rights and opium addiction sheds light on the complexities of effecting societal change. This interaction not only emphasizes the challenges of conveying harsh realities to the privileged personified by Letty but also questions the efficacy of awareness in the face of entrenched self-interest, suggesting that the battle against injustice is as much about overcoming societal apathy as it is about confronting the injustices themselves.

At the core of this dialogue is the assertion that Victoire, along with her peers, are entrapped in a modern form of slavery—*intellectual slavery*—that, while distinct in manifestation from the historical chattel one, is equally exploitative. This intellectual slavery represents a contemporary iteration of subjugation, where the exploitation of intellectual and cultural resources continues to perpetuate economic disparities and contributes to a *brain drain* that leaves native communities in a state of impoverishment. By drawing parallels between past and present modes of subjugation, the narrative argues that fundamental aspects of slavery, such as exploitation and dehumanization, persist under different disguises. This analysis challenges the idea that slavery is just a chapter from a history textbook, showing the detrimental effects of continued intellectual and cultural exploitation on indigenous communities. It stresses the urgency of redefining the concepts of freedom and slavery in the context of the modern world.

Kuang's portrayal of Letty—"Still, she'd helped them, protected them, and kept their secrets. She loved them. She would have killed for them. And she tried not to believe the worst things about them, the things her upbringing would have had her think. They were not savages. They were not lesser, not soft-minded ingrates. They were only – sadly, dreadfully – misguided" (438-9)—lays bare the paradox of Letty's self-perception as an ally against the backdrop of her ingrained prejudices. This narrative moment critically examines the unconscious biases that linger beneath the surface of well-intentioned allyship. Letty's struggle to reconcile her actions with her inherited worldview illuminates the pervasive influence of colonial ideology, suggesting that the journey to overcome internalized racism involves a profound and often painful confrontation with one's own complicity in systemic oppression.

Kuang further complicates this exploration of allyship and privilege through Letty's reaction to the radical measures proposed by her friends: "Of course she did not support this war. Of course she was against all kinds of prejudice and exploitation . . . But then they were talking about blackmail. About kidnapping, rioting, blowing up a shipyard. This was vindictive, violent, awful. And she couldn't bear it" (439). Letty's horror at these suggestions exposes a deeper questioning regarding the ethics of resistance. Her inclination towards "peaceful, respectable, civilized" (439) protest displays a fundamental misconception of the nature and immediacy of the struggle against injustice. While this dichotomy highlights a critical divide in postcolonial discourse between the rhetoric of nonviolence and the reality of oppressed communities' fight for liberation, *Babel* does not advocate for one form of resistance over the other. Instead, it urges an understanding of the necessity of resisting, presenting characters that illuminate why some may choose violent actions and others opt for more peaceful approaches. Letty's inability to understand and unease with taking direct action highlights the privilege that

comes with being able to choose the methods of resistance. This nuanced portrayal exposes her lack of empathy and comprehension for the desperation that fuels others to resort to violent resistance.

The narrative's emphasis on Letty's character development offers a critique of the limitations of privilege and the necessity of a deeper moral awakening. Letty, as a symbol of those who benefit from the status quo, embodies the challenges involved in transforming sympathy into genuine solidarity. The distance between her viewpoint and that of her friends—who have firsthand lived experiences of oppression—mirrors the chasm between recognizing injustice on an intellectual level and the lived reality of those combating it. This disparity emphasizes the need to move beyond superficial allyship towards a more involved and self-critical approach to advocacy. Notably, *Babel* does not merely critique but also showcases models for genuine allyship. For instance, Ramy, who supports Victoire in the face of racism—a discussion to be elaborated on later in this section—demonstrates a form of solidarity that is impactful. The text, thus, challenges readers to contemplate their own positions within this matrix of power and privilege, encouraging a commitment to a continuous process of self-examination and action.

Another exchange between Victoire and Letty in the narrative serves as a profound critique of the complexities surrounding interpersonal relationships within the context of systemic racism and privilege. In a particularly revealing conversation, Victoire confronts Letty about her unawareness and apathy, stating, “You didn’t care,” Victoire continued. “Letty, you don’t even care that our landlady doesn’t let me use the indoor bathroom—” “What? That’s ridiculous, I would have noticed—” “No,” said Victoire. “You didn’t. You never did, Letty, and that’s the point And we’re asking you now to finally, please, *hear* what we’re trying to tell you. Please believe us” (355). This moment transcends the immediate personal failure of Letty to acknowledge the racial

discrimination Victoire faces, embodying a broader ethical examination of allyship, privilege, and the unseen violence of negligence. Victoire's lived reality of being denied basic amenities is not merely an isolated act of discrimination but symbolizes the systemic nature of racism that is often rendered invisible to those who do not directly experience it. Letty's astonishment and refusal highlight her lack of awareness and compassion which defines most relationships across divides of privilege and oppression. This incident exemplifies a broader social inclination to belittle or outright deny systematic inequality, thereby enabling the continuation of these structures.

Moreover, this encounter catalyzes a deeper contemplation on the need of individuals in postcolonial societies to engage actively and dismantle the enduring effects of colonialism and racism that continue to shape present-day dynamics. Letty's defensive stance reflects a broader societal reluctance to recognize and admit one's complicity in systems of oppression. The dialogue between Victoire and Letty calls into question the efficacy of professed love and solidarity that fails to translate into meaningful action or understanding. It critiques the superficiality of allyship that does not confront its own blindness and the comfort derived from systemic privilege. The narrative thus pushes the reader towards a more introspective consideration of their positionality within networks of power and privilege, urging a shift from passive bystander to active participant in the struggle against injustice.

Babel also critiques the notion of white victimhood, represented by Letty's ploy to cast herself as a victim despite her privileged position within a colonial power structure. Moreover, it critiques the use of victimhood discourse by powerful in-groups as it deflects attention away from pressing systemic oppression faced by marginalized populations. Such actions bolster the existing state of inequity and obscure the privilege, representation, and power imbalances that underpin

societal structures. The novel invites readers to critically re-evaluate narratives in which the unease of the privileged is prioritized over the lived experiences of the oppressed. It compels readers to reflect on how their perspective may be formed by and potentially contribute to sustaining these practices.

Through the personal relationship of Victoire and Letty, Kuang skillfully examines the intersections of race, privilege, and the moral imperatives of postcolonial identity, challenging both characters and readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of their complicity and to aspire towards a more sincere form of empathy and solidarity. Through Letty's character, the novel explores the complexities of love and loyalty when entwined with unexamined privilege, urging a deeper introspection on the part of the reader to recognize and confront the often-unseen forces of inequality and injustice.

Another instance that illuminates another aspect of Victoire's diasporic persona is her interaction with Colin during a University College ball: "Without looking at her, Colin held his wineglass out in front of Victoire's face. 'Get rid of this and get me a burgundy, will you?'" (241). This encounter provides an exploration of racial stereotyping, colonial mindset, and resistance. The encounter sheds light on the challenges that individuals from colonized backgrounds experience while navigating spaces dominated by a colonial mentality. Colin's dismissive and condescending attitude towards Victoire, mistaking her for a server based on her racial background, reveals the deeply ingrained racial prejudices prevalent in (post)colonial societies. His remark, "They all look the same to me" (241), showcases a dehumanizing attitude that reduces individuals from minority or colonized backgrounds to mere stereotypes, erasing their individuality and agency. Moreover, Colin's drunken state serves as a metaphor for the distorted perceptions that often underpin such racist ideologies.

Victoire's response, "Get your own" (241), becomes a means of reclaiming agency and dignity in the face of racial prejudice. Victoire's subsequent refusal to comply with Colin's demand and her assertion of her role as a student symbolizes a significant act of defiance and self-determination. Her restraint could be interpreted as a form of dignified resistance, refusing to be provoked or degraded by the ignorance of the oppressor. Victoire's patient and measured response to Colin's offensive conduct, however, prompts questions regarding what might constitute an appropriate and effective response for those from marginalized backgrounds when confronted with racism.

Ramy's support in confirming Victoire's identity as a student further enriches the narrative and emphasizes the critical role of allyship in deconstructing racial and class biases. Through his gesture of solidarity, Ramy aligns himself with Victoire, presenting a counter-narrative to challenge the dominant discourse of racial discrimination. This alignment resonates with Homi Bhabha's observations on the emergence of "Minoritarian affiliations or solidarities [that] arise in response to the failures and limits of democratic representation, creating new modes of agency, new strategies of recognition, new forms of political and symbolic representation" (xvii-xviii). Through Victoire's and Ramy's actions, the narrative invites a deeper contemplation of the forms of solidarity and resistance necessary to dismantle the enduring legacies of racial and colonial domination. Therefore, Ramy's supportive stance becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative, showcasing the power of allyship as a meaningful tool in combating racism.

The encounter between Victoire and Colin, deepened by these layers of nuanced exchanges and acts of defiance, echoes the broader discourse on racism as "a cognitive and social phenomenon that has the social function of protecting the interests of the in-group. Thus conceptualized, Racism becomes pivotal in maintaining the power relationships and structures that

historical or other forces might have emplaced in a society” (Talbot, Atkinson & Atkinson 37). This perspective illuminates the complex intertwining of colonialism and racism within society’s structure, aimed at upholding established hierarchies and power relations. The incident at the ball, therefore, transcends its immediate context to offer a commentary of the continuous struggle against the legacies of colonialism, challenging us to contemplate with the complex interplay of language, power, and identity in the postcolonial world.

Another episode that exposes the coloniocalapist self-serving mentality, which prioritizes personal gain over collective well-being, unfolds when Victoire develops a “Kreyòl-French match-pair” (235). Despite its effectiveness, Leblanc dismisses its inclusion, citing its irrelevance to non-Kreyòl speakers. When Victoire highlights its utility for people in Haiti, she is met with laughter from Leblanc. This reaction not only underscores a dismissive attitude towards non-Western priorities but also reflects a broader issue. Spivak articulates this dynamic, stating, “the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow, a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic ‘under erasure,’ to see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text” (24). Leblanc’s response, therefore, extends beyond a personal insult to signify a systemic refusal to value the economic and social potential of inclusive knowledge sharing. This mirrors Nandy’s critique that “Colonialism is the name of a political economy which ensures a one-way flow of benefits, the subjects being the perpetual losers in a zero-sum game and the rulers the beneficiaries” (16). Thus, Leblanc’s reaction exemplifies not just unethical knowledge hoarding but a broader refusal to acknowledge the rights of the oppressed to access knowledge that could empower their economic development, perpetuating the economic disparities Spivak criticizes and reinforcing a coloniocalapist framework that privileges one-way flow of benefits from colonized to colonizer.

This mentality transcends geographical and temporal boundaries, infiltrating both domestic and international spheres, and manifests itself in various forms of exploitation and inequality. For example, the depiction of London in *Babel* as a city “growing fat on its spoils while still somehow starved” (20) serves as an important critique of the exploitative mechanisms of colonialism. These mechanisms are deliberately designed to place the working class of colonizing nations in a lower stratum and to extract resources from colonized territories. The examination shows that the economic and political structures of colonial powers are intentionally designed to continue exploitation domestically, mirroring the abuses perpetrated in the colonies. Such duality highlights the fundamental inequalities embedded in colonial economies, predicated on the relentless appropriation of resources and labor from the subjugated, while systematically disregarding the welfare of affected communities, both domestically and abroad. This strategic manipulation of economic and political power is sustained through the hoarding of knowledge, ensuring that the mechanisms of control and exploitation remain exclusively in the hands of the colonizing capitalist entities, further entrenching the disparities between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Babel's setting, where knowledge is both the currency and the weapon of the powerful, paints a vivid picture of the consequences stemming from its hoarding and monopolization. As the story advances, it scrutinizes the hypocrisy of colonial education systems. These systems, while ostensibly promoting the free exchange of knowledge, construct, in reality, barriers to maintaining hegemony and control. This duality highlights a critical tension between the ideals of education and the practices that contradict them, revealing a landscape where power dynamics dictate the flow of knowledge.

Robin's incisive interrogation reveals the core of colonial duplicity, questioning the very foundations of a system that claims to value freedom yet closely guards its reservoirs of

knowledge. Robin's shrewd inquiry, "Because if language is free, if knowledge is free, then why are all the Grammaticas under lock and key in the tower? Why don't we ever host foreign scholars, or send scholars to help open translation centres elsewhere in the world?" (117), exposes the exclusivity and elitism entrenched within colonial education. This moment in the narrative is pivotal, as it not only challenges the established order but also highlights extensive ramifications of such control—specifically, the colonization of knowledge, language, and culture. By deploying knowledge as a tool of power, colonial entities are able to extend their sway far beyond the confines of physical territories, encroaching upon the minds and identities of those they aim to subjugate. This strategy not only perpetuates inequalities but also stifles the global exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas.

As the novel progresses, it delves into the internal dynamics of academic institutions, highlighting how academic territoriality can lead to the downfall of entire nations. Through Robin's interactions with Professors Chakravarti and Craft, the absurdity and profound impact of academic elitism are brought to the forefront. Robin's remark, "Are you telling me this country's going to fall because of academic territoriality?" (488), paired with Craft's sarcastic response and Chakravarti's dismissive attitude towards Cambridge, serves to underscore the insularity and self-importance that pervade elite academic circles. This discussion not only highlights the trivial yet significant rivalries within academia but also points to the broader socio-political divisions these competitions represent. The potential for such internal conflicts to have far-reaching consequences outside the institutions' walls is a testament to the power and influence of knowledge in shaping and sustaining the very fabric of societies.

A pivotal scene occurs as Professor Chakravarti reveals the underlying strategy of Babel's design, aimed at ensuring the city's reliance on the Institute. Chakravarti explains, "This is how

Babel was designed to work . . . We made the city as reliant on the Institute as possible. We designed bars to last for only several weeks instead of months, because maintenance appointments bring in money. This is the cost of inflating prices and artificially creating demand. It all works beautifully, until it doesn't" (469). This disclosure highlights the Institute's intentional creation of products with a limited lifespan to ensure a constant stream of revenue through maintenance. The Institute's strategy of planned obsolescence², a hallmark of capitalist systems, manipulates market demand and prices for profit maximization. This scene illustrates the exploitative nature of such systems, where the bourgeoisie, represented by the Institute, benefits at the expense of the broader community's well-being.

Babel further explores themes of exploitation within capitalist systems, offering a critique of the underlying inconsistencies and a preview of the unsustainable nature of these structures. A significant observation in the novel reads, "How slender, how fragile, the foundations of an empire. Take away the centre, and what's left? A gasping periphery, baseless, powerless, cut down at the roots" (469). Victoire makes this statement during a scene where the removal of several resonance rods from Babel's eighth floor leads to disastrous consequences, crippling the city. This incident demonstrates the empire's vulnerability and reliance on Babel. Victoire's observation is an illuminating commentary on the fragility of seemingly invincible systems when their core is destabilized. This remark suggests the instability and potential collapse of such a coloniocapitalist system that, while seemingly efficient, is fundamentally flawed.

² The practice or policy of curtailing the life of manufactured products (as by using non-durable materials, frequently changing design, terminating the supply of spare parts, etc.), so as to induce consumers to replace them regularly ("Planned Obsolescence, *N.*").

In another scene, Robin confronts the artificial nature of the expenses imposed by the Institute. Reflecting on the choleric plague's impact on London's poor and the high cost of silverwork, Robin pointedly asks: "Then the expense is entirely invented?" (160), Professor Playfair, amused by the situation, replies: "'Oh, yes.' Professor Playfair seemed to find this all very funny. 'We hold the secrets, and we can set whatever terms we like. That's the beauty of being cleverer than everyone else'" (160). This exchange sheds light on the bourgeoisie's exploitation of knowledge and control over resources to maintain and enhance their power. The artificial inflation of expenses, despite the existence of solutions, highlights the moral failings of a system that values profit over human lives. This emphasizes the need for a radical societal transformation to prioritize human needs and equitable resource distribution.

One of the most employed tactics used by the coloniocal capitalist elite to maintain their power structure is division and manipulation. Victoire and Robin, despite suffering under similar oppressive conditions as the strikers and the poor English, initially harbor hostility towards one another, influenced by misleading preconceptions spread by the colonial propaganda. This dynamic is vividly portrayed in a scene where they realize during an interaction with Abel, a character who previously showed aggression toward them. Abel presents a pivotal moment of clarity, saying, "The silver industrial revolution, of course' . . . 'Turns out we're on the same side" (480). Victoire and Robin, reflecting on their past views, recognize they had been deceived by Professor Lovell's negative portrayal of the strikers. Abel's revelation, "It was never about the silver . . . It was about the wage-cutting. The shoddy work . . . We were suffering. And we only wanted to make you see it" (481), serves as a turning point, uniting them in their common struggle against exploitation.

Babel further sheds light on how nationalistic and imperial ideologies serve as distractions from domestic inequalities. These ideologies idealize empire and colonial conquests, concealing the exploitation within both the colonizing nations and the distant colonies. This strategy of diversion is central to the story, where imperialist rhetoric justifies both the exploitation of foreign lands and the deepening of social and economic divides at home. The characters' eventual understanding of each other and the oppressive systems they face leads to an uprising, realizing Marx's prediction of class struggle and the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

As Victoire navigates these British spaces marked by persistent violence, she embarks on a journey of introspection and cultural reclamation, moving from internalizing narratives of inferiority to celebrating her Haitian heritage. This journey is emblematic of the process described by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, where he articulates the importance of cultural resistance and stresses that "One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance [is] to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land" (226). This concept becomes central to Victoire's transformation as she navigates the violence of British spaces and reevaluates her perception of Haiti through her involvement with the Hermes Society. Through her interactions within this society, particularly with Anthony, Victoire celebrates her heritage and engages in an authentic exploration of her culture.

Initially, Victoire's understanding of Haitian history is clouded by colonial narratives, perceiving it through a lens of turmoil and struggle. Kuang describes her perception as filled with "curses in the night; of a magnificent palace named Sans Souci, home to the first Black king in the New World; of men with guns; of vague political disagreements she does not understand that, somehow, uprooted her life and sent her across the Atlantic" (538). This view is reinforced by her mother's words, "We are lucky . . . that we survived it" (538), underscoring a narrative of Haiti as

a place of hardship. However, Victoire's encounter with Anthony within the Hermes Society becomes a turning point, offering her a bridge to a more nuanced understanding of her cultural heritage and challenging the colonial narrative that painted Haiti solely through the lens of conflict.

Victoire's evolving perception embodies the spirit of reclamation and identification emphasized by Said, as she begins to challenge the distortions imposed by colonialism. Said cites Fanon's argument that "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (qtd. in *Culture* 237). This distortion is particularly apparent in the colonial portrayal of the Haitian Revolution, which often downplayed its importance, misrepresented its causes and outcomes, and placed an excessive emphasis on the violence without adequate consideration of its context or broader implications. This portrayal starkly contrasts with the reality of the Revolution, which stands as a historic milestone: it was the first and remains the only successful rebellion by enslaved individuals that led to the establishment of a free, sovereign nation led by people of African descent. Victoire's journey in the narrative allows her to peel back layers of misrepresentation, eventually aligning with a more authentic understanding of the Revolution, recognizing it as a pivotal moment in the struggle against colonial oppression.

Another layer of the oppression faced by Victoire is her gender, which adds to her struggle against colonial and racial injustices. Her critique of the academic setting as ostensibly liberal, yet fundamentally discriminatory, underscores the gendered aspect of oppression. She articulates, "I don't think you two quite understand how hard it is to be a woman here," said Victoire. "They're liberal on paper, certainly. But they think so very little of us . . . Every weakness we display is a testament to the worst theories about us, which is that we're fragile, we're hysterical, and we're

too naturally weak-minded to handle the kind of work we're set to do" (151). This remark exposes the hypocrisy of liberalism in societies that claim to be progressive, where women continue to face discrimination and stereotyping despite alleged acknowledgment of their rights. This sentiment resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the subaltern, in which she notes, "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected" (28). Spivak's assertion highlights that women, especially those from colonized backgrounds, face compounded marginalization—not only silenced by the colonial narrative but also obscured by ideological constructions of gender that maintain male dominance.

The conclusion of Victoire's arc in the novel invites a deeper reflection on her decision to forge her own path, distinct from the tragic fates of her peers, Robin and Ramy. Her choice to carry on underscores a pivotal moment of self-determination and resistance against the narratives imposed upon her. Victoire's decision, which is "refusing to look back" (537) and focusing on the future, is not merely an act of survival; it is a profound assertion of her agency to write her own narrative in the face of systemic oppression.

Victoire's choice embodies a rejection of the colonial gaze that seeks to define her existence either as a tragic figure or a noble sufferer. Instead, she embodies the postcolonial struggle for self-definition, echoing Said's observation that "post-colonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future" (*Culture* 31). Her determination to look forward reflects a nuanced understanding of post-colonial resilience, where the past is a foundation, but not a limitation, for future endeavors. Victoire's journey, thus, becomes a powerful commentary on the necessity of reclaiming one's history and identity as tools for empowerment and liberation:

“We have to die to get their pity,” said Victoire. “We have to die for them to find us noble. Our deaths are thus great acts of rebellion, a wretched lament that highlights their inhumanity. Our deaths become their battle cry. But I don’t want to die, Robin.” Her throat hitched. “I don’t want to die. I don’t want to be their Imoinda, their Oroonoko. their tragic, lovely lacquer figure. I want to live.” (525)

In weaving together these strands of postcolonial thought, gender critique, and the exploration of identity, Kuang crafts a narrative that transcends the personal to touch on the collective human experience. Victoire’s story arc, culminating in her rejection of imposed narratives and her embrace of a future crafted on her own terms, provides a closure to her personal journey and serves as a call to action. It encourages readers to critically examine, resist, and redefine the oppressive narratives that attempt to define us. Kuang’s integration of postcolonial, creative, and philosophical insights offers a rich analysis that champions the power of reclaiming one’s history and identity in the face of systemic oppression.

Chapter 3 - Macaulay's Legacy: Decoding Ramy's Arc

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'm becoming just that class of person Macaulay hoped to create. (Kuang 283-4)

In contrast to the diasporic account of Victoire, marked by her uprooting from Haiti and moving to France with her mother, and Robin's experience, shaped by British endeavors of economic hegemony and involvement in opium wars with China, the first thirteen years of Ramy's life—up until his enrollment in Babel—unfolds within the direct sphere of the British colonial rule in India. His proximity to colonial dominance offers a unique lens through which the intricate dynamics shaping his reality can be examined. His narrative arc, rich in depth, not only encapsulates the paradoxes and complexities within the colonial experience but also brings to light the varied challenges faced by those under direct colonial rule. For instance, his educational journey, influenced by the imperialist ideals of Thomas Macaulay, illustrates the profound impact of colonialism on personal and collective identities. Standing out among his peers, Ramy's journey exemplifies the nuanced and often painful realities of life under direct colonial control.

Ramy's experiences go beyond mere personal struggle; they mirror the broader societal struggles against a backdrop of a world (re)shaped by colonial legacies. His narrative highlights how colonial projects have deeply affected aspects of life, such as education, resistance, and identity formation. In particular, Ramy's narrative explores the profound influence of an education dominated by colonial ideologies, forcing him to wrestle with notions of mimicry and hybridity. These themes represent his struggle to navigate a world where he must constantly perform and

renegotiate his sense of self. This section aims to analyze Ramy's narrative arc, influenced by the imperialist philosophy advocated by Thomas Macaulay, to his embodiment of mimicry, hybridity, and the performance of identity. It will also examine how these factors are interconnected to construct a character whose experience reflects the broader struggles of the colonized subject.

Ramy's journey in India is marked by a series of transformative experiences as a colonial subject. His experience resonates with Césaire's characterization of colonialism: "I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out" (43). One of the key historical events that significantly shaped Ramy's character is the East India Company's implementation of the land revenue system known as *The Permanent Settlement*. In this context, Ramy's family represents one of the numerous Indian Muslim families who suffered land dispossession due to the inequities in this colonial economic policy, which resulted in significant social and property disruptions. The Mirza family's fortunes underwent a profound transformation, shifting them from landowners with a degree of autonomy to becoming mere servants under the authority of Sir Horace.

Living under colonization presents a complex web of contradictions, marked by illogical and dehumanizing conditions for the colonized population. One fundamental aspect of colonial rule is the usurpation of indigenous land by the colonizers, often concealed beneath various pretexts and appeals to various sources of authority like economic interests or religious justifications. The Indian experience serves as a powerful example, where the initial presence of the British East India Company, ostensibly for economic trade, ultimately transformed into full-fledged colonization. What was initially portrayed as an endeavor for cooperation gradually evolved into occupation. As noted by Clougherty in his article "Voiceless Outsiders:

Count Dracula as Bram Stoker,” the symbolic significance of land and its connection to cultural identity cannot be separated. In his analysis to the case of Ireland, for example, he states:

money is the root of evil and land the basis of good; land overpowered by money equates symbolically with good conquered by evil . . . the English . . . inability to comprehend the culture in general and the value that it attaches to soil in particular [led to a violent clash of worldviews because] . . . An industrial society like Britain would not comprehend the value that an Irish agrarian society put on soil. (150)

Colonization, thus, often driven by capitalist motives, operates as an ideology cloaked in economic pursuits. Colonizers refrain from openly articulating their end goals, knowing it would provoke resistance. Instead, they adopt a tactic of promising economic prosperity, methodically executed over time to deflect blame onto the colonized. In the case of India, the loss of land was unjustly attributed to the colonized population’s alleged incompetence, framed as laziness and superstition, rather than acknowledging the true culprits—unjust economic conditions and the divisive *divide and rule* policy that empowered corrupted British-backed zamindars over patriotic leaders. This victim blaming mentality resonates throughout the novel, for example, “Professor Lovell scoffed. ‘Never. I look at those men, and I think of the vast differences between us. I am where I am because I believe in knowledge and scientific progress, and I have used them to my advantage. They are where they are because they have stubbornly refused to move forward with the future. Men like that don’t scare me. Men like that make me laugh’” (210). In summary, while colonizers relentlessly chase capitalist gains, they often do so at the expense of the cultural and economic well-being of the colonized.

One of the contradictions that Ramy had to confront is the claim that the United Kingdom had abolished slavery. In one of the novel's footnotes, Kuang boldly asserts that the widely accepted notion of the abolition of slavery is, in reality,

a great lie, and one that white Britons are happy to believe . . . slavery continued in India under the East India Company for a long time after. Indeed, slavery in India was specifically exempt from the Slave Emancipation Act of 1833. Despite early abolitionists' belief that India under the EIC was a country of free labour, the EIC was complicit in, directly profited from, and in many cases encouraged a range of types of bondage, including forced plantation labour, domestic labour, and indentured servitude. The refusal to call such practices slavery simply because they did not match precisely the transatlantic plantation model of slavery was a profound act of semantic blindness. (354)

This footnote highlights the contradictions and cognitive dissonance often present in the attitudes and actions of individuals and institutions during eras of colonialism and slavery, where people could advocate for the abolition of slavery in one context while actively participating in or benefiting from it in another. Within the novel, Sir Horace encapsulates this sentiment, advocating for respect for the native languages while having Ramy's family as servants. However, this respect should not be misunderstood as arising from the goodness of his heart; instead, it emerges from pragmatic motives, as he holds the distinction of being the first endowed chair in Sanskrit in Oxford's history. Further, domestic labor is itself one of the categories Kuang identifies as a continuing form of slavery. Kuang's narrative thus underscores the intricate interplay of contradictory attitudes and actions exhibited by individuals during eras of colonialism, wherein

advocacy for abolition and basic human rights could coexist with practices that perpetuated oppression.

The novel's narrative exhibits a profound ability to unveil the strategic manipulation of language within the framework of colonialism, emphasizing the notion that despite altering the signifiers—ranging from Indentured Servants to Bonded Laborers, Serfs, Coolies, Household Servants, Peons, or Slaves—the signified concept of territorial conquest and the ruthless exploitation of both resources and populations remains consistent. This semantic manipulation serves as a deliberate tactic employed by colonizers to obscure the oppressiveness of the system, employing varying terminology that aligns with the prevailing humanitarian lexicon of the time. This linguistic maneuvering aims to pacify the oppressed and inhibit any potential alliance toward liberation or self-determination.

The novel also delves into the intricacies of colonial manipulation through education during a visit to Wilson's residence. Here, a conversation unfolds, during which one of his guests, Mr. Trevelyan, brings up the ongoing discourse surrounding the debate between Orientalist and Anglicist education policies. This debate, rooted in the divergent ideologies of the Orientalists and the Anglicists, reflects a larger, more insidious agenda of cultural imperialism as espoused by figures like the fictional character of Mr. Trevelyan and the actual English politician Lord Thomas Macaulay. Macaulay, a pivotal figure in shaping British educational policy in India, infamously declared, "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 taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 430). This statement underscores the essence of the Anglicist perspective, aiming to cultivate a generation of Indians who are disconnected from their roots, molded into a form more useful to the colonial rulers.

The scene illustrates this colonial arrogance and the underlying patronization. Mr. Trevelyan's request for Ramy to count in various languages, ostensibly a benign display of linguistic prowess, is in reality a subtle assertion of dominance. It is a test, a demonstration of the *success* of their anglicizing mission marked by his remark "I'm proving a point" (270), parading Ramy's abilities as a validation of their cultural imperialism. Ramy's subsequent wait for a reward for his performance is symbolic of the larger transactional nature of the colonial relationship—one where cultural display and assimilation are rewarded, albeit superficially. This colonial arrogance is further highlighted in the exchange between Mr. Trevelyan and Mr. Mirza, which serves to reinforce the scene's critique of colonial attitudes. Trevelyan's interaction with Mr. Mirza not only belittles Mirza's role but also reduces him to a mere example of an unfulfilled potential under the prevailing educational system. This interaction is not just a conversation; it is a microcosm of the larger colonial project, where indigenous knowledge and positions are systematically devalued.

In contrast, Sir Horace Wilson, representing the Orientalist faction, appears to advocate for another approach to education, one that values Sanskrit and Arabic. The Orientalists, however, despite their seemingly benevolent stance, are entangled in their own form of cultural hegemony, where the preservation of indigenous languages is not necessarily about empowerment, but rather about maintaining another form of colonial control. Through this scene, Kuang masterfully exposes the intricate battle not simply between oppressor and oppressed but between two competing forms of colonization, each with its unique brand of cultural and epistemic dominance. This revelation paves the way for understanding decolonization not just as the cessation of foreign physical control but as the beginning of reclaiming one's voice, history, and autonomy—an essential step towards dismantling the legacies of both forms of colonization and fostering a truly decolonized identity and society.

This conversation takes yet another unsettling turn when Mr. Trevelyan directs his attention toward Ramy's father, initiating a disquieting exchange: "'Come now, Mr. Mirza,' said Mr. Trevelyan. 'You can't claim that you wanted to be a footman.' Mr. Mirza gave a nervous chuckle. 'It's a great honour to serve Sir Horace Wilson.' 'Oh, come off it – no need to be polite, we all know how he farts' . . . Mr Mirza nodded and smiled. 'Yes. That's right, Mr Trevelyan, sir. Of course, I'd rather be in your position'" (271). This pivotal moment in Ramy's early development epitomizes the experiences of individuals who initially idealize and adopt the colonial education and value systems, finding it alluring and "fun" (271), while remaining oblivious to the concealed dehumanization inherent within such institutions and ideologies. Ramy's disillusionment occurs when he witnesses the humiliation of his own father at the hands of Mr. Trevelyan, serving as an illustration of the brutality underlying such epiphanies: "Ramy saw the most peculiar expression then on his father's face. [His father] looked as if he were holding something in, as if he'd swallowed a very bitter seed but was unable to spit it out. Suddenly this game did not seem such fun. He felt nervous now for showing off, but couldn't quite put his finger on why" (271). This vivid portrayal captures the moment of Ramy's awakening to the harsh realities of colonial dominance and the personal costs it entails, marking a critical turn in his journey towards resistance.

Despite the colonizers' acknowledgment of the talents within indigenous families, they attribute their circumstances to the capriciousness of fortune. Mr. Trevelyan's assertion that Mr. Mirza "belonged to a wealthier merchant class. But so fortunes rise and fall. Despite his natural talents, Mr. Mirza here can attain no better than a posting as a domestic servant" (271) conveniently absolves the British from any responsibility for India's predicament. His provocative language underscores the power dynamics at play, effectively silencing the colonized and denying them any

platform to express their genuine sentiments and thoughts. As long as such an imbalance persists, true freedom remains an elusive aspiration for the colonized.

This cycle of physical, psychological, and epistemic violence becomes Ramy's everyday reality, and its intensity grows as he engages with the colonial world of *Babel*. One pivotal moment in the novel occurs during an exchange between Ramy and Professor Harding. Ramy proposes to work on "a translation of Ibn Khaldun's manuscripts" (190), but Harding dismisses his aspirations, asserting that "the French Orientalists were already working on that, and that it was unlikely [he] could get Paris to lend them to [Ramy]" (190). This incident epitomizes the colonial gatekeeping of knowledge, where the colonizer holds the key to intellectual resources and dispenses it at his discretion. Harding's stance not only undermines Ramy's academic agency but also symbolizes the broader colonial imposition that restricts access to knowledge and cultural heritage, ensuring that the power to define, interpret, and disseminate historical narratives remains firmly in the hands of the colonizer.

The exchange between Ramy and Professor Harding aligns with Said's observation that Orientalism hinges on a "flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7). Translation is not a neutral act in this context but a means of exerting control over the *Other*. This scene symbolizes the West's attempt to *own*, *construct*, and *interpret* Oriental knowledge, often from positions of perceived superiority, frequently devoid of direct experience or meaningful engagement with the cultures under scrutiny. Professor Harding suggests that Ramy works on editing Schlegel instead. Frustrated, Ramy points out to his cohort that Schlegel wrote *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* without ever having been to India, crafting a narrative from a distance: "This was only the beginning of the multiple flaws of Schlegel's work. Islam he

considered a ‘dead empty Theism’. He also assumed that Egyptians were descended from Indians, and argued Chinese and Hebrew were inferior to German and Sanskrit because they lacked inflection” (191). Schlegel’s attitude underscores the self-aggrandizement and arrogance of Orientalist scholarship. Not only did he write about subjects he had never experienced firsthand, but his views on various cultures and languages were also entrenched in ignorance and Eurocentrism.

Ramy’s exchange with Harding underscores the profound mismatch between the authentic lived experiences of a culture and the distorted representations offered by outsiders, creating a caricature of what each perceives about the other, rather than reflecting the reality of things. This exchange lays bare the absurdity of having an Indian scholar tasked with editing a Western scholar’s work on his own country. In this exchange, Ramy is compelled to edit Schlegel’s work, despite Schlegel’s conspicuous absence from India and reliance on distant Parisian accounts. The reference to Schlegel’s work on India raises questions about the authenticity and legitimacy of Eurocentric scholarship. Schlegel, an outsider to Indian culture, writes about it from the confines of Paris, highlighting the disconnect between the scholar and the subject of study. This underscores the audacity of Eurocentric scholars who believe they can speak authoritatively about cultures they do not fully understand. This situation parallels Macaulay’s admission of ignorance, as he declares, “I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value” (Macaulay). Despite occupying influential roles, Schlegel and Macaulay perpetuate stereotypes and oppressive policies without *substantial knowledge*. Their disconnect and presumptuous authority highlight that the colonization agenda often precedes genuine authenticity and accuracy, a troubling aspect in an era when avenues for understanding the *Other* were primarily confined to sources like Schlegel and Macaulay.

Ramy's subsequent proposition to translate the Arabic essays of Omar ibn Said instead of working on the manuscripts of Ibn Khaldun signifies his commitment to preserving the cultural heritage tied to the experiences and identities of colonized subjects, especially within the context of slavery. Within this context, Professor Harding's second rejection of Ramy's proposal carries profound implications, as it rests on the unsubstantiated claim that England's abolition of slavery renders such an undertaking unnecessary—an assertion already debunked in earlier sections. This act inadvertently exposes a worldview that dismisses ongoing struggles and narratives unfolding beyond the boundaries of Europe. This scene vividly showcases the systematic exclusion of non-European viewpoints and the intentional marginalization of narratives that challenge the colonial agenda. Moreover, Harding's steadfast refusal highlights that, within this Eurocentric framework, academic pursuits are only validated when they conform to the interests and agendas of the colonial powers. Edward Said's assertion that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5) finds powerful resonance in this act of imperialistic erasure.

This encounter resonates with Macaulay's famous "Minute on Indian Education," where he undervalues literary contributions in favor of promoting Western education and the English language among Indian subjects. Macaulay's assertion that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" and that "that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England" (Macaulay) resonate with the dismissive attitude towards Ramy's proposal. This refusal to support Ramy's endeavor reflects the power imbalance in colonial relationships. Harding, embodying the archetypal Western academic, exerts hegemonic influence over what is considered

scholarly valuable. This act epitomizes the broader colonial effort to shape and control the educational and cultural narratives of colonized societies, often leading to the suppression or distortion of indigenous knowledge and historical perspectives.

An intriguing dimension of Ramy's maneuver with Harding is his attempt to discuss slavery within an American context, rather than opting to address the East India Company's enslavement of Indians within his homeland. This strategic choice may stem from apprehensions regarding challenging British authorities, perhaps due to concerns for his position within the university or fear for the safety of his enslaved family members who remain under the dominion of British rule. This oppressive environment, characterized by threats and coercion, offers no sanctuary for Ramy to voice his authentic sentiments openly.

One of the defining characteristics of Ramy is his quick-wittedness, which takes on a striking dimension in the context of mimicry. He skillfully wields the same tools that are used to oppress him or are products of attempts at oppression. Ramy

thickened and thinned his accent depending on his audience. He learned all the fanciful notions the English held about his people, elaborated on them like an expert playwright, and spat them back out. He knew when to play a lascar, a houseboy, a prince. He learned when to flatter and when to engage in self-deprecation. He could have written a thesis on white pride, on white curiosity. He knew how to make himself an object of fascination while neutralizing himself as a threat. He fine-tuned the greatest of all tricks, which was to swindle an Englishman into looking at him with respect. (273)

Ramy's mimicry is not merely a survival tactic; it is a profound subversion of the power dynamics at play. In his mimicry, he strategically transforms himself into what the colonial society expects, effectively mirroring their prejudices and misconceptions. This act of mirroring, however, is not

mere compliance; it is an astute strategy that allows Ramy to navigate the complexities of colonial rule while retaining his inner identity. His mimicry serves as a potent weapon, blurring the lines between authenticity and performance. In doing so, Ramy challenges the oppressive system from within, exploiting its own tools to carve out a space for himself that, while conforming to the colonial expectations, simultaneously undermines their authority. In essence, Ramy's mimicry is a subtle act of resistance, a defiance that emerges from the shadows of mimicry itself, ultimately forcing the colonizers to view him with an unexpected respect.

Ramy's struggle transcends the boundaries of the classrooms, resonating throughout the academic landscape of the Babel institution. Within the institute's "hallowed halls" (439), a disheartening reality unfolds, as vividly portrayed by Kuang in one of her footnotes:

Babel scholars were there less as distinguished guests and more as zoo animals on display, expected to dance and perform for wealthy donors. Robin, Victoire, and Ramy were always treated as national representatives of the countries they appeared to hail from. Robin had to put up with excruciating small talk about Chinese botanical gardens and lacquerware; Ramy was expected to elaborate on the inner workings of the "Hindu race", whatever that meant; and Victoire, bizarrely, was always being asked for speculation advice in the Cape. (139)

The Babel scholars, including Robin, Victoire, and Ramy, find themselves in an unsettling position. Rather than being students, they are akin to zoo animals, put on display for the amusement of affluent benefactors. They are expected to perform, to dance to the tune of stereotypes, and to represent the countries they are perceived to come from.

In this context, Ramy faces the daunting task of elucidating the "inner workings of the "Hindu race" (139), an expectation that encapsulates the very essence of Orientalism and cultural

reductionism. It highlights the reduction of intricate, individual identities into monolithic, oversimplified stereotypes. The demand placed upon Ramy echoes the colonial mindset, where colonized individuals were not seen as unique beings with their own narratives but rather as uniform representations of their race or culture. The term “Hindu race” itself is a misnomer, conflating religion with race and revealing a superficial comprehension of the diversity and complexity within Indian society. Ramy’s discomfort in having to elucidate and embody this concept serves as a reminder of the burden placed upon individuals from colonized backgrounds to navigate and challenge these damaging narratives.

Moreover, in likening the scholars to “zoo animals on display” (139), Kuang employs a powerful metaphor that vividly illustrates the objectification and exoticization frequently experienced by individuals from colonized nations. It dehumanizes them, stripping away their individuality and casting them as mere curiosities meant for the entertainment and enlightenment of the Western gaze. This metaphor underscores the enduring perception of the *Other* as fundamentally distinct and inferior, a perspective deeply ingrained in colonial history and persisting in postcolonial interactions.

The phrase “whatever that meant” (139) demonstrates a self-awareness and critique of the superficial comprehension and misrepresentation of The Rest’s cultures by the West. It hints at the absurdity and inaccuracy of such expectations, challenging the audience to acknowledge the shallowness inherent in such stereotyping. In this scenario, Ramy becomes a victim of cultural reductionism, tasked with representing an entire race or culture. This reductionism falls under the umbrella of *Othering*, where Ramy is viewed not as an individual but as a representative of a homogenized and exoticized *Other*.

This scene also raises questions regarding the concept of national representation. Ramy, much like Robin and Victoire, is expected to be a spokesperson for an entire nation or culture. This oversimplification of identity disregards the diversity and complex nature of experiences within any given nation or culture. It underscores the perils of assuming that one individual can speak on behalf of an entire group or nation, perpetuating stereotypes and erasing individual agency. The danger of this reductionist view resonates with Edward Said's critique of the representation of the Orient. Said elucidates that "The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined" (63), highlighting how broad, homogenizing representations serve to confine and simplify complex cultures.

Ramy identifies reductionist viewpoints within his own age group, signaling a concerning continuity of colonial thought patterns among younger generations. Letty's questions to Ramy about his origins—"And you – Madras? Bombay?" (84)—superficially attempt to engage with India's diverse cultural landscape, but instead demonstrate a simplistic understanding. Ramy's reply to Letty, "Calcutta" (84), is not just an answer but a strategic move in a subtle confrontation over the simplification of his homeland's identity. By choosing not to directly challenge Letty's ignorance, yet delicately making her aware of it, Ramy assumes a sophisticated command of the dialogue. His approach subtly critiques the colonial tendency to simplify complex cultures into easily digestible stereotypes, presenting his response as a form of resistance against the diminishment of cultural intricacies and advocating for the recognition of Indian identity's rich diversity against her reductive views.

As Ramy interacts with Letty, his initial physical reaction—biting into a dry scone and taking a sip of tea—symbolizes a moment of composure. This act serves as a metaphorical shield, enabling him to politely engage with Letty's questions. While this pause may seem trivial on the

surface, it hints at an underlying discomfort, possibly stemming from the anticipation of ignorance or prejudice he is about to encounter. The dialogue further unfolds as Ramy's body language changes; the act of applying jam to his scone contrasts with his sarcastic response to Letty's mention of her father's military service in Calcutta: "Lovely . . . Could be he pointed a gun at my sisters once" (84). His remark acknowledges the historical reality of the British colonial presence, symbolized by Letty's father in Calcutta, while simultaneously challenging its legitimacy and morality. In doing so, Ramy's use of humor and passive aggression merges to form a potent tool for psychological resilience and ideological challenge. Moreover, Letty's casual mention of her father's military service in India emphasizes the normalization of colonial dominance by its beneficiaries and the disregard for the experiences and perspectives of the colonized. Ramy's juxtaposition of physical actions and verbal responses underscores his dual engagement: outwardly conforming to social norms while internally resisting the insensitivity demonstrated by Letty.

Ramy's emphatic buttering of his scone while expressing frustration at the conflation of Indian identity with Hinduism reveals his escalating annoyance through his body language. This act symbolizes a physical manifestation of his growing irritation, underlining the weight of his discomfort. He "was buttering his scone with great vim" (84), a direct observation from the narrative that vividly captures the vigor of his movements. His subsequent action of lifting the scone to his mouth marks the end of his argument and a subtle refusal to continue a conversation that misinterprets and simplifies his identity and culture. Ramy's adept use of dark humor and passive aggression acts as both a protective shield and a weapon, enabling him to confront colonial prejudices and affirm his identity subtly yet effectively.

As their conversation progresses, Letty's assertion of her understanding of India through a colonial lens, indicated by her reference to "Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a*

Hindoo Rajah” (128), exposes the colonial foundations of her knowledge. In claiming to have read “all sorts of essays” (128), Letty inadvertently highlights the limitations of her knowledge, which, despite its apparent breadth, is anchored in a singular colonial perspective. This revelation is critical, as it sheds light on the dangers of an education system rooted in colonial ideologies, where a single narrative overshadows the multiplicity of voices and perspectives of colonized cultures.

This moment intensifies the conflict between the characters, underscoring the persistent influence of colonial narratives on modern perceptions of non-Western cultures. Ramy’s challenge to the authenticity of Letty’s sources highlights a key aspect of postcolonial critique: the rejection of Eurocentric depictions of colonized nations as uniform entities shaped by outside influences. His engagement reveals the inaccuracies of idealized colonial perspectives and contests their authority to define India’s historical and cultural identity. Ramy embodies the postcolonial resistance by articulating counter-narratives that aim to deconstruct and reinterpret the colonial story from the colonized standpoint.

Ramy’s intent to “provoke [Letty], to dismantle her every assertion” (129) manifests as a resistance to the colonial ideology she represents. His provocative questioning of Letty’s source material, which simplistically portrays “India as a lovely Hindu nation, overrun by tyrannical Muslim invaders” (128), triggers a defensive reaction from Letty. Her defensiveness symbolizes the deep-rooted acceptance of colonial narratives and her hesitance to question their validity. This response illustrates the colonizer’s influence not only on the discourse about colonized cultures but also on the self-image of the colonized. Letty’s “stiff upper lip” (129) and her representation of objectionable English traits to Ramy delve into the discourse on cultural superiority and the legacy of colonial arrogance. The novel uses Ramy’s and Letty’s interactions to comment on broader colonial legacies and their ongoing impact on perceptions of cultural superiority.

Amid Letty and Ramy's ideological clashes, Ramy's frustration with colonialism becomes apparent during a conversation about the role of Indians in civil administration under British rule. Letty asserts, "There are plenty of Indians in civil administration, as long as they're qualified" (131). Ramy critically responds that qualification often requires conforming to an elitist framework that favors the British. He further critiques colonialism, stating, "We're not being ruled; we're being misruled. What's happening to my country is nothing short of robbery" (131). Moreover, Ramy's sharp retort to Letty's probing question, "If you think that, then what are you doing in England?" with "Learning, woman" (131), encapsulates the irony and struggle of seeking enlightenment within the oppressor's intellectual sphere. This interaction suggests a complex dynamic in their relationship, resonating with Dubion's observation that "characters' contradictory reactions exemplify the attraction-rejection process symptomatic of othering" (17). The narrative of British exploitation in Bengal, countered by Letty's view of colonialism as civilizing, underscores the vast differences in their perspectives. Such differences not only reflect the personal tensions between Ramy and Letty but also the broader contradictions faced by colonized individuals in spaces of colonial influence, where cultural, political, and personal layers intersect.

Ramy's depiction of British occupation in Bengal as an "ongoing travesty" (131) contrasts sharply with Letty's justification of British colonialism, rooted in the belief that the British victory at Plassey was a justified response to Mughal rule. This dichotomy underscores the conflicting historical narratives between the colonizer and the colonized, with Letty embodying the colonial apologist's view of British rule as a civilizing force, and Ramy representing the perspective of the oppressed, who see the same actions as exploitative. Letty's attempt to downplay the negative impacts of colonialism with "And it's not as if you have had it all so bad" (131), is met with Ramy's critique highlighting the elitism and cultural erosion fostered by colonial rule, exposing

the power and control mechanisms of colonialism that often compromise the dignity and identity of the native population.

Furthermore, the discussion on Plassey reveals a glaring omission: the very question of why the British were in Bengal to begin with, potentially becoming hostages or engaging in military conflict. This omission exemplifies a broader colonial inclination to tell the history of imperial involvements in a way that foregrounds the alleged provocations or misdemeanors of the colonized, while conveniently overlooking the aggressive expansionist policies and economic motivations driving European powers to distant lands. Such a narrative strategy serves to rationalize colonial violence and domination under the guise of retaliation or moral obligation, thereby concealing the unwanted and often unwelcome intrusion of colonial powers into the political and social fabric of non-European societies.

Letty's remarks demonstrate a reductionist perspective of colonial history, which simplifies the intricate processes of empire by focusing only on specific events that can be evaluated morally to support the colonial narrative. This viewpoint is not only intellectually dishonest but also morally problematic, as it attempts to justify and validate the broader project of colonialism by appealing to isolated events that are removed of their wider historical and geopolitical context. The absurdity of this argument becomes apparent when one considers the asymmetrical power relations that underpin the colonial encounter, where the technological, military, and economic might of the British Empire positioned it as an overwhelming force against the fragmented and politically diverse landscape of eighteenth-century India.

The critique of Letty's position thus extends beyond the specific historical inaccuracies or omissions; it touches upon the epistemological violence inherent in

colonial historiography, which seeks to construct a narrative of the colonial other that legitimizes and naturalizes the colonizer's presence and actions. This form of historiographical manipulation not only distorts the historical record but also perpetuates a dehumanizing portrayal of colonized peoples as mere backdrops to the moral and civilizational dramas authored by the colonizers.

Moreover, Letty's argument reveals a profound ethical failure: the inability to recognize the colonized as agents within their own right, possessing sovereign integrity and the capacity for self-determination. The justification of colonial domination through such narrowly construed narratives exemplifies a form of moral blindness, one that fails to account for the dignity and worth of cultures and societies subjected to colonial rule.

Through the polarizing perspectives of Ramy and Letty on British colonial rule in India, the narrative invites readers to reflect on the nature of power and resistance within the colonial context. It challenges narratives that justify or glorify colonial enterprises, presenting a nuanced exploration of domination and subjugation dynamics. This interaction compels readers to confront the realities of colonialism—its economic depredations, cultural dislocations, and ethical compromises. The debates between Ramy and Letty offer a profound inquiry into the human condition under the shadow of empire.

The violence and discrimination observed in *Babel* extends beyond the academic environment and permeates the streets of Oxford, reflecting a broader societal issue. Edgar, a minor character in the novel, epitomizes this extension of bigotry through his stereotypical view of diverse ethnic and religious groups. He repeats a racist jingle: "London streets where the turbaned Moslem bearded Jew and woolly Afric meet the brown Hindu" (58) in a sing-song tone, trivializing and homogenizing the rich cultural and religious identities of these groups.

This misidentification and oversimplification of complex religious and cultural identities are indicative of a broader xenophobic attitude prevalent in the society depicted in *Babel*. The novel illustrates how these stereotypes and prejudices, which begin in controlled environments like classrooms, seep into everyday life, perpetuating ignorance and intolerance. This extension of violence from academic to public spaces underscores the pervasive nature of colonial attitudes and the systemic nature of racism and xenophobia in the colonial setting of the novel.

Ramy also grapples with the complex dimensions of religion within the novel's colonial setting. In *Babel*, religion emerges not merely as a matter of personal faith but as a critical element intertwined with imperialist and hegemonic structures. The character of Sir Horace Wilson, the first endowed chair in Sanskrit at Oxford University, exemplifies this entanglement through his role in "conducting tutorials for Christian missionaries" (100), highlighting religion's instrumental use in furthering colonial objectives. This scenario underscores the deep integration of religious education with the agenda of spreading Christianity, serving as a means of cultural and ideological control over colonized peoples.

Ramy's interactions further illuminate the contradictions inherent in the colonial project. His interaction with Jemima Smythe, a Christian missionary from America, is particularly telling. Ms. Smythe's enthusiasm for the prospect of war in China and her obliviousness to the implications of such conflict starkly contrast with her purported spiritual values. Her inquiries about the situation in China, asking, "Was it an accident or did the Chinese do it on purpose? Will it be open war now, do you think?" (315) reveal a disturbing excitement for conflict. Her reaction stands in stark contrast to the ideals of her religious role, which ideally should be in accordance with values of peace and compassion.

A striking example of the imposition of Christianity on colonized subjects is evident when Letty intercepts Miss Smythe's attempt to convert Ramy by asserting his Christianity, necessitated by the Oxford matriculation requirement to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Kuang notes, "This was true, though Ramy did so only because he would not have been allowed to matriculate otherwise" (316). This incident encapsulates the broader colonial practice of imposing Christianity as a means of control and assimilation, highlighting the hypocrisy of a system that mandates participation in religious rituals, regardless of personal beliefs.

Ramy's father's advice, to "*Hide your faith, hide your prayers, for Allah will still know your heart*" (273), carries deep significance in the context of colonial power dynamics and the need to hide one's faith. It reflects an understanding of the dangerous realities of living under colonial rule, where overt expressions of cultural and religious identity can invite scrutiny, discrimination, or worse. This warning is not just about remembering one's roots but also a strategy for survival in a world where one's very identity is under constant threat. Ramy's father had demonstrated this survival tactic, maintaining a façade of compliance and subservience while secretly preserving his beliefs and dignity.

Babel also presents a complex and contradictory landscape of Western views on religion, as seen through the contrasting viewpoints of characters such as Professor Lovell and Sir Horace Wilson. Both characters, although on opposite ends of the religious spectrum, demonstrate how religious and ideological affiliations can be exploited for personal gain or to advance specific agendas. Their actions underscore the idea that religious and ideological beliefs can be used as a façade or "dress-up" (316) to legitimize and facilitate personal desires and objectives within the context of the imperial project.

Professor Lovell's assertion that Christianity involves "self-flagellation, professed repression, and bloody superstitious rituals as dress-up for doing whatever one wants" (316) reflects a perception of religion as a façade that individuals assume to pursue their agendas under the guise of piety and morality. In Lovell's view, religion is not a genuine pursuit of spiritual truth or ethical living but rather a means to cloak personal desires and actions with a layer of socially acceptable or even commendable righteousness. This perspective suggests a deep skepticism about the authenticity and sincerity of religious practice, particularly within the context of the imperialistic and colonial setting of the novel.

Contrastingly, Sir Horace represents the institutionalized promotion of Christianity, viewing it as an essential tool for civilizing and controlling the colonized populations. His faith, deeply intertwined with the colonial ideology, posits Christianity not just as a spiritual belief but as a cultural and moral superior force destined to uplift the *savage* societies. Sir Horace's approach to religion underscores the belief in the divine right of the imperial powers to rule and reshape foreign lands, using Christianity as both justification and mechanism for colonial expansion.

The coexistence of these polarized views within the same social and academic environment creates a perplexing and contradictory landscape for individuals like Ramy. On one side, there exists a pronounced contempt for Christianity coupled with a promotion of atheism; on the other hand, the colonial endeavor systematically fosters Christianity as a core component of its cultural and ideological imposition. This dichotomy situates the colonized in a precarious position, compelling them to perpetually (re)negotiate their beliefs and identities amidst a landscape marked by profound ideological conflicts.

The dichotomy in colonial religious ideology reveals a more profound critique of the moral ambiguities and ethical compromises in colonial settings. It suggests that, regardless of one's stated

beliefs, individuals' underlying motivations and actions within the imperial system often converge on exploiting power and privilege. Through its portrayal of these characters, the novel highlights the complex interplay between personal ambition, ideological conviction, and the broader dynamics of colonialism, raising questions about the authenticity and integrity of beliefs when used as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

In *Babel*, the notion that Westerners have the privilege to embrace any ideology or religion they choose while the colonized are denied this freedom is a critical commentary on the power dynamics and double standards of colonialism. This theme is exemplified through the contrasting experiences and freedoms of characters like Professor Lovell and Sir Horace Wilson, compared to those of colonized characters like Ramy, who do not enjoy the same freedom to choose or express their religious beliefs, highlighting the intricate dance between visibility and concealment in *Babel*. This elucidates how religion, within the colonial context, becomes a matter of performance rather than a genuine expression of belief.

Ramy's arc concludes with his martyrdom, brought about by Letty's unexpected act of violence. Ramy's murder scene unfolds within the ominous confines of the Old Library, a haven turned into a battleground, where the characters' allegiances and beliefs are put to the ultimate test. It is here that Letty, with "a revolver" in hand, commands, "Put your hands above your heads" (409), her voice transforming her from ally to adversary in an instant. This moment ruptures the illusion of community's performance of apparent harmony and lays bare the colonial ideologies that infiltrate even the most private of relationships. The divide takes on a political dimension that goes beyond the personal; it embodies the colonizing project that seeks to divide and conquer, to turn friends into foes and solidarity into surveillance.

Letty's act of violence serves as a counter-narrative to long-standing literary and media representations of Muslim men. Instead of violence, we witness sacrifice: "Letty whipped the gun around. By instinct, Robin rushed towards her – he didn't know what he intended, only that he was sure Letty would hurt Victoire – but just as he approached her, Ramy shoved him to the side. He fell forward, tripping against a table leg—And then Letty broke the world. A click; a bang. Ramy collapsed" (409). Ramy's murder is not merely a plot point; it is a moment of intense symbolism that critiques the oversimplified and often false narratives that categorize individuals based on their faith. By choosing a white woman as the perpetrator against a Muslim colored Indian man, Kuang ingeniously challenges not only religious stereotypes but also those related to gender and nationality, presenting a nuanced counter-narrative that questions pervasive labels and prejudices.

This moment of violence exemplifies the colonial mindset that views lives like Ramy's as expendable. Edward Said's analysis in *Orientalism*, particularly his assertion that "The crime [is] that the Oriental [is] an Oriental" (39), resonates deeply with this scene. I would add another dimension to Said's argument: It is not merely the ontological condition of being an Oriental that is criminalized within the colonial paradigm but rather the Oriental's intrinsic desire for autonomy, dignity, and life itself. The scene, thus, reflects the colonial attitude that diminishes the value of othered lives and justifies oppression by framing the mere existence and aspirations of these individuals as transgressions.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* offers a critical lens through which to view this scene, emphasizing the systemic devaluation of lives deemed *Other* by the colonial gaze. Said critiques this dehumanization, quoting Orwell, "it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings . . . The people have brown faces . . . Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names?" (251-2). This passage resonates deeply with the fate of Ramy, a character

who, in his final moments, embodies the struggle against a narrative that seeks to erase his identity and agency. The colonial narrative, as Said and this scene from *Babel* suggest, is predicated on the erasure of individuality, reducing vibrant lives to mere footnotes in the history of empire.

The tragedy of Ramy's death extends beyond the loss of a single life; it is a microcosm of the broader struggle against colonial oppression. His sacrifice forces the reader to face the brutal realities of resistance, where the struggle for dignity and justice often comes at the highest cost. The juxtaposition of Ramy's dead corpse with Letty's transformation into the instrument of colonial violence highlights the significant sacrifices made in the search of freedom.

Chapter 4 - Deciphering Robin Swift: A Fanonian Phenomena and a Late Awakening

Colonization and civilization? . . . the essential thing here is to see clearly, to think clearly-that is, dangerously-and to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies. (Césaire 32-33)

Robin's journey is a narrative of violation and violence. His narrative is deeply entangled with the colonial exploitation of the physical and cultural landscape of his homeland, the objectification and abuse of his mother, and the profound impact these violations have on his identity and sense of self. Throughout the novel, Robin's identity is in constant flux, caught in the liminal space between his Chinese self and his identity as an English ward, embodying W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "twoness . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." A crucial moment in Robin's journey occurs when he realizes the impossibility of maintaining his fractured sense of self: "He could not go on like this. He could not exist as a split man, his psyche constantly erasing and re-erasing the truth. He felt a great

pressure in the back of his mind. He felt like he would quite literally burst, unless he stopped being double. Unless he chose” (319). This moment signifies Robin’s need to forge a coherent identity, one birthed from the womb of the violence surrounding him. Robin’s shift from a passive recipient of violence to an active perpetrator is a critical highlight of his journey. It mirrors the impact of colonialism, which not only violates the colonized but also instills in him the tendency towards violence. Robin’s storyline, thus, surpasses mere character’s growth or downfall, joyous or tragic resolution; it’s a narrative that encapsulates the cycle of violence and violation, both inflicted by and stemming from colonialism.

Babel opens with Professor Lovell’s arrival at Robin’s house in Canton, where he finds Robin, surrounded by and awaiting death, lying beside his dead mother in a state of weakness and vulnerability. The scene highlights the power imbalance in the colonial encounter: Professor Lovell, representing colonial authority and power, uses a silver bar—a symbol of Western knowledge and resources—to heal Robin. This act positions the Westerner as a savior to the helpless native, while simultaneously absolving colonialism of any responsibility for Canton’s plight. The opening scene is also significant for what it omits: the story and viewpoint of Robin’s mother. Her silence reflects the novel’s critique of the way women’s identities are overshadowed and diminished in colonial endeavor, reduced to mere instruments serving imperial goals. Told primarily through the viewpoints of others, the story of Robin’s mother exemplifies the broader societal tendency to overlook and suppress women’s experiences and autonomy, especially in colonial contexts. The story of the mother thereby serves as a powerful critique of the patriarchal and colonial structures that continue to enforce this erasure and marginalization.

The exploitation of Robin’s mother mirrors the dynamics of body politics within colonial settings and showcases the extent to which colonized bodies, especially women’s, are

commodified, violated, and manipulated by colonial powers. This manifestation of body politics emphasizes the intersectionality of oppression, where colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism intersect to control the most personal aspects of human existence. The narrative aligns with Marx critique which examines the reduction of human relationships to mere economic transactions under capitalism. He specifically addresses the commodification of women, stating, “The bourgeois sees his wife as a mere instrument of production” (66). Their perspective is mirrored in the novel’s portrayal of Robin’s mother’s story, offering a critique of the interconnectedness of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. *Babel*, therefore, becomes a vehicle for deeper understanding and critique of these systemic injustices, highlighting their intersectionality and how frequently they are inseparable.

Examining Robin’s arc in light of his mother’s violation is pivotal for understanding his character’s development and the overarching themes in the narrative. His mother’s character is not just a passive background element; instead, she is pivotal in informing and compelling Robin’s most important decisions in the novel. In a moment of introspection, Robin painfully recalls “his mother, young and desperate, eager to do anything for the foreign man who promised her coin, who used and abused her and left her with an English maid and a bewildering set of instructions to raise their child, her child, in a language she couldn’t speak herself. Robin was birthed by choices produced from poverty, poverty produced from this” (303-4). This painful memory reveals the layers of violation suffered by Robin’s mother and subsequently by Robin himself. This narrative element extends beyond a personal tragedy, embodying the broader colonial condition in which the colonized body becomes a site of both economic and cultural conquest and penetration. Viewed from this perspective, Robin’s mother emerges as a symbol of the colonized body, one

that is exploited for the colonizer's purposes and then cast aside, epitomizing the brutality and apathy at the core of the colonial mindset.

Throughout the novel, the lingering effect of Robin's mother's sexual abuse dramatically influences the story's development and Robin's climactic decisions. Her almost spectral presence demonstrates that acts of aggression and dominance are not isolated incidents but part of a continuum in history, deeply ingrained in the memory of the colonized which cause lasting trauma and scars on individuals and entire communities alike. Moreover, through Robin's mother's story, readers are prompted to reflect on personal narratives that are often overlooked in contexts of power imbalance. Robin's mother's experience shows the personal cost of colonialism, where people's lives are caught in the crossfire of greater political and economic agendas. The narrative, thus, emphasizes the intricate link between personal suffering and collective history, underscoring the need to acknowledge and address the broader historical and cultural wounds of colonialism. Robin's mother then serves as a reminder of the intergenerational legacy of such violence, where the trauma of one generation is inherited and perpetuated in the next.

Professor Lovell's arrival at Robin's house, initially perceived as a rescue, quickly reveals itself to be a colonial maneuver aimed at exploitation and manipulation. After healing Robin, he proposes that Robin either accompany him to England and accept him as his legal guardian, living a life of obedience and gratitude, or face a life of destitution with theft and death lurking in every corner. The professor's proposition appears at first as an opportunity, yet it is presented in a context that significantly compromises Robin's ability to make a genuine choice. The professor's postponed intervention—choosing to remain in Macau for “two weeks and some change” (17) and arriving only when Robin is at his most vulnerable and isolated—exposes this so-called *humanitarian aid*, revealing its true intentions to advance colonial aims and confuse the moral

compass of the colonized. Throughout the novel, Robin finds himself trapped between the desire to resist the colonizer and feeling indebted for their supposed aid, aid that would not have been necessary without their involvement in the first place. “He had no right to be resentful. Professor Lovell had promised him everything and owed him nothing . . . he understood the necessity of gratitude, of deference. One did not spite one’s saviours” (17). This statement reveals the intricate dynamics of power, exploitation, and indebtedness that define Robin’s interactions with Lovell throughout the narrative.

Professor Lovell’s colonial manipulation is further accentuated by his insistence that Robin adopts a name “that will do in London” (11), a demand that signifies the stripping away of Robin’s Chinese identity and heritage. Under Lovell’s guardianship, Robin undergoes a transformation that includes alterations to his appearance, language, and legal status, epitomizing the colonial practice of identity erasure and reconstitution as a method of establishing control. This process is symbolic of the broader theme of migration and identity transformation, capturing the essence of the migrant experience as both a physical transition and a translation of self, as highlighted by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, “[the] liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one” (321). Bhabha’s observation of the migrant experience highlights the complex power dynamics at play in the colonial encounter, where identities are constantly being reshaped and manipulated to conform to established hierarchies of inferiority and superiority.

Robin’s narrative of fragmented self, caught between his under-assault Chinese identity (signified by his original name, which remains undisclosed to the readers) and the unattainable identity of the professor (despite their biological connection), aligns with the observations provided by Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson in *Language and Power in the Modern World*. They elucidate, “The colonial education system produced a largely disempowered populace who simply

could not find their voice in English, and whose voice . . . in Chinese was denied. As a result, the British administration faced little challenge from the governed and little threat to its established power, as opposition was literally silenced, incapable of voicing discontent” (278). Their analysis highlights how colonialism systematically stifled the Chinese voice, as embodied by Robin and the erasure of his original name, through enforcing the English language. The process of renaming, in particular, signifies not only a loss of culture but also a sinister attempt to sever the roots of the colonized, to alienate them to their own space and selves, stripping them of agency and the ability to resist.

Robin’s existential crisis, grappling with the loss of his identity and the realization that neither his native Chinese nor the imposed English can adequately articulate his lived experiences or challenge the colonial structures seeking to define his existence, epitomizes the systemic suppression of the colonized voice. This phenomenon resonates with Frantz Fanon’s description of colonialism as “a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity” (*Wretched* 182). Therefore, Robin’s arc reflects Fanon’s critique of colonial dynamics, positioning him as a quintessential example of the colonized individual. He is portrayed as “a split man” (Kuang 319), emblematic of those fractured by the imposition of an alien identity, “constantly ask[ing] the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’” (*Wretched* 182). Through Robin’s narrative, *Babel* vividly illustrates the internal and external conflicts faced by colonized subjects, as well as the various psychological factors that shape their voice and sense of self.

Robin’s half-brother, Griffin sheds light on the novel’s themes of displacement and alienation when he attempts to sympathize with Robin’s situation: “You’re lost, brother. You’re a ship adrift, searching for familiar shores. I understand what it is you want. I sought it too. But there is no homeland. It’s gone” (219). Griffin’s exchange eloquently conveys the deep sense of

unanchoring that characterizes Robin's journey from Canton to London. Moreover, Griffin's insight illuminates the challenges of finding one's place in the world. Robin's departure from Canton marks a pivotal moment of transition and loss, vividly depicted through the emotional distress he experiences as his familiar world recedes into the distance. The narrative captures the intensity of this severance, how "Robin felt a sharp ache in his chest as Canton disappeared over the horizon, and then a raw emptiness, as if a grappling hook had yanked his heart out of his body . . . The word loss was inadequate. Loss just meant a lack, meant something was missing, but it did not encompass the totality of this severance, this terrifying un-anchoring from all that he'd ever known" (15). This depiction not only communicates the deep emotional impact of leaving behind everything familiar but also highlights the insufficiency of language to fully encapsulate the depth of Robin's grief. The disappearance of Canton, symbolizing his concept of home, intensifies his sense of alienation and captures the distressing experience of his departure. As he transitions from the solidity of land to the uncertainty of the sea, his sense of security is destabilized, leaving him feeling insecure and unmoored. This moment signals the beginning of Robin's journey into the colonial world, a journey filled with an uncertain sense of self and identity.

Babel further depicts the dehumanization and commodification of Oriental figures, in an episode where Robin and Professor Lovell witness a Chinese laborer unjustly denied boarding due to prejudice. The crewman's rejection, stating, "I can't have Chinamen on this ship. Last ship I sailed that carried a Chinaman got filthy with lice. I'm not taking risks on people who can't wash" (13-14), exposes the racism and systemic exploitation inherent in colonial practices. In this scenario, Robin's role as a mediator highlights his complex position within these dynamics, where translation serves both as a means of communication and exclusion.

This encounter becomes a critical point in Robin's transformation and self-understanding. As the only other Chinese person in sight, Robin is thrust into a position of reluctant mediator between the laborer and the ship's captain. This moment encapsulates the profound dilemma of navigating between one's identity and the pressures of assimilation within a colonial context. The laborer's perception of Robin as a potential ally, based solely on their common ethnicity, underscores the expectations placed upon Robin to act in solidarity with his fellow countryman. Yet, the societal and systemic forces force him to betray this unspoken bond, reflecting the internalized colonial mindset that prioritizes loyalty to the empire over familial or ethnic ties. This incident not only reveals the harsh realities of colonialism but also accentuates Robin's moral dilemma and complicity in the oppression of his people, thus enriching the narrative's discourse on loyalty, belonging, and allyship.

Viewed through this encounter, *Babel* foregrounds the moral ambivalence of translation as an interpretive process, revealing that it is not only a linguistic undertaking but also a highly political one that has the capacity to (re)shape beliefs, perceptions, and cultural identities. This notion aligns with Kuang's insight that "translation is never neutral, but it's always biased and always ideologically motivated, [which] means that a magic system that takes advantage of the fact that translation can never be perfect, made perfect sense for this novel" (interview with John A. Riley, qtd. in Golden 73-4). The novel emphasizes the importance of the translation process by demonstrating the significant influence the translator has in molding the comprehension and presentation of a text to a different audience. When wielded within the colonial context, this power becomes a tool for cultural imperialism, challenging the ethical boundaries of translation practices. In *Babel*, the act of translation, thus, emerges as a site of conflict, embodying the tensions between facilitating understanding and perpetuating domination.

Upon arriving in London, Lovell subjects Robin to a harsh course designed to teach him Greek and Latin and to assimilate him into the British Empire. This assimilation process, however, is marked by violence and coercion, as highlighted by an incident where Lovell brutally beats Robin for being late to class. This unexpected experience highlights the unpredictable and often concealed nature of colonial violence. Robin's bewilderment is palpable as he endures the assault: "Even as the poker cracked against his ribs for the eighth, ninth, tenth, time – even as he tasted blood on his teeth – all he felt was a deep bewilderment that this was happening at all" (39). Robin's response to the situation is consistent with the fight, flight, or freeze paradigm of trauma responses. He exhibits a freezing reaction, which persists until enough triggers prompt the release of this energy, culminating in the act of killing Lovell and his suicidal mission to destroy Babel. Lovell's act of beating transcends personal trauma, serving as Robin's initiation into the realities of colonial power dynamics. Violence, as depicted here, emerges as a tool for control and assimilation, challenging the very notion of civility that the colonizer professes to uphold, revealing a stark contrast between theory and praxis.

The ideological underpinnings of Lovell's violence are further revealed through his rebukes to Robin, where he attributes laziness and deceit to Robin's Chinese heritage. Lovell's bigoted remark, "Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind. This is why China remains an indolent and backwards country" (40), serves as an example of how colonial discourse constructs the colonized as inherently inferior and in need of Western discipline and enlightenment. This narrative not only justifies the violence enacted on individuals like Robin but also frames it as a necessary, even benevolent, act of civilizing those considered uncivilized. Lovell's mindset demonstrates the racism that underpins colonial ideology, legitimizing oppression and violence under the pretext of moral and civil superiority.

The calculated nature of Lovell's assault, aimed at inflicting severe pain without causing permanent damage, reveals a chilling mastery and a systemic approach to torture. This detail indicates a broader, more insidious consequence of such power disparities: the imbalance "works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism" (Césaire 35). Moreover, the observation that "[Lovell] seemed to have done this before" (40) suggests not only a personal history of violence but also an institutional endorsement of such methods as tools for maintaining order and discipline. The relation between Robin and Lovell, thus, becomes a microcosm of the colonial power dynamics, where violence is a tool for enforcing hierarchical order and instilling fear and submission in the colonized. Their account not only illustrates the personal and institutional dynamics of colonial violence but also reflects on the disturbing implications of its normalization, sanitization, and rationalization within an ostensibly civil society.

Following his aggressive act, Lovell coerces Robin into an illusion of choice, where Robin's options are to either devote himself completely to his studies or return to Canton. Lovell's action vividly illustrates the coercive nature of colonial education, presenting the illusion of choice while subtly enforcing compliance. Robin's response: "'I'm sorry,' Robin said hoarsely. 'I want to stay'" (41) arises from the limited options presented to him by Lovell. This façade of choice under pressure highlights colonialism's pretense of offering progress and integration into the empire, while what it does is perpetuate subjugation and cultural dissolution. Viewed through this perspective, the novel critically examines the notion of "humane colonization" (353), challenging the idea that the suffering of indigenous peoples can be mitigated through forced assimilation and questioning the very possibility of such a concept.

This strategy of emotional manipulation is a recurring theme in the novel, particularly defining the dynamic between Lovell and Robin. For example, later in the story, Lovell presents Robin with a seemingly straightforward choice: “Babel, or Hermes” (266). This ultimatum exposes the oppressive power imbalance in Robin’s life, exploiting his vulnerabilities to ensure obedience and allegiance. Lovell’s confidence that Robin will choose Babel reveals the underlying coercion masked as freedom. His manipulation becomes even more evident when he questions Robin’s ethics, accusing him of ingratitude: “‘To think,’ Professor Lovell said after a long pause, ‘that you would have turned out so abominably ungrateful’ . . . ‘And if you are indeed so disgusted by the ways Babel enriches itself,’ continued Professor Lovell, ‘how is it that you seemed delighted, always, to take its money?’” (261;263). The manipulation of Robin’s gratitude and loyalty underscores the colonial strategy of indebting its subjects, securing their compliance through material and educational benefits. Through such instances, *Babel* portrays how emotional manipulation serves as a tool for maintaining colonial dominance and control.

Robin’s climactic confrontation with Lovell brings to the forefront the complicated nature of the privileges extended by Babel, illustrating the coercive underpinnings of colonial benevolence. At this moment, Robin reflects on the tension between his gratitude for the opportunities provided and the realization of their oppressive ramifications on China: “A hundred arguments swam through Robin’s head—that he had not sought these privileges from Oxford, had not chosen to be taken from Canton at all, that the university’s generosity should not necessitate his unwavering loyalty to the Crown and its colonial endeavors, and if it did, then that represented a form of bondage to which he had never consented” (262). This internal debate encapsulates the essence of Robin’s struggle as he grapples with the expectation of loyalty to the Crown juxtaposed against his consciousness of its colonial implications, underscoring a coerced allegiance that he

perceives as akin to bondage, a realization that challenges the very foundation of the privileges he received.

Furthermore, Lovell's rhetorical question, "Suppose you invented the spinning wheel. Are you suddenly obligated to share your profits with everyone who still spins by hand?" (263), seeks to legitimize colonial and capitalist exploitation as a natural consequence of advancement and innovation, further deepening the divide between the colonizers and the colonized. By framing exploitation as a consequence of innovation, Lovell highlights the tension between individual achievement and collective well-being within capitalist and colonial contexts. This interrogation urges a reevaluation of societal values and priorities.

The narrative also delves deeper into the idea of "humane colonization" (353) through a conversation involving Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty, who remains oblivious to the harsh realities of colonialism. Attempting to reconcile her belief in the benevolence of Babel and the British Empire at large, Letty counters her cohort's criticisms of the institution's exploitative actions by asserting, "But that's not true" (353). She then proceeds to list Babel's charitable endeavors, insisting, "They contribute to charity all the time. I know, Professor Leblanc was leading research into London's waterworks so that the tenement housing wouldn't be so diseased, and there are humanitarian societies all over the globe" (353). This statement reflects Letty's either naive or deliberate ignorance of the darker aspects of colonialism, clinging to the notion that these endeavors are purely altruistic. Letty's faith in the empire's "civilizing mission" (353) is one that can be easily as well as quickly dismantled by examining the realities of these so-called *humanitarian* efforts.

In a footnote related to this discussion, the novel exposes the paradox at the heart of humanitarian societies founded in British-controlled territories. It vividly deconstructs the motivations behind such organizations. Kuang writes:

Here, Letty refers to the creation of humanitarian societies for the protection of Indigenous peoples in British territories, such as the evangelical authors of the 1837 “Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes”, which, despite acknowledging the British presence had brought “many calamities to uncivilized nations”, recommended expanding white settlement and spreading British missionaries in Australia and New Zealand as part of a holy “civilizing mission.” (353)

This footnote dismantles the myth of a benign empire, exposing the dissonance of acknowledging harm while continuing to inflict it under the pretext of moral superiority. Through these observations, the novel articulates a profound critique of colonialism’s mechanisms, emphasizing the oxymoronic nature of the concept of *humane colonization*. Through characters’ conversations, *Babel* invites readers to reconsider the narratives surrounding humanitarian efforts in colonial contexts.

The assimilation process under colonial rule, thus, is fraught with contradictions that expose the moral inconsistencies of the colonizing powers. A key aspect to this contradiction is the notion of cultural and moral superiority, which is often used to justify colonial oppression. Colonizers often disseminate the belief that their culture, values, and lifestyle are inherently good, progressive, and superior, while those of the colonized are deemed evil, backward, and inferior. This constructed dichotomy serves as the cornerstone for an assimilationist

agenda, wherein the colonized are not only encouraged but often coerced to embrace the colonizers' customs and norms.

However, this process reveals a fundamental paradox. If the colonized people were to fully assimilate and adopt the supposed goodness of the colonizer's culture, it would logically follow that they should no longer be considered inferior or in need of subjugation. Their transformation into the likeness of the colonizer should, in theory, grant them equal status and rights. Yet, this is rarely the case in colonial contexts. Despite assimilation, the colonized remain subjects of exploitation and domination.

The ongoing oppression, even post-assimilation, demonstrates the changing nature of the justifications employed by colonizers to cement and rationalize their control. The standards of goodness continually shift, extending beyond mere cultural practices or moral principles. Immutable traits such as race or ethnicity, as well as mutable factors like religion—which ought to change solely by individual choice rather than as a prerequisite for social inclusion—are now bases for that supposed goodness. These identity markers are used to create a perpetual state of *Otherness*, ensuring that the colonized can never indeed be *equal* or good enough in the eyes of the colonizer. This dynamic adjustment of standards of acceptance and the colonizers' assumed authority to determine them further entrench the existing power structures, supporting their ongoing control and exploitation. Thus, the assimilation process under colonial rule is not a genuine attempt at cultural exchange or moral improvement but rather a tool of control founded on the belief in the colonizer's superiority.

Babel, in effect, is not only a historical critique but also a philosophical questioning of the ethics of power and the possibility of moral action within deeply flawed structures. The dialogue between Letty and the broader paratextual context forces the reader to face the painful reality that

these supposed projects of enlightenment and civilization often serve as guises for exploitation and cultural eradication. It invites a reflection on the role of language, education, and law as tools of empire, spotlighting how these soft power instruments often complement the brutal power of military occupation and economic domination.

Robin's journey in *Babel* embodies the quest for identity and autonomy within the confining environment of colonial academia influenced by assimilationist agendas. Unlike Ramy and Victoire, who adopt a position of defiance against the Empire from the beginning, Robin's path is characterized by a profound ambivalence. The complexity of Robin's situation escalates with the introduction of his half-brother, Griffin, and the clandestine Hermes society, whose objective is to challenge Babel's colonial ideologies. The society's mission, aiming to dismantle colonialism's overt structures and the epistemological violence perpetuated by Babel's monopolization over knowledge, presents Robin with an ideologically charged alternate path. Caught between his loyalty to Babel and his allegiance to Hermes, he faces an inner conflict mirroring his desire for recognition from institutions that grant and deny him legitimacy at the same time. Robin's ambivalence embodies the insidious nature of colonial power, trapping its subjects in a deceptive dance of desire and repulsion, offering an illusion of choice as a means of control.

Griffin's revelations about Babel's exploitative nature significantly intensify Robin's ideological unrest. He reveals Babel's complicity in the colonial project stating: "The professors like to pretend that the tower is a refuge for pure knowledge, that it sits above the mundane concerns of business and commerce, but it does not. It's intricately tied to the business of colonialism. It is the business of colonialism" (100). This compels Robin to face the moral consequences of his involvement with Babel and leads him to a profound reflection on themes of

resistance and complicity within colonial structures. Robin's inner conflict is further encapsulated when he grapples with conflicting emotions towards Babel, reflecting, "He hated this place. He loved it. He resented how it treated him. He still wanted to be a part of it – because it felt so good to be a part of it, to speak to its professors as an intellectual equal, to be in on the great game" (120). Through Robin's story, Kuang navigates the psyche of the colonized where he oscillates between the desire for assimilation and the impulse for rebellion.

Robin's existential crisis is further emphasized when he reflects on embracing and rejecting different identities:

Robin had become so good at holding two truths in his head at once. That he was an Englishman and not. That Professor Lovell was his father and not. That the Chinese were a stupid, backwards people, and that he was also one of them. That he hated Babel, and wanted to live forever in its embrace. He had danced for years on the razor's edge of these truths, had remained there as a means of survival, a way to cope, unable to accept either side fully because an unflinching examination of the truth was so frightening that the contradictions threatened to break him. (319)

Robin's internal conflict is vividly captured through the metaphor of "two hearts" (137), representing his internal turmoil and divided allegiances. "In Classical Chinese, the characters 二心 referred to disloyal or traitorous intentions; literally, they translated as 'two hearts'. And Robin found himself in the impossible position of loving that which he betrayed, twice" (137). The twoness symbolism not only reveals Robin's personal struggles but also illuminates the broader dilemma of individuals torn between the harsh realities of oppressive systems and the perilous path to defiance.

After studying in Babel for some time, Robin and his cohort are assigned the task of accompanying a delegation from Babel to Canton to negotiate the terms of the opium trade with the Chinese. This journey represents a significant return to Robin's homeland, Canton. In Kuang's vivid depiction, Canton emerges as a living, breathing entity, suffering under the weight of colonial exploitation. Its harbor, during Robin's childhood, is likened in the opening chapter of the novel to a mouth through which China engages with the global community—a synecdoche that underscores the city's linguistic diversity and its stark contrast to England's monolingual nature that Robin has experienced since he left Canton. Its depiction in the novel, "Canton's harbor, the mouth from which China encountered the world, was a universe of languages. Loud and rapid Portuguese, French, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, English, and Chinese floated through the salty air, intermingling in an implausibly mutually intelligible pidgin that almost everyone understood, but which only a few could speak with ease" (12), captures not only the vibrant multitude of languages at Canton's docks but also serves as a commentary on the broader themes of cultural assimilation and identity. Kuang masterfully employs the bustling atmosphere of the harbor to symbolize the rich tapestry of cross-cultural interactions, suggesting that true inclusivity is about embracing diversity rather than seeking to diminish it.

Upon Robin's arrival in Canton as a Babel scholar, he encounters a substantial transformation of the docks' landscape and architecture. What was once a vibrant reflection of the area's rich culture and history has been diminished to a mere shadow of its former self, now reconfigured to align with the colonial taste. This change signifies more than just a physical alteration but an assault on the collective memory and identity of the people, deeply experienced by Robin as a native of the land. The metamorphosis of his homeland symbolizes a loss of innocence, and the harsh imposition of colonial rule reflects the broader narrative of cultures and

societies being reshaped by foreign powers. Kuang vividly contrasts Canton's indigenous architecture with the Factories' Western-style buildings, using this disparity to illustrate the forceful imposition of colonial structures. These buildings are portrayed as alien insertions that disrupt the city's harmony, drawing a stark line between the colonial and the native elements of Canton.

The narrative further explores the physical and metaphorical dissonance between colonial and indigenous structures through the imagery of the factories, described as jarring Western designs amidst Canton's traditional landscape. Mr. Baylis's remark, likening the Factories to "diamonds on top of a heap of old rubbish" (294), serves to highlight the colonial contempt for native cultures and the glorification of Western aesthetics over local traditions. This sentiment resonates with Fanon's argument from *The Wretched of the Earth*, "The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress, this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities" (5-6). Fanon's insights underscore the eventual pushback from the colonized, who reclaim their agency and challenge the violence used to subdue them. Through this analysis, Kuang's narrative critiques the erasure of indigenous spaces by colonial architecture, marking a deeper conquest of culture and history. The transformation of Canton's landscape into a narrative device reflects the emotional and psychological impact of colonialism on the native population, illustrating the existential struggle to preserve identity against overwhelming external influences.

Robin's personal turmoil, sparked by the colonial transformation of his native land, echoes the broader collective grief for a bygone era and the current subjugation by foreign powers. This

narrative thread not only denounces the tangible and symbolic violence of colonial expansion but also probes into dilemmas of identity, memory, and resistance in the face of cultural assimilation and appropriation. By using the physical landscape of Canton as a metaphorical lens, Kuang vividly portrays the emotional and psychological burdens colonialism places on the indigenous community and their environment. The juxtaposition of the Western-style Factories against Canton's traditional architecture symbolizes the intrusive nature of colonial forces, effectively showcasing the cultural and emotional divides created by the imposition of foreign structures on indigenous spaces.

This storytelling approach enriches the narrative, providing a complex look at the impact of colonialism that resonates on an emotional and psychological level within the affected communities. Kuang invites readers to experience the alienation and loss that come with the physical alteration of one's homeland, offering a layered exploration of the colonial experience that goes beyond mere political and economic considerations. Robin's emotional journey in the face of foreign intrusion mirrors the collective grief of a people facing the erosion of their cultural landmarks and the compulsory imposition of an alien identity. This aspect of the novel highlights the silent, yet profound, resistance inherent in the struggle to maintain cultural heritage amid the relentless tide of conquest and control, underlining the pain and complexity of navigating a world where familiar signs of identity are gradually replaced by markers of colonial dominance.

During the negotiations concerning the opium trade with the Chinese, Robin finds himself entangled in a complex battle of words and wits, raising critical questions about concepts of free choice and free trade. The discourse between Mr. Baylis, a steadfast supporter of the opium trade, and the Chinese, unveils the profound depths of colonial hypocrisy. Baylis's claim that opium trade is a matter of freedom and justice, blatantly overlooking its devastating impact on Chinese

society, epitomizes the moral void at the core of colonial rationale. His assertion, “Smoking opium is the safest and most gentleman-like speculation I am aware of” (298) is in stark contradiction to the Chinese view of the drug as a significant scourge. Baylis’s blatant indifference to the well-being of the Chinese, masked under the guise of liberalism and free trade, reveals the strategic misuse of economic theories and linguistic expressions to further imperialistic goals.

Baylis’s peculiar claim that opium is beneficial for China, countered sharply by Commissioner Lin’s pointed rebuttal, showcases the vast divide between the imperialistic agenda and the tangible consequences experienced by those under its impact. Commissioner Lin’s questioning of Baylis, “Mr. Baylis, is it not true that in your own country, opium is prohibited with the utmost strictness and severity?” (308) exposes the double standards at the heart of the British advocacy of free trade in opium. Lin’s perceptive question not only emphasizes the British recognition of opium’s detrimental effects but also underscores their willingness to profit from it in China. Lin’s further probing, “And, does not the sanction against your own civilians’ use of opium prove that you know full well how harmful it is to mankind?” (309) reveals a core ethical inconsistency, challenging the justification of practices deemed unacceptable in one’s own country but advantageous in another. This dialogue underlines the colonizer’s hypocrisy, where economic benefits are valued above ethical considerations, and the welfare of the colonized is sacrificed for imperial gain. This deliberate oversight and justification for exploitation starkly contrast with Lin’s call for mutual respect and equitable exchange, challenging the colonial narrative that disguises economic dominance as a civilizing mission.

Robin’s subsequent conversation with Commissioner Lin deepens the narrative’s critique of colonial attitudes. Robin’s admission in response to Lin’s inquiry about the potential for fair negotiation with the British reveals the inflexibility of British traders and their disregard for

Chinese sovereignty and dignity. Robin states, “They want what they want, and they won’t settle for anything less. They don’t respect you, or your government. You are obstacles to be resolved, one way or another” (312), which captures the dehumanizing view of the Chinese as nothing more than obstacles in the path of their trade ambitions. This moment of honest exchange between Robin and Commissioner Lin, contrasted with Baylis’s earlier statements, underscores the moral emptiness of the colonial endeavor, where *rights and dignity* are selectively applied based on racial and cultural hierarchies. The narrative depicted in these dialogues serves as a critical examination of the justifications for colonial oppression through economic rationalization, encouraging readers to reevaluate the narratives that have historically shaped such interactions.

The dialogues between Baylis, Robin, and Commissioner Lin elucidate a core tension between the rhetoric of free trade and the reality of coercive economic practices that benefit the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. Baylis’s framing of the opium trade as a form of justice and a manifestation of liberal values of unrestricted trade is exposed as a cynical exploitation of enlightenment ideals for imperialistic ends. This manipulation prompts a broader examination of the nature of freedom and choice within a framework of unequal power dynamics, revealing the emptiness of the notion of *free choice* for the Chinese under coercive circumstances. The exchange between Baylis and Commissioner Lin in *Babel* then not only highlights a clash over trade policies but also ignites a deeper debate on freedom, choice, and the ethical duties of nations.

Edward Said’s incisive observation in *Orientalism* that “any Egyptian who would speak out is more likely to be ‘the agitator [who] wishes to raise difficulties’ than the good native who overlooks the ‘difficulties’ of foreign domination” (33) aligns with the themes Kuang explores through Baylis’s tactics used to maintain imperial and colonial dominance. By labeling any opposition from the colonized as mere troublemaking, colonial narratives delegitimize valid

criticisms and resistance, casting the colonial project as altruistic, despite its exploitative and oppressive nature. The “good native” is depicted as one who passively accepts foreign rule, reinforcing the colonial ideology of the colonized’s incapacity for self-governance or discerning what is “good” for them.

From traders to government officials, Babel professors to religious figures, Robin’s arc reveals the interconnectedness of various human life aspects manipulated by capitalist and colonial forces to maintain and justify their control and exploitation. For instance, Reverend Gützlaff embodies the complex and paradoxical roles of religious figures involved in the colonial project, juxtaposing his alleged moral and spiritual objectives with his actions. Gützlaff’s proclaimed dedication to the spiritual well-being of the Chinese is contradicted by his involvement in activities that radically deviate from this professed commitment, such as working as an interpreter for shipping companies and supporting the opium trade. This duality is further highlighted by his involvement in the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China, which, under the guise of promoting educational advancement, aimed to instill colonial ideologies and reshape China’s cultural and economic ideologies to favor Western interests. Gützlaff’s claim of contributing to this society to teach the Chinese about free trade hides a colonial ambition, thereby using education as a tool for economic and political hegemony—an irony that exposes the cloaked deceit in such missionary endeavors.

Furthermore, the contrast between Gützlaff’s self-proclaimed affection for the Chinese, naming himself the “one who loves the Chinese” (296), and his support for the opium trade—which inflicted severe harm on numerous Chinese lives—underscores a profound ethical hypocrisy. His rationalization of opium by comparing its use to that of tobacco or brandy, and even recommending it to his congregation, indicates a significant moral disconnect. This juxtaposition

of purported care against the backdrop of exploitation reflects a broader colonial attitude that viewed the colonized as targets for exploitation under the façade of love and enlightenment. Gützlaff's perspective on the Chinese as simultaneously deserving of compassion and captives in "thralldom of Satan" (296), embodies the colonial mentality capable of maintaining and acting on contradictory and hypocritical notions.

In the aftermath of the tense negotiation with Commissioner Lin, Robin finds himself confronted with Mr. Baylis's demeaning remarks about the Chinese. Baylis's derogatory comments, "You can't fault business. Chinamen are simply filthy, lazy, and easily addicted. And you certainly can't blame England for the foibles of an inferior race. Not where there's money to be made" (299) highlight the emotional burden such interactions place on individuals straddling different cultures. When Robin asserts his identity with the statement, "Mr. Baylis, *I am* a Chinaman" (299), only to be met with Baylis's laughter and disbelief crystallizes the cruelty of colonial dismissal and the absurdity of its logic. This exchange vividly showcases how colonialism maintains its dominance through the denial of the complexities, hybridities, and lived realities of those it seeks to dominate.

As the day progresses, Robin's discomfort with Baylis's company grows, culminating in a headache that symbolizes the physical manifestation of his internal unrest. This unease reaches peaks during a dinner scene, where Baylis takes pleasure in belittling the Chinese by bragging about Robin's alleged victories against the customs officials. Kuang writes, "Mr Baylis spent the whole time recounting silly claims the customs officials had made, and kept casting his stories in a way that made Robin sound like he'd verbally slapped the Chinese at every turn" (303). Robin's choice to remain quiet and later leave the English Factory to wander the city reflects a notable shift in his strategy for engaging with the colonizer and asserting his own stance. By distancing himself

from the colonial setting and narratives, Robin not only rejects the derogatory portrayal perpetuated by Baylis but also reclaims his autonomy.

Furthermore, Robin's assertion of his identity and his right to freely explore his birthplace challenges the colonial logic that attempts to control belonging and movement. His courage, in response to Baylis's claim, "Where are you going? . . . Foreigners aren't allowed in the city," by countering, "I'm not a foreigner. I was born here" (301), challenging the colonial practice of arbitrating identity and underscores the irrationality of colonial restrictions based on arbitrary racial and origin distinctions. This episode, culminating in Robin's unopposed exit, underscores the nature of colonial authority, which is destabilized by the mere articulation of individual truth and autonomy. In this exchange of denying and affirming Robin's Chinese identity, the narrative illuminates the intricate dynamics of colonial identity politics, where the delineation between foreigner and native is constantly manipulated to serve the colonizer's interest.

As Robin walks through Canton with Ramy, he experiences a profoundly symbolic instance of personal and cultural loss: the space where his family home once stood has been altered beyond recognition. This change is not merely a change in the physical landscape but a profound commentary on the effects of colonialism and globalization on the identities and lives of the colonized. The area, now possibly occupied by a tea shop, a company office, an opium den, or a combination of these, showcases the significant transformation of the area. Robin's struggle to identify a once familiar and familial space emphasizes the profound personal impact of this loss and accentuates the broader consequences for societies under colonization. Each of these establishments symbolizes different aspects of colonial exploitation and cultural erosion. This scene in the novel invites readers to reflect on colonialism's historical and ongoing consequences, challenging them to consider the damaging effects of cultural and economic domination that

reshape local worlds in the image of global forces, often at a significant cost to the indigenous inhabitants.

The replacement of Robin's family home with a tea shop symbolizes the commodification of local cultures and the prioritization of global trade practices over the preservation of indigenous heritage. Tea, as a central commodity in the context of British colonialism in China, becomes a metaphor for the broader economic forces that displace traditional lifestyles and communal spaces. This shift from a personal space to a commercial venture catering to global tastes starkly represents how local identities and needs are overridden by the demands of global markets. Similarly, the presence of a company office in the place of Robin's family residence signifies the direct imposition of foreign control within colonized spaces, serving as a stark reminder of the transformation of societal structures under colonial rule.

Moreover, the opium den, marked with the sign "huā yān guǎn" (302), embodies the devastating effects of the British-promoted opium trade on Chinese society. This establishment becomes a grim emblem of the colonial intrusion, reflecting the moral and ethical bankruptcy of exploiting societies for profit at the expense of their well-being and cultural integrity. Through Robin's eyes, the reader confronts the tangible loss of identity and the profound sense of dislocation wrought by these transformations. The erasure of his family home and its replacement with mechanisms of colonial commerce and exploitation illustrate the alienation and fragmentation of self-experienced by colonial subjects. Robin's inability to recognize his surroundings, and the absence of his family's home, encapsulate the painful existential crisis faced by individuals navigating a world where their cultural landmarks are erased, and their histories overwritten by foreign narratives of power and profit.

During their walk in Canton, Robin and Ramy engage in a conversation that unveils the intricate web of colonial violence, illustrating how colonialism, akin to capitalism, obscures, disconnects, and mystifies its operations. Their dialogue reveals that addressing the effects of colonialism in China is equally relevant as discussing them in India, highlighting the interconnectedness of colonial exploitation. This interaction encourages readers to perceive colonialism not as isolated occurrences but as a complex, systemic force that has fundamentally shaped and continues to influence global dynamics. The mention of Ramy's visit to an opium field in West Bengal, described vividly with "Rows and rows of flowers. A whole ocean of them. They're such bright scarlet that the fields look wrong, like the land itself is bleeding" (305), serves as a potent metaphor for the violence and exploitation at the core of the British Empire's opium trade, illustrating the transformation of the land and its far-reaching socio-economic and political consequences.

The mechanics of the opium trade from India to China are exposed, showcasing the global ramifications of colonial exploitation, with commodities like opium acting as symbols of displacement and suffering. The narrative, described by Robin as a "great spider's web" (305), highlights the complexity of colonialism's consequences, where the economic gains for colonizers come at a significant cost to the colonized. Ramy's comment, "The British are turning my homeland into a narco-military state to pump drugs into yours" (305), personalizes the colonial experience, emphasizing the human cost behind global transactions and policies. This personal dimension adds depth to the historical understanding, reminding the reader that behind abstract discussions of trade and economy are real communities whose lives are irrevocably altered.

The employment of sepoys, as discussed by Griffin, illustrates the British Empire's strategy of using colonized subjects against each other, a tactic extending beyond military strategy to encompass psychological and sociopolitical control. This divide and conquer strategy exacerbates societal divisions, tearing apart families and communities with conflicting loyalties. Griffin's reflection on the sepoy strategy in Afghanistan—"They're going to invade with troops from Bengal and Bombay . . . because those Indian troops have the same logic you do, which is that it's better to be a servant of the Empire, brutal coercion and all, than to resist" (218)—underscores the manipulative tactics of colonial governance, revealing the entrenched manipulation and coercion at the heart of colonial rule.

Babel thus offers a profound postcolonial critique of power and exploitation structures, urging readers to confront the legacies of colonialism that linger in contemporary societies. It challenges us to recognize, resist, and dismantle the cycles of violence and exploitation that colonialism has ingrained in the global fabric. The narrative's exploration of the opium fields, through Sir Horace's perspective, underscores the grotesque beauty and inherent violence of the colonial enterprise. The fields, described as potentially under Ramy's future supervision, symbolize not only the cultivation of opium but also the cultivation of colonial complicity, illustrating how the colonial project bleeds the land both physically and socio-economically.

The depiction of the opium fields as a site of narcotic production epitomizes the broader processes of colonial exploitation, where the extraction of natural and human resources serves the colonizer's interests. This change represents a broader ontological violence, reducing beings to their utility for the empire and erasing indigenous ties to the land. Ramy's observation of the empire's drug trade linking their homelands highlights the binding nature of colonial power,

suggesting potential solidarity among the oppressed. Furthermore, *Babel* navigates the dichotomy between disjunction and continuity in resistance portrayals, illustrating the complexities where the line between challenging and perpetuating the system becomes blurred. This nuanced exploration of resistance, from radical action to reformist compromise, encapsulates the internal conflicts faced by those under colonial rule, offering a spectrum of responses to oppression.

Upon Robin's return to the ship, a heated confrontation with Professor Lovell unfolds, encapsulating the thematic depth of their journey and providing a scathing critique of colonialism. Set in Lovell's cabin, the encounter provides a backdrop for a critical moment of reckoning that arises from their failed efforts in Canton. As the conversation between Robin and Lovell escalates, Robin denounces the opium trade and its effects on China. He challenges Lovell's authority and resolutely refuses to engage in any further activities associated with the opium trade. Lovell's effort to trivialize the situation with remarks such as "For heaven's sake, it's just a market. Don't be childish . . . It is a nation mired in superstition and antiquity, devoid of the rule of law, hopelessly behind the West on every possible register. It is a nation of semi-barbarous, incorrigibly backwards fools" (318) deeply insults Robin. Robin's bold declaration, "It's a sovereign nation . . . It's a nation of people" (318), coupled with his refusal to facilitate the colonial project of opium trade, underscores a critical moral awakening against the dehumanization inherent in colonialism, which views people merely as "just a market" (318). This moment marks a turning point in Robin's character, signifying a shift towards resistance rather than submission, as he realizes that non-participation in the exploitation of his people is the only viable path forward.

The confrontation further intensifies as Lovell accuses Robin of ingratitude for the opportunities he has been afforded. However, Robin's plea for recognition transcends the mere acknowledgment of these opportunities; he yearns to be seen beyond an "asset" (319) or a "talking

dictionary” (318), seeking acknowledgment as a son or, more fundamentally, as a human being. This longing for recognition exposes the deeply ingrained racist ideologies that underpin colonial hierarchies, revealing Robin’s realization that he will never be viewed as a person in his father’s eyes due to the lack of “blood purity of the European man” (319). This epiphany is not merely personal but serves as a commentary on the arbitrary nature of racial and colonial definitions of personhood. Through Robin’s quest for acknowledgment from Lovell—and, by extension, the colonial system Lovell embodies—the narrative delves into the search for dignity and the recognition of one’s humanity. Kuang’s work, through this emotionally charged confrontation, navigates the complex terrain of resistance ethics and the moral ambiguities that accompany the struggle against oppressive systems, presenting a compelling exploration of the human condition within the context of colonial exploitation.

The conversation between Robin and Lovell reaches a pivotal moment of escalation when Robin asks, “Who was my mother to you?” (319). This question is not simply a quest for personal recognition but serves as a profound critique of the colonial logic that views individuals solely through the lens of their utility. Robin’s inquiry into the significance of his mother’s existence in Lovell’s life reveals a disturbing reality; to Lovell, she was nothing more than a means to an end—a vessel to produce Robin, a tool himself for linguistic endeavors. Lovell’s dismissive attitude towards her death and his derogatory reference to her as “just some Chink” (319) vividly illustrate the dehumanization at play. This moment not only challenges the erasure of personal histories under the colonial gaze but also exposes the cold, mechanistic view of human relationships within the colonial mindset.

The significance of Robin’s inquiry about his mother transcends a mere personal quest for closure; it confronts the erasure of colonial violence and the obliteration of personal histories it

entails. Lovell's apathetic response, "Well, I'm sorry about your mother" (118), juxtaposed with his immediate focus on his steak, serves as a chilling symbol of colonial indifference. The gesture of slicing into the steak while ignoring a life lost to colonial machinations is a vivid metaphor for how the colonizer consumes and destroys without remorse. This moment visually and metaphorically encapsulates the violent extraction and consumption at the heart of colonial enterprise.

This incident displays the emotional and moral disconnect of the colonizer from the everyday experiences of the colonized, highlighting the fundamentally inhumane and exploitative character of colonialism. Deliberately avoiding confronting the hard realities of colonialism, particularly in interactions where the colonial entity has greater power, indicates a purposeful decision to maintain a status quo that disproportionately benefits the colonizer at the detriment of the colonized. This silence and conformity to colonial narratives act as mechanisms to preserve the existing power dynamics, ensuring that the atrocities and injustices inherent in colonialism remain unaddressed. Consequently, this perpetuates the cycle of harm inflicted upon the colonized populations while simultaneously guaranteeing the colonizer's privileges.

The escalating tension between Robin and Lovell is vividly portrayed through their exchange, with Robin accusing, "You killed her. And you didn't even bother to bury her" (319), and Lovell retorting, "It was the Asiatic Cholera that killed her" (319). This conversation encapsulates the essence of colonial rationalization, as Lovell's argument, "the Asiatic Cholera was a product of Canton's poor public hygiene, not the unequal distribution of bars" (118), typifies the colonial tactic of deflecting responsibility for suffering onto natural occurrences or local conditions, thus maintaining a façade of innocence. Contrary to this narrative, Kuang delves into the historical emergence and spread of Asiatic Cholera and the role of colonialism in exacerbating

health crises. Her detailed account, “In 1829, the plague that later became known as Asiatic Cholera made its way from Calcutta across the Bay of Bengal to the Far East . . . It hit Canton like a tidal wave” (5), refutes the colonial tendency to blame local conditions, instead underscoring the interconnectedness between colonial expansion and the globalization of health crises.

In a significant following moment that heightens the tension between Lovell and Robin, the professor makes an intriguing comparison concerning the nature of Robin’s process of *production*. Lovell states that he believes “having offspring is a kind of translation of its own. Especially when the parents are of such vastly different stock” (319), suggesting that producing offspring is similar to translating from one language to another. This metaphor is rich with irony, as translation inherently involves a source and a target, implying dependence on two distinct entities. Lovell’s observation underscores the complexity of blending distinct heritages, hinting at his curiosity about the outcome of such a mix. His words, “One is curious to see what ends up coming through” (320), underscore a keen interest in the resultant blend of traits in Robin, reflecting a deeper quest for a specific outcome in the progeny’s development.

Lovell’s intentions are revealed to be more sinister than mere academic interest in genetic or cultural translation. He harbors a desire for genetic imprinting³ where the traits of one partner overshadow those of the other, effectively seeking to engineer Robin to match a preferred narrative. This approach reveals a profound bias, positioning heritage and identity as flexible constructs that can be shaped according to one’s desires. By referring to Robin’s lineage as “stock” and pondering the traits that “come through,” Lovell commodifies the child, reducing him to an object of cultural engineering. This perspective strips the act of raising a child of its humanistic

³ “Genomic imprinting is the process by which only one copy of a gene in an individual (either from their mother or their father) is expressed, while the other copy is suppressed” (“Genetic Imprinting”)

essence, relegating it to a mere experiment in breeding. Such a viewpoint not only dehumanizes Robin but also echoes a colonial mindset that elevates certain heritages above others, revealing a problematic valuation of identity.

The dialogue further explores the enduring debate of nature versus nurture, with Lovell's comments initially suggesting a belief in the transformative power of upbringing and education. He expresses his wish that by cultivating in Robin a set of values and ethics, he will be superior to his brother. However, Lovell's concluding remark, lamenting the inability to elevate Robin from his "base, original stock" (320) signals a shift to a deterministic perspective. This shift indicates a belief that inherent qualities and cultural heritage are insurmountable by external influences. Lovell's reference to the Latin phrase, "*Quo semel est imbuta recens, servabit odorem testa diu*" (320), encapsulates his frustration, suggesting that despite his efforts to raise Robin with certain values and ethics, to be a more "elevated cask" (320), his inherent nature or "base, original stock" prevails. This suggests that Lovell feels his attempts to "translate" Robin into a certain kind of person have been unsuccessful, and the *fundamental* characteristics, inherited from the mother, remain dominant.

This tension reaches its zenith when Robin demands that Lovell acknowledge his mother's existence by simply uttering her name, a plea that Lovell denies, epitomizing the colonial refusal to recognize the humaneness and individuality of those it subjugates. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said articulates this dynamic succinctly by quoting Fanon's insight in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity . . . The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying

the settler. On the logical plane, the Manicheanism of the settler produces a Manicheanism of the natives, to the theory of the “absolute evil of the native” the theory of the “absolute evil of the settler” replies. (qtd. in Said 271)

This theoretical framework is vividly brought to life in the confrontation between Robin and Lovell, where Robin’s insistence and Lovell’s refusal reflect the broader struggle for recognition, autonomy, and the right to remember and honor one’s past within the oppressive structures of colonialism.

Robin’s demand, “Say her name” (320), and Lovell’s ultimate refusal, followed by Robin’s refusal to back down, signify more than just a personal feud; they represent the clash of ideologies and the inherent violence of colonial erasure. The moment Lovell pushes his chair back, standing in opposition to Robin’s demand, symbolizes the broader colonial stance of denying the colonized their voice, history, and identity. The narrative tension culminates in Robin’s act of violence, not just as an act of personal revenge but as a symbol of the broader struggle against colonialism. This scene, where Robin’s hands form fists and he steps forward to challenge Lovell, encapsulates the transformation of the oppressed into an agent of change, albeit through violent means. This transformation parallels Fanon’s observation that “The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes” (*Black Skin* 140), highlighting the inevitable eruption of violence as a response to systemic dehumanization and oppression.

Robin’s internal conflict and his ultimate act of violence against Professor Lovell can be understood through Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the colonized psyche. Fanon posits that the path to liberation is inherently violent, necessitating a confrontation with the colonial forces that dehumanize and oppress. The act of violence, in this context, becomes a cathartic assertion of agency by Robin, a rejection of the colonial narrative that has sought to define his existence. This

moment is a critical juncture where Robin, armed with the “machine gun” of his own voice and actions, confronts the “only force which challenges his very being: colonialism” (*Wretched* 20). It signifies a rupture from the imposed identity and a reclaiming of his autonomy, albeit through means that mirror the violence of the colonial condition itself.

The destruction of Babel, which will be explored later, and the murder of Lovell serve as powerful metaphors for Robin’s rejection of the colonial enterprise and its values. This act is not merely a moment of personal vengeance, but a profound statement against the colonial powers. Babel, symbolizing the peak of colonial scholarship and linguistic dominance, represents the intellectual and cultural domination that colonialism imposes. Robin’s decision to kill Lovell, thereby killing the part of himself nurtured by colonialism, embodies the violent but necessary process of decolonization described by Fanon, where “national liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event” (*Wretched* 1). This act of destruction is both a literal and symbolic rejection of the structures that have oppressed him and others, highlighting the complexities of seeking liberation within a system built on exploitation and dehumanization.

Upon their return to London, Robin and his companions settle into Lovell’s Hampstead home. It is here that Robin discovers a collection of letters revealing the elaborate tactics devised by British imperialists to instigate a conflict with China. The letters, filled with cold calculations and chilling foresight, uncover a plot to incite conflicts under the guise of trade disagreements. This discovery highlights the British intent to use military force for economic gain—specifically to secure silver—eschewing any genuine diplomatic engagement with Commissioner Lin. The correspondence between figures such as Jardine, Matheson, and Lovell

and the complicity of missionaries like Reverends Morrison and Gützlaff reveal a deliberate plan to alter political and military scenarios in favor of Britain. The phrase “tranquil and judicious visit” (349) is used euphemistically, masking the violent reality of the planned aggression and unveiling the depth of imperial deceitfulness. Through Robin’s realization, Kuang compels the reader to confront the ways in which language and narrative are manipulated to sanitize and legitimize aggression.

The murders of Griffin and Ramy, whom Robin deeply cared for, serve as a turning point, pushing him towards radical action. His decision to seize Babel alongside Victoire and demand an end to the war with China is not merely a political statement but a manifestation of Robin’s grief and anger. It marks his transition from passive participant to active resistor against the colonial machine. Yet, this transformation is complex, as it mirrors the violence and apathy of the empire he seeks to dismantle. His readiness to sacrifice civilian lives in the shutdown of the tower reveals a darker aspect of his rebellion, signaling a departure from the principled stance against violence he once held.

The scene where Robin contemplates the complete destruction of Oxford encapsulates his internal conflict and desire for revenge:

Privately, Robin did not want this to end. He would never confess it to the others, but deep down, where the ghosts of Griffin and Ramy resided, he did not want a speedy resolution, a nominal settlement that only papered over decades of exploitation. He wanted to see how far he could take this. He wanted to see Oxford broken down to its foundations, wanted its fat, golden opulence to slough away; for its pale, elegant bricks to crumble to pieces; for its turrets to smash against cobblestones; for its bookshelves to collapse like dominoes. He wanted the whole

place dismantled so thoroughly that it would be as if it had never been built. All those buildings assembled by slaves, paid for by slaves, and stuffed with artefacts stolen from conquered lands, those buildings which had no right to exist, whose ongoing existence demanded continuous extraction and violence—destroyed, undone. (471-2)

This thought process goes beyond a simple quest for justice; it reflects a deeper, more visceral need to erase the symbols of colonial power and exploitation that Oxford represents. Robin's wish to see these structures undone is a powerful testament to his radical shift in perspective—from seeking reform within the system to desiring its total annihilation.

Robin's transformation also highlights the psychological impact of colonialism, particularly through the lens of loss of identity and dehumanization. The systematic abuse and commodification experienced by individuals under colonial rule can lead to a profound sense of alienation from oneself and one's values. This alienation is a driving force behind Robin's extreme actions, as he no longer adheres to the social norms or values he once held. His desensitization to violence is a tragic consequence of continuous exposure to colonial brutality, leading him to view violent actions as normal or even justified. This shift in perception underscores the cycle of violence that colonialism perpetuates, where victims of abuse may internalize and later enact the violence they experienced.

Moreover, Robin's moral disengagement, where he justifies his actions as rightful retaliation against his oppressors, signifies a coping mechanism to deal with the guilt or moral conflict associated with such actions. This process of rationalization is intricately tied to the loss of empathy, particularly evident in his disregard for harming innocent people. The novel delves into the damaging impact of colonial oppression, illustrating how it leads to a complex pathway

from victimization to aggression and underscores the tragic perpetuation of violence in a vicious cycle.

Robin's assertion, "But that's precisely the devil's trick," Robin insisted. "This is how colonialism works. It convinces us that the fallout from resistance is entirely our fault, that the immoral choice is resistance itself rather than the circumstances that demanded it" (497), reveals a critical insight into the manipulative nature of colonial power. This remark encapsulates the novel's exploration of the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, emphasizing how colonialism distorts the moral compass of the oppressed, framing their resistance as the root of immorality rather than the oppressive conditions necessitating it.

After the failure of sieging Tower to guarantee a decision that the British Empire would not take military action against China over the opium trade, Robin, along with other characters, decides to sacrifice themselves to ensure the tower's destruction. Robin's plan involves destroying Babel to trigger a chain reaction using silver bars engraved with the word translation in various languages, creating a paradox that the bars cannot resolve, causing them to shatter violently. By doing this, Robin renders all the silver in Babel unusable, effectively destroying its ability to conduct translation and silver-working operations. As he contemplates the imminent collapse of Babel and his own death, the narrative juxtaposes his reflections against Professor Craft's quotations from classical authors on the nature of death. She says, "*Death is nature's greatest good. Death is a better state. Death frees the immortal soul*" (532). This intellectualization of death, presented as a source of comfort, starkly contrasts with the raw fear and grief experienced by Robin and his companions. Kuang thus captures the disconnect between theoretical discourse on suffering and death and the terrifying reality of facing one's end. This discrepancy underscores the limitations of intellectualized approaches to human

suffering, highlighting the inadequacy of philosophical traditions to address the complexities and traumas of colonial violence.

As Robin juxtaposes the intellectual debates on freedom and liberty he once engaged in with the reality of the empire's cruelty, the narrative lays bare the hollowness of privileged intellectual pursuits. The realization that discussions on abstract concepts like freedom, conducted in the comfort of academic institutions, are detached from the lived experiences of those suffering under colonial rule, is a powerful indictment of the complicity of intellectualism in perpetuating colonial injustices. This epiphany acts as a critical reflection on the gap between theory and reality, stressing the importance of grounding conceptual debates in the material conditions of human existence.

Through these scenes, Kuang not only critiques the British Empire's imperial ambitions but also interrogates the role of language and intellectual discourse in sustaining power dynamics. The novel's exploration of the paradoxes of translation, the limitations of purely intellectual approaches to understanding suffering, and the dissonance between academic theory and colonial realities, offers a profound postcolonial critique. It invites readers to reassess the implications of translation and communication within the framework of empire, as well as the moral responsibilities of those involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Chapter 5 - Words Unbound: *Babel's* Reckoning with the Myth of a Transcendental Signified

But what struck him most just then was the beauty. The bars were singing, shaking; trying, he thought, to express some unutterable truth about themselves, which was that translation was impossible, that the realm of pure meaning they captured and manifested would and could not ever be known, that the enterprise of this tower had been impossible from inception.

For how could there ever be an Adamic language? The thought now made him laugh. There was no innate, perfectly comprehensible language; there was no candidate, not English, not French, that could bully and absorb enough to become one. Language was just difference. A thousand different ways of seeing, of moving through the world. No; a thousand worlds within one. And translation – a necessary endeavour, however futile, to move between them. (Kuang 535)

In summary, the novel illustrates how the British Empire, despite its vast reach and power, relied heavily on the very cultures it sought to dominate, as Kuang vividly describes: “the British . . . could not manage to do basic things like bake bread or get safely from one place to another without words stolen from other countries” (471). This reliance on appropriated words underscores the paradoxical nature of colonialism, which both reveres and seeks to obliterate the cultures it dominates. Kuang delves deeper into this contradiction through the character of Cathy, who notes, “that’s the great contradiction of colonialism . . . ‘It’s built to destroy that which it prizes most’” (384). Here, Kuang not only critiques the self-defeating nature of colonialism but also suggests a broader, more devastating loss—the erosion of cultural diversity and knowledge that results when one culture asserts dominance and supremacy over others.

Babel is filled with vivid examples of how the West forcefully imposes its languages and cultures. These instances reverberate throughout the novel's interactions, as in Professor Lovell's imperious command to Robin, "English. Use your English" (5), the authoritative tone of Mr. Trevelyan, who orders Ramy to, "Count to ten in English" (270), and the coercive force of Madame Desjardins, who relentlessly silenced Kreyòl with a stern rebuke, "Shut up . . . 'I told you, you must speak French, the Frenchman's French" (539-40). These vivid scenes resound as stark echoes of both historical and contemporary Western rhetoric, where the lofty mission to *illuminate* and *civilize* other cultures frequently entails the erasure of indigenous languages and the imposition of Western imperialist agendas. The connection between *Babel* and today's global conversations underscores the enduring importance of these themes, demanding a reassessment of the current power imbalances and the enduring legacies of colonialism.

Kuang's narrative further suggests that the West parallels the Derridean notion of the *transcendental signified*. In this framing, the West attempts to assert itself as the ultimate source of meaning and truth, an effort Kuang critiques through the novel's exploration of language and translation. Its endeavor to universalize its values and language mirrors Derrida's critique of the search for a universal center of meaning, which he argues is impossible due to the endless deferral of meaning through an ongoing chain of signifiers. This critique is embodied in the novel's depiction of the Hermes society, which is dedicated to projects that challenge the linguistic imperialism of the English language and by extension its speakers. The society's efforts, as described, "a number of ongoing projects, which Anthony introduced with pride. These included the compilation of dictionaries between regional languages ('We lose a lot by assuming everything must first come through English'), non-English silver match-pairs ('Same principle – Babel won't fund match-pairs that don't translate into English since all of its bars are for use by the British. But

that's like painting with only one colour, or playing only one note on a piano" (382-3), showcase a resistance to the monolingual and monocultural dominance of the British Empire, positioning language and culture as sites of power and a battleground to gain legitimacy and assert resistance.

Moreover, *Babel* casts a critical eye on the academic world, exposing its complicity in the structures of colonialism and imperialism. The novel reveals the selective inclusivity of academic institutions, as illustrated when Professor Playfair explains that "Babel alone among the Oxford faculties accepts students not of European origin. Nowhere else in this country will you find Hindus, Muslims, Africans, and Chinamen studying under the same roof. [Babel accepts them] not despite, but because of [their] foreign backgrounds" (81). This statement, while seemingly progressive, hints at the underlying motivations of such institutions that embrace diversity only when it aligns with their interests. This selective inclusivity aligns Homi Bhabha's observation in *The Location of Culture*, where he notes that "States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to 'diversity', at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor" (xiv). Through these layers of narrative and critique, Kuang not only dissects the hypocrisy inherent in academia and broader societal structures but also challenges the reader to reconsider the value and implications of true diversity and inclusion in the face of power dynamics shaped by colonialism and imperialism.

In conclusion, Kuang's *Babel* "is a book about colonialism, its impact on the colonized, on culture, on history, on the very concept of civilization itself" (Kelley 8). Through its complex characters, layered narrative, and intricate exploration of the impact of colonialism, *Babel* makes a significant contribution to post-colonial conversation. The novel's depiction of the

violence, dehumanization, and power imbalances in the colonial system emphasizes the continued significance and value of critical evaluations of colonialism in present-day society. By shedding light on the complexities and contradictions of colonial dynamics, Kuang's novel adds to the ongoing conversation about how to address the legacies of colonialism and how to challenge them. The novel also urges us to reconsider our attitudes towards accepting and accumulating blood-stained capital and commodities and to care, even if the matter pertains to those who are viewed as the Other, be it "the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India, [or] the 'niggers' of Africa" (Césaire 36), building on Fanon's assertion that

What matters now is not a question of profitability, not a question of increased productivity, not a question of production rates. No, it is not a question of back to nature. It is the very basic question of not dragging man in directions which mutilate him, of not imposing on his brain tempos that rapidly obliterate and unhinge it. The notion of catching up must not be used as a pretext to brutalize man, to tear him from himself and his inner consciousness, to break him, to kill him. (*Wretched* 238)

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