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## From Victim to Perpetrator: A Study of Robin's Trauma in *Babel*

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### | ABSTRACT

The novel *Babel: Or, The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* has garnered significant acclaim since its publication, praised for its intricate exploration of colonialism, language, and identity. This paper employs postcolonial trauma theory, with a particular focus on Frantz Fanon's research on the psychological effects of colonialism, as the theoretical framework to analyze the text. The study zeroes in on the character Robin, examining the trauma symptoms associated with his fractured identity and psychological struggles within the colonial context depicted in the novel. The analysis begins by elucidating the various manifestations of Robin's trauma, followed by an in-depth exploration of the causes rooted in the systemic discrimination imposed by colonizers, the emotional scars from family-related traumas, and the compounded grief from the successive deaths of those close to him. The paper reveals that Robin's trauma, rather than being alleviated through acts of resistance, becomes increasingly entrenched, culminating in his tragic demise. This exploration not only underscores the destructive impact of colonial oppression on individual identity but also contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonial trauma in literature.

### | KEYWORDS

Trauma, *Babel*, Rebecca F. Kuang, Frantz Fanon, postcolonial literature, colonial identity

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### 1. Introduction

Rebecca F. Kuang (1996–) is a renowned Chinese-American writer, born in Guangdong Province, China, who later immigrated to the United States. She is currently pursuing a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University. Kuang had already established her place in the literary world with her *Poppy War* trilogy and *Yellowface* (2023). Her novel *Babel: Or, The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) received widespread acclaim, topping the *New York Times* bestseller list, earning a spot on the 2022 Waterstones Book of the Year shortlist, and winning the 58th Nebula Award for Best Novel. Kuang's works have solidified her as one of the most prominent voices in contemporary speculative fiction, blending historical and fantastical elements with incisive social commentary.

Set in the 1820s, *Babel* tells the story of a young boy from Guangzhou, Robin Swift, who is adopted by an Englishman, Professor Lovell, and sent to Oxford University's Royal Institute of Translation in 1828, ultimately leading a rebellion against colonial rule. The novel delves into complex themes such as colonialism, gender, economics, race, and magic. It also touches on historical events familiar to Chinese readers, such as the First Opium War, allowing for greater cultural resonance. *Babel* is not only an outstanding speculative novel but also a significant contribution to American ethnic literature.

Diaz (2024) noted a particular comment by Ashley Keimach, who found it unconvincing for a character described as "kind of a coward" to suddenly muster enough courage to commit suicide (Kuang, 2022, p. 35). Is there indeed a flaw in Robin's act of rebellion? Was his death inevitable? This study examines Robin's traumatic experiences, the causes of his trauma, and the actions he took to address these issues, aiming to reveal the intricate interplay between personal trauma and the broader colonial context.

## 2. Literature Review

Since the publication of *Babel*, numerous scholars have conducted research on the novel. Compared to the extensive studies abroad, research in China has been relatively limited. A search on CNKI reveals only one paper, which primarily analyzes Robin's identity construction from a postcolonial perspective (Yang, 2024). While international scholars have not only focused on the text itself, some have also engaged in comparative studies. Diaz (2024), in her dissertation "An Examination of *Fourth Wing* and *Babel*," compares the two works from a postcolonial perspective, examining how the anti-totalitarian narratives in both novels imagine different political realities. Other scholars have explored the connection with biblical stories, with Hoke (2022) examining the relationship between the narrative in *Babel* and the Genesis story in the Bible. Bongoyan (2023) analyzes R. F. Kuang's writing and connections with academic texts about the inclusion of politics in fiction.

The theoretical cornerstone of this study is the postcolonial trauma framework developed by Frantz Fanon (1925–1961). In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), a work that draws on extensive research into the behaviors of colonized individuals, Fanon offers a pioneering integration of psychoanalysis with postcolonial literary studies, providing a profound examination of how colonized individuals lose their sense of self as their bodies and desires become subordinated to the white colonial world. As Tao (2014, p. 138) observes, "we can't avoid Fanon in trauma." Craps and Buelens (2008) emphasize that Fanon's analysis "brings to light the harm done to marginalized groups by continuous exposure to a galaxy of erosive stereotypes," which causes feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred (p. 3). Craps (2013) defines postcolonial trauma as "the specific forms of trauma produced by colonial wars, by colonization itself, and, more diffusely, by racism" (p. 2).

Cathy Caruth (1955–), the leading figure of trauma studies, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1991, p. 181). Sanchez-Taylor (2023) notes that Robin is "both invisible and hyper visible," and that his survival depends on his awareness that he will never be able to fully integrate into a white-dominated colonial culture (p. 9). Together, these frameworks provide the analytical foundation for examining how Robin's colonial environment generates, sustains, and ultimately destroys him.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, close-reading approach grounded in postcolonial trauma theory. The primary text is Kuang's (2022) *Babel*, and textual evidence is drawn directly from the novel. Secondary scholarly sources are consulted to contextualize findings within the broader fields of postcolonial and trauma studies.

Fanon's (1967) framework is selected as the primary theoretical lens for several reasons. Unlike generic trauma theory, which tends to focus on individual psychological rupture in isolation, Fanon specifically theorizes the intersection of colonial oppression and psychological damage, arguing that the colonized subject's identity crisis is not incidental but structurally produced by the colonial system. This makes his framework particularly apt for analyzing Robin, whose trauma cannot be separated from the racial and imperial hierarchies of nineteenth-century Britain. Furthermore, Fanon's concept of the "inferiority complex" and his account of how the colonized may internalize and eventually replicate colonial violence directly illuminate Robin's trajectory from victim to perpetrator—a dynamic that other postcolonial frameworks, such as Bhabha's mimicry or Said's Orientalism, do not address with the same psychological precision. Caruth's (1991) trauma theory and Alexander's (2004) work on cultural trauma are used as supplementary frameworks to account for the delayed, repetitive nature of Robin's traumatic responses and the collective dimensions of colonial suffering.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: identification of Robin's trauma manifestations and their roots, examination of the colonial causes that produce and sustain his trauma, and exploration of the consequences of his attempts to work through it. This progression mirrors the structure of Fanon's own diagnostic method, moving from symptom to cause to (failed) resolution.

## 4. Traumatic Experiences: Roots and Repression

The concept of "trauma" in this study refers specifically to postcolonial trauma: "the specific forms of trauma produced by colonial wars, by colonization itself, and, more diffusely, by racism" (Craps, 2013, p. 2). Robin's trauma manifests across three interrelated dimensions: family rupture, identity fragmentation, and accumulated loss.

Robin's earliest trauma originates in family rupture. His mother's death from plague in Guangzhou severed him from his cultural roots, producing feelings of abandonment and helplessness. The subsequent revelation that Professor Lovell was his biological father compounded this wound: Lovell treated Robin not as a son but as a colonial instrument, concerned only with academic utility. "Robin felt a fierce urge to cry. He forced it down. Hurt never garnered sympathy from his father" (Kuang, 2022, p. 321). According to Caruth (1991), traumatic responses are often delayed and denied due to the overwhelming force of the original event—a pattern evident in Robin's prolonged suppression of grief and his desperate wish for his father to "look him in the face" (Kuang, 2022, p. 128).

Robin's trauma also manifests as persistent identity fragmentation. As a biracial Chinese man in Victorian Britain, he occupies a liminal position: visually able to blend into British society yet constantly marked as other. Fanon (1967) identifies this condition as an "inferiority complex," particularly acute among the educated colonized, who must "struggle with it unceasingly" (p. 18). Robin's internalization of this complex is evident in his belief that "he had no right to be resentful" and that he "understood the necessity of gratitude, of deference" (Kuang, 2022, p. 17). After Griffin reveals the true nature of Babel's colonial function, Robin feels he "would quite literally burst, unless he stopped being double" (Kuang, 2022, p. 319)—a crisis of self that signals the unsustainability of his split identity.

Finally, the successive deaths of those closest to him—his mother, Griffin, and Ramy, alongside Letty's betrayal—compound Robin's trauma into an overwhelming accumulation of loss. The killing of his father, far from providing release, produces guilt and psychological instability: "Awake and asleep, he examined the same moment from a thousand different angles until he truly no longer knew what had happened" (Kuang, 2022, p. 332). These losses transform Robin's passive suffering into an active, revenge-driven psychological state that sets the stage for his radicalization.

## **5. Trauma Causes: Colonial Impact**

While section 4 identifies the symptoms of Robin's trauma, this section examines their root cause: the systematic colonial oppression that structures every dimension of his life. As Zhang (2024, p. 45) observes, colonists sought not merely to control a colony but to "distort, denigrate, destroy its culture and history, and impose their own culture." *Babel* dramatizes this dynamic through the institution itself, which extracts the linguistic labor of non-Western scholars to fuel British imperial expansion while denying them full humanity.

The colonial logic of *Babel* produces Robin's trauma in two reinforcing ways: through direct racial violence and through the subtler violence of enforced gratitude. When Robin attempts to correct a classmate's orientalist assumptions about foot-binding, he is simply disbelieved (Kuang, 2022, p. 69). Despite his academic excellence, he is treated as "an asset" who should be "undyingly grateful" (Kuang, 2022, p. 320). This enforced gratitude is itself a colonial mechanism: it prevents the colonized from naming their own exploitation, deepening the inferiority complex Fanon (1967) identifies as central to colonial psychology.

Wang (2010, p. 120) notes that in Fanon's view, the mental illness of the colonized originates fundamentally from political, economic, and ideological oppression, and that only the dismantling of these structures can eliminate its root cause. Robin's escalating psychological instability—his violent fantasies, his guilt-ridden patricide, his susceptibility to Griffin's revolutionary logic—are therefore not character flaws but symptoms of a system designed to make the colonized subject psychologically uninhabitable to themselves. His trauma is, in this sense, colonial policy made flesh.

## **6. Working through Trauma: Inevitable Death**

Fanon (1967, p. 100) suggests that a path toward psychological recovery requires individuals to "abandon attempts at a hallucinatory whitening" and sincerely accept their own identity. Robin does ultimately reach this point of clarity, declaring that there is "no straddling the line" and choosing to embrace his Chinese heritage over complicity with empire (Kuang, 2022, p. 429). Yet this identity consolidation does not constitute a working-through of trauma—it merely redirects it. Robin's resolution takes the form not of healing but of destruction.

His progression from repression to violence follows the trajectory Fanon (1967) describes for the colonized subject who internalizes colonial logic: having absorbed the violence of the system, Robin can only imagine liberation in its terms. His fantasies of harm, his patricide, his seizure of *Babel*, and his final declaration—"I'm underwater. And I've been underwater for so long ... this is my way out" (Kuang, 2022, p. 516)—all reflect a psyche that has never found a language for recovery outside of annihilation. As he himself acknowledges during the occupation of *Babel*, "This was not him speaking; this was the ghost of Griffin, the braver, madder brother, reaching through the underworld to pull his strings" (Kuang, 2022, p. 449). He has become the instrument of another's violence rather than the author of his own healing.

Robin's death is thus not a failure of courage, as Keimach suggests, but the inevitable terminus of unresolved colonial trauma. He cannot imagine a future because the colonial system has ensured he was never given the psychological resources to build one. His suicide is the final, tragic confirmation of Fanon's thesis: that colonialism does not merely exploit the body—it forecloses the self.

## **7. Conclusion**

Robin's journey in *Babel* is a harrowing exploration of the psychological toll of colonial oppression. His trauma is rooted in the loss of his mother, emotional abandonment by his father, systemic racial discrimination, and the successive deaths of those closest to him. These elements coalesce to form a fractured identity, pushing Robin from passive suffering toward active

rebellion. Fanon's theory of colonial trauma offers a crucial framework for understanding this trajectory, illustrating how colonialism exacerbates inner turmoil and propels the colonized into a cycle of violence and self-annihilation.

Robin's transformation from victim to perpetrator reveals that establishing a coherent identity does not equate to overcoming trauma. His internalization of the very logic of violence employed by the colonizers demonstrates that colonial oppression not only subjugates the body but also distorts the psyche in ways that persist long after resistance begins. This analysis underscores the importance of examining postcolonial trauma not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a profound psychological reality, and contributes to the broader discourse on how colonialism fractures individual identities and shapes self-destructive behavior.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring trauma representation in other postcolonial literary works, examining how different authors depict the psychological scars left by colonialism across diverse cultural contexts. Comparative analyses across regions could reveal both the commonalities and unique aspects of colonial experiences, further deepening our understanding of the long-term consequences of historical injustices.

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