

ETHNIC OPPRESSION IN R.F. KUANG'S *THE POPPY WAR* BOOK

Balqis Affanin Kanza, M. Thoyibi

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: zzzkhanza@gmail.com

Received: 2025-04-22

Accepted: 2025-06-12

Published: 2025-06-26

Abstract

This study explores the representation of ethnic oppression in R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* (2018) using a qualitative literary approach. It focuses on three main objectives: (1) identifying indicators of ethnic oppression within the novel; (2) analyzing how these forms of oppression are portrayed through literary elements such as characterization, setting, and plot; and (3) examining the motivations behind Kuang's engagement with this theme. The primary data source is the novel itself, supported by secondary materials including academic journals, interviews, and historical texts. The analysis reveals three dominant indicators of ethnic oppression in the novel: systemic marginalization, cultural erasure, and institutional prejudice. These are conveyed through narrative elements and key events involving marginalized groups such as the Speerlies. The findings suggest that Kuang uses the fantasy setting of *The Poppy War* to reflect on historical injustices and process personal and familial trauma rooted in real-world events. Through this lens, the novel serves as both social critique and historical reflection.

Keywords: *Ethnic oppression; R. F. Kuang; The Poppy War*

1. Introduction

Issues of prejudice and unfair treatment of other ethnic groups are only a few examples of real-world problems that have found a voice in fantasy literature (Muś, Iwan-Sojka, and Depta, 2024). The fantastical settings and characters in these novels provide fresh perspectives on heavy subjects. In her 2018 fantasy novel *The Poppy War*, R.F. Kuang follows Rin, an orphan from a previous war, as she learns about her unique abilities at a military academy. Her experience is emblematic of the struggles endured by marginalized communities. The novel's portrayal of ethnic discrimination can provide an insightful analysis of the ways in which real-world ethnic oppression can manifest in various forms (Fitri Amalia and Hartono, 2023).

The representation of ethnic minorities in literature provides valuable insights into societal problems both old and new (Dhobi, 2022). Many have examined this in mainstream literature, but fewer have looked at how fantasy novels handle these weighty issues. Creating a sense of detachment from real events while maintaining significant linkages to real concerns allows fantasy fiction to occasionally address difficult topics with greater impact (Garcia, 2021). Examining the tale and characters of *The Poppy War* in light of its depiction of ethnic oppression is the goal of this research. We can learn more about how

literature mirrors and critiques real-life prejudice by analyzing the novel's depiction of ethnic oppression experiences (Al-Ramadan, 2023). This research is significant because it provides readers with analytical tools to recognize patterns of prejudice. The distinctive role of fantasy literature as a medium for social critique is especially crucial when analyzing works such as *The Poppy War*. Although conventional historical fiction may be limited by the requirement for precise factual fidelity, fantasy allows authors to investigate intricate social events through its narrative (Attebery, 2022). This literary freedom allows authors to address difficult topics while giving readers sufficient emotional detachment to reflect on challenging concepts (Schroeder, 2024).

Rin's journey illustrates how educational institutions may provide alternatives for development while sustaining hierarchies in social structure. The narrative illustrates how academic organizations, although proclaiming meritocracy, frequently sustain ethnic and social prejudice through both direct and indirect mechanisms (Alvinus, 2022). The in-depth examination of oppression illustrates the actual processes in which oppressed groups encounter both visible and disguised limitations to social mobility (Meerman, 2005). This paper aims to analyze the narrative and characters of *The Poppy War* about its portrayal of ethnic oppression. Analyzing the novel's depiction of ethnic oppression experiences provides a deeper understanding of how literature reflects and critiques real-life oppression (Dimaano, 2018). The fantasy genre's capacity to address these concerns through narrative elements makes works like *The Poppy War* particularly important for understanding and reflecting on ethnic oppression in modern society. Examining the novel's depiction of these dynamics enhances our awareness of the enduring nature of ethnic oppression and the diverse methods communities implement to oppose and resist such oppression (Putra, Kistanto, and Suryadi, 2023).

The importance of this research goes beyond literary interpretation. Many minority groups still face prejudice and unfair treatment in societies; therefore, the book's discussion of ethnic oppression is relevant even now (Oakes, Oakeley, and Goke-Pariola, 2021). Analyzing the interaction between fantasy fiction and real-world ethnic oppression improves the understanding of creative writing's role in social criticism and activism (Ormrod, 2014). This research seeks to illustrate how fantasy literature, through careful analysis of *The Poppy War*'s depiction of ethnic oppression, may enhance larger awareness regarding social concerns in modern society.

2. Literature Review

One study by Healey (2021) examines how *the Poppy War* novels (2018–2020) examine the potential and constraints of hybridity in terms of form and culture in order to redefine history. Examined is the way in which these pieces use formal hybridity to address colonial themes of transculturation. Although this research focuses on hybridity rather than ethnic oppression specifically, it is still relevant because it examines how *The Poppy War* reinterprets historical themes and links to broader postcolonial discourse.

Another analysis by Jannah et al. (2024), in terms of intersectional oppression. According to their research, Rin, the main character, encounters various types of racial, class, and gender-based oppression. According to the study, powerlessness, violence, cultural imperialism, and marginalization are examples of oppressive behaviors. Although this study and the current one both deal with oppression, the focus of this research is intersectional feminist perspectives rather than ethnic oppression in particular.

Further research explores the way in which R.F. Kuang addresses postcolonial themes in her writings examined by (Bosma, 2024). Their argument focuses on how *The Poppy War* uses fantasy to depict historical occurrences, especially the Nanjing Massacre. While this study examines how fantasy can address historical trauma, it does so from a wider perspective across Kuang's entire body of work rather than concentrating on ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War*.

Another study by Hannum, Caroline Morgan, B.A. (2024) explores *The Poppy War* in relation to female protagonists in contemporary fantasy, looking at how writers such as Kuang have developed nuanced female characters that provide readers and academics with fresh viewpoints. Despite addressing *The Poppy War*, this study concentrates on gender portrayal as opposed to ethnic persecution.

A different study by Khoirunnisa and Wulan (2023), investigates depictions of society in the novel. Themes such as women's marginalization, coerced marriages, and unequal education are analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method and a sociological approach. This investigation emphasizes the convergence of literary and sociological analysis, with an emphasis on historical contexts and cultural values.

Another study carried out by Mzyk (2023), emphasizes the impact of trauma on the character's growth. Psychological frameworks are employed to examine maladaptive coping mechanisms in the article, which emphasizes the significance of addressing characters that are often neglected in literary criticism. It is comparable to the examination of marginalized identities in literature.

Although previous studies have examined *The Poppy War* through the lenses of hybridity, trauma, gender, and intersectionality, they have not directly addressed the specific issue of ethnic oppression in the novel. To fulfill this gap, the current study will identify ethnic oppression indicators, analyze their literary depiction, and investigate Kuang's related focus on ethnic oppression.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach, employing close reading to examine how ethnic oppression is represented in R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* (2018). The qualitative method is suitable for exploring complex social themes in literature through interpretive and contextual analysis (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, this research follows the data analysis framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This framework allows for the systematic interpretation of textual data and facilitates the identification of key themes related to oppression.

The formal object of this research is the concept of ethnic oppression as presented in literary works. The material object is *The Poppy War*, a historical fantasy novel that draws heavily on East Asian history, particularly the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre. The analysis focuses on how ethnic oppression is constructed through characterization, narrative structure, setting, dialogue, and diction.

The primary data source is the text of *The Poppy War*. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, historical documents, author interviews, and theoretical works on oppression and postcolonialism. These supplementary materials provide the socio-historical context necessary for interpreting the literary elements and thematic concerns of the novel.

This research is interpretive and analytical, aiming to illuminate the underlying systems of oppression embedded in Kuang's fictional world, and how they mirror real-world structures. The use of literary theory and sociological perspectives enhances the depth of analysis, positioning the work within the broader discourse on ethnic injustice and historical trauma.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Indicators of Ethnic Oppression in *The Poppy War*

R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* presents a multifaceted and historically resonant portrayal of ethnic oppression, centering primarily on the experiences of the Speerlies—an ethnic minority subject to systemic subjugation by the Nikara Empire and external imperial forces such as the Federation of Mugen. Through a detailed close reading, this study identifies three overarching indicators of ethnic oppression depicted in the novel:

1. Systemic Marginalization – embodied in patterns of economic, social, and institutional exclusion;
2. Cultural Erasure – evident in the deliberate destruction and suppression of ethnic identity, language, history, and religious practices;
3. Institutional Prejudice – manifested through the educational system, the military, and state ideologies that dehumanize and exploit minority groups.

These forms of oppression operate interdependently, shaping the lived experiences of the oppressed characters and communities in the novel. The following subsections detail these indicators using textual evidence and theoretical frameworks drawn from postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, and trauma studies.

4.1.1 Historical Oppression

Historical oppression in *The Poppy War* is portrayed as a long-term, systemically reinforced condition inflicted on the Speerlies, driven by the political ambitions and racial hierarchies of the Nikara Empire. Kuang critiques imperial history not merely through external colonization but also through internal domination and betrayal. A defining moment occurs when Rin confronts the ghost of Speer's former ruler, revealing the roots of the Speerlies' suffering:

“You left your people to become slaves. You let the Red Emperor exploit and abuse and mistreat them for a millennium. You set Speer on a path that made centuries of suffering inevitable.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 433)

This passage encapsulates the systemic economic and militaristic exploitation of the Speerlies. Historically coerced into servitude, they were treated as tools of empire—valued for their martial abilities yet denied autonomy or dignity. This aligns with Fanon's (1961) analysis of colonized subjects as bodies to be utilized but never humanized, and echoes Said's (1978) depiction of how colonial narratives mythologize domination as benevolence or inevitability.

Kuang's framing of “centuries of suffering” underlines the temporal continuity of oppression. The implication is that imperial systems not only devastate in the present but also predetermine futures through generational trauma. In Marxist terms, this illustrates the concept of historical materialism, where economic exploitation and class stratification are inherited legacies, not just contemporary conditions (Marx & Engels, 1848). The Red

Emperor's exploitation of the Speerlies parallels colonial and feudal systems in which minorities were forcibly militarized and stripped of land, culture, and agency.

Additionally, the critique is not solely directed outward. The ghost's words indict the leadership of Speer itself, revealing a layered betrayal in which members of the marginalized group may be co-opted into sustaining the very systems that oppress them—echoing Spivak's (1988) notion of the "subaltern's complicity" within hegemonic frameworks.

Ultimately, historical oppression in the novel is not confined to acts of violence, but is institutionalized through silence, erasure, and inherited suffering, rendering the Speerlies as both symbol and casualty of a broader imperial structure. This forms the foundational context for subsequent indicators such as cultural erasure and institutional prejudice explored in the following sections.

4.1.2 Cultural Control

The second major indicator of ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War* is cultural control, defined as the strategic suppression and manipulation of a marginalized group's identity, traditions, and belief systems in order to maintain dominance. Kuang illustrates this through the calculated addiction of the Speerlies to opium—a historically grounded tactic often used in imperialist regimes to pacify and destabilize subjugated populations.

"When Speer lost its independence, the Red Emperor sent crates of opium over to the Speerlies as an offering. A gift, from the colonizing state to the tributary... They were slaves to the opium just as much as they were slaves to the Emperor." (Kuang, 2018, pp. 413–414)

This passage underscores how cultural and chemical dependency is manufactured as a tool of domination. The metaphor of opium as a "gift" from empire is especially potent—it invokes historical parallels with British imperialism in China, particularly the Opium Wars of the 19th century, where addiction was weaponized to weaken local sovereignty while maintaining economic and political control (Lovell, 2011). In *The Poppy War*, this narrative is re-imagined in a fictional context, but the mechanism and outcome mirror historical imperialist practices.

Kuang's portrayal of forced dependency also speaks to what Gramsci (1971) termed cultural hegemony: the control of societal beliefs and behaviors by those in power, often disguised as benevolence or necessity. By framing the opium as an "offering," the Red Emperor masks coercion as generosity—an ideological sleight of hand that ensures compliance while concealing violence. The Speerlies' cultural institutions, language, and spiritual heritage are not simply oppressed but rewritten through addiction, illustrating how empires manipulate consciousness as effectively as they control economies or militaries.

Moreover, the deployment of cultural control through drugs serves as a metaphor for the internalization of colonial narratives. The Speerlies' spiritual and cultural degradation is not merely enforced from outside, but also perpetuated by the effects of substance dependence—symbolizing the psychological disempowerment of oppressed communities. As Fanon (1963) has argued, colonialism works not just through physical domination but through mental subjugation, alienating the oppressed from their own identity and agency.

Through this lens, Kuang's depiction of cultural control operates as both allegory and critique. It exposes how cultural subjugation is essential to the maintenance of imperial systems, often preceding or replacing overt violence. In *The Poppy War*, cultural erasure

does not begin with genocide or occupation—it begins with addiction, submission, and the redefinition of heritage into weakness.

4.1.3 Ethnic Discrimination and Cultural Exclusion

A core dimension of ethnic oppression depicted in *The Poppy War* is the systematic exclusion and racialized discrimination faced by the Speerlies. Through both narrative exposition and character interactions, Kuang reveals how the Speerlies are constructed as a racial “Other,” permanently estranged from the dominant Nikara identity. This exclusion is explicitly articulated in the following passage:

“But the Speerlies weren’t really Nikara at all. Tall and brown-skinned, they were an island people who had always been ethnically separate from the Nikara mainlanders. They spoke their own language, wrote in their own script, and practiced their own religion... if any Nikara territory had to be sacrificed, Speer was the obvious choice.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 53)

This passage demonstrates how phenotypical difference, cultural separation, and religious divergence are used to construct an artificial boundary between the Speerlies and the mainland Nikara. The categorical framing of the Speerlies as “not really Nikara” reflects processes of racial othering as theorized by Said (1978) and Hall (1997), in which dominant groups define themselves through the exclusion and essentialization of marginalized identities. Here, the language of ethnic separation becomes justification for territorial abandonment and sacrificial logic—rendering the Speerlies not only expendable but also non-citizens in the imperial imagination.

The logic of disposability—“Speer was the obvious choice”—reveals the instrumental value assigned to ethnic minorities under empire. Their cultural distinctiveness is not protected but weaponized against them, making them ideal subjects for exploitation or erasure. This reflects what Mbembe (2003) calls necropolitics—the state’s power to determine who may live and who must die, based on constructed hierarchies of value and belonging.

Moreover, the cultural exclusion of the Speerlies—language, script, religion—is emblematic of what Spivak (1988) critiques as epistemic violence: the systematic silencing of subaltern knowledge systems and the delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. Kuang’s decision to detail these aspects reinforces the stakes of cultural exclusion, showing how the denial of cultural autonomy is not passive ignorance but a calculated act of disempowerment.

These dynamics not only illustrate the intersection of racism and nationalism but also echo historical patterns of ethnonationalist violence, particularly in East Asian contexts. Kuang’s narrative mirrors the marginalization of ethnic minorities such as the Ainu in Japan, Tibetans in China, and indigenous populations in colonized territories, where perceived cultural incompatibility becomes the rationale for exclusion, control, and in some cases, extermination.

Overall, *The Poppy War* depicts ethnic discrimination and cultural exclusion as not just interpersonal prejudice but structural logics of exclusion embedded in imperial policy and national identity. Through these portrayals, Kuang interrogates the myth of unity in empire and exposes how multicultural coexistence is often predicated on the suppression or elimination of difference.

4.1.4 Forced Militarization

The theme of forced militarization serves as a powerful marker of ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War*, reflecting how marginalized communities are systematically weaponized for imperial interests while being denied agency and recognition. The Speerlies, despite being spiritually and culturally distinct, are coerced into serving as frontline soldiers—a form of conscription that dehumanizes their identities and transforms them into instruments of war.

“Centuries ago, the Red Emperor had taken the island by storm and forced the Speerlies into military service, turning the island warriors into the most feared contingent in the Militia until the Second Poppy War wiped them out.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 74)

This passage lays bare the mechanized transformation of ethnic identity into military utility. The Speerlies’ value is reduced to their usefulness in battle; their unique skills and beliefs are not respected but militarized and ultimately expended. Their fate echoes historical examples of colonial conscription—such as the deployment of Senegalese Tirailleurs in the French army or Gurkha regiments under British rule—wherein ethnic minorities were recruited or coerced to serve as loyal soldiers while remaining marginalized within the colonial order (Semino, E., Demjén, Z., & Koller, V. (2014).

Kuang’s narrative invokes what McClintock (1995) calls the “paradox of imperial intimacy”: empires depend on the bodily labor of their Others, yet exclude them from the cultural, legal, and political rewards of citizenship. The Speerlies are simultaneously central to Nikara’s military might and alienated from its national identity. They are not allies—they are tools.

Furthermore, this militarization of minority identity represents a form of state violence masked as honor. The text’s depiction of Speerlies as “the most feared contingent” highlights the contradiction wherein valor is not accompanied by equality. Their bravery is instrumentalized, not celebrated. They are both glorified and devalued—a hallmark of what Memmi (1965) describes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* as the double bind of the colonized subject, whose worth is measured only by their service to the oppressor.

This dynamic also reinforces the novel’s critique of biopolitical control. Drawing from Foucault’s (1978) concept of biopolitics, forced militarization is a form of state power exerted over life itself—over bodies that are conscripted, trained, and sacrificed. The Speerlies’ cultural legacy is overwritten by their military function, severing them from their historical and spiritual roots. They are shaped into weapons, not people.

Kuang uses this motif not merely as a historical analogy but as a literary condemnation of imperial logic. The forced martial service of the Speerlies is neither celebrated nor romanticized; it is portrayed as a tragedy of erasure, a stripping of identity in exchange for utilitarian function. Through this, the novel contributes to a broader postcolonial discourse that interrogates the cost of empire on the bodies and histories of the marginalized.

4.1.5 Slavery and Systemic Marginalization

In *The Poppy War*, the Speerlies’ long-standing oppression is not limited to forced labor and militarization but extends into the realm of dehumanizing servitude that persists even after their contributions to the empire. Kuang captures this degradation through stark language that underscores the persistent denial of dignity:

"The way that the Speerlies were treated was . . . regrettable. They were used and exploited by the Empire for centuries. Their warriors were regarded as little more than vicious dogs. Savages." (Kuang, 2018, p. 93)

This passage reflects how the Speerlies are simultaneously valorized for their utility in warfare and reviled as subhuman—a contradiction emblematic of the structural logic of slavery. Their treatment mirrors historical systems of racialized slavery in which the enslaved were seen not as citizens or human beings, but as disposable tools of the state or economy. Their identity is not defined by personhood, but by function—a critical trait of what Orlando Patterson's (1982) terms "social death", wherein the enslaved are stripped of rights, heritage, and recognition.

Kuang's representation aligns with the concept of systemic marginalization, in which entrenched social and institutional structures continuously exclude and exploit racial or ethnic minorities. This form of oppression is not the result of isolated incidents or individual prejudice; it is produced and perpetuated by an interlocking system of policies, beliefs, and practices across economic, educational, military, and cultural institutions. As Crenshaw (1991) and Meerman (2005) argue, systemic marginalization is reproduced over generations, creating a cyclical trap that prevents social mobility and reinforces inequality.

In the Nikara Empire, the Speerlies are deprived of citizenship, cultural autonomy, and post-service reintegration. Their legacy as warriors becomes the very justification for their exclusion—perceived not as heroic but as evidence of inherent savagery. This racial essentialism contributes to the construction of an underclass whose continued exploitation is rationalized through stereotypes and historical revisionism.

Moreover, Kuang's use of the term "regrettable" in the quoted passage is critical. It mimics the sanitized language of historical apologies issued by states for their roles in slavery or genocide—words that acknowledge suffering without taking responsibility. This rhetorical distancing reflects the politics of erasure, where acknowledgment serves as a substitute for justice or redress.

The portrayal of slavery in *The Poppy War* extends beyond the physical to the structural and symbolic realms, making it a key component of the novel's broader depiction of systemic ethnic oppression. It highlights how imperial regimes do not simply conquer; they enslave, erase, and entrench inequality in the very institutions meant to govern society.

4.1.6 Destruction of Sacred Cites

The targeted destruction of sacred sites in *The Poppy War* functions as a symbolic and strategic act of cultural genocide. Kuang illustrates this through the Federation's eradication of the Speerlies' place of worship, a key site of cultural identity and spiritual resilience:

"The Federation must have torn down the temple twenty years ago. It must have been the first thing they did, after they had butchered the Speerlies. The Federation had to destroy the Speerlies' place of worship. They had to remove their source of power." (Kuang, 2018, p. 431)

This passage makes clear that the destruction was not incidental to military conquest but a calculated assault on the spiritual and cultural core of the Speerly people. The temple is referred to not merely as a structure, but as a "source of power"—a metaphysical anchor

that connects the community to its ancestral identity, resistance traditions, and supernatural capacities.

The obliteration of sacred architecture is a time-tested method of imperial domination. As Nora (1989) argues, physical sites of memory—or *lieux de mémoire*—are repositories of cultural continuity; their destruction aims to sever the symbolic links between past, present, and future. Without these anchors, communities lose access to the rituals, cosmologies, and collective narratives that sustain their cohesion and resistance.

Moreover, this erasure aligns with Raphael Lemkin's (1944) concept of cultural genocide, defined as the deliberate obliteration of a group's cultural institutions, language, religion, and heritage in order to eliminate them as a people. In this case, the Federation's action is not only militaristic but deeply ideological—it seeks to annihilate not just bodies, but beliefs.

From a postcolonial perspective, the act parallels real-world campaigns such as the destruction of Buddhist temples during the Cultural Revolution, the demolition of Armenian churches during the Ottoman Empire, or the erasure of Native American sacred sites through settler expansion. In each instance, the destruction of spiritual spaces functioned as an assertion of civilizational superiority, intended to erase not only resistance but memory itself.

By portraying this violence, Kuang situates *The Poppy War* within a critical tradition of anti-imperial literary resistance, revealing how fantasy literature can expose the mechanics of historical trauma. The temple's destruction is more than narrative backdrop—it is a narrative indictment of how colonizers dismantle identity not just through war, but through the eradication of sacred meaning.

4.1.7 Historical Suppression

In *The Poppy War*, Kuang draws attention to the mechanism of historical suppression, where dominant powers deliberately silence or erase traumatic episodes associated with ethnic minorities. The fate of Speer and its people is rendered invisible not only through physical destruction but through the systematic erasure of their memory from national discourse: "...Nikan does not like to speak of Speer, and for good reason." (Kuang, 2018, p. 93)

This brief but telling line reveals a collective politics of forgetting, in which the Empire's silence is not a passive omission but an active suppression of historical truth. Such erasure serves a dual function: it protects the legitimacy of the dominant regime and deprives the oppressed of their narrative rights. In this way, memory becomes a battleground, and the absence of remembrance functions as a continuation of violence.

Theoretically, this aligns with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) concept of "silencing the past," wherein power is exercised not only by shaping historical events but by controlling how—and whether—those events are remembered. According to Trouillot, historical narratives are constructed through a complex interplay of archival power, academic institutions, and state interests. Kuang reflects this dynamic by portraying how the Nikara Empire's official silence about Speer conveniently erases its culpability in genocide and systemic marginalization.

This suppression also resonates with the idea of "postmemory," as described by Marianne Hirsch (2012), where the traumatic experiences of a previous generation are not fully inherited by the next because they are obscured, denied, or forgotten. In the novel, the younger generation—including Rin—has limited access to the truth about Speer, its people,

and their destruction. This temporal disconnection from trauma inhibits solidarity, justice, and resistance.

Kuang's depiction of historical suppression critiques real-world patterns of state-sponsored historical revisionism. Examples include the denial or minimization of the Armenian Genocide, the obfuscation of colonial atrocities in European school curricula, or Japan's controversial textbook omissions regarding the Nanjing Massacre. These cases reflect how hegemonic control over history serves to absolve perpetrators while denying recognition and redress to victims.

By emphasizing Speer's absence in Nikara's national memory, *The Poppy War* interrogates the power structures that dictate which histories are preserved and which are erased. It challenges readers to consider how historical amnesia serves imperial ideology, and how the silencing of trauma perpetuates oppression across generations.

4.1.8 Suppression of Beliefs and Enslaving

In *The Poppy War*, Kuang highlights how the Empire systematically suppresses belief systems and cultural practices that diverge from its dominant worldview. Rather than tolerate difference, the Empire reacts to spiritual and cultural variation with exclusion and violence:

"Once an empire has become convinced of its worldview, anything that evidences the contrary must be erased. The Hinterlanders were banished to the north, cursed and suspected of witchcraft. The Speerlies were marginalized, enslaved, thrown into battle like wild dogs, and ultimately sacrificed." (Kuang, 2018, p. 174)

This passage reveals a deliberate strategy of cultural and spiritual repression, where minority groups such as the Hinterlanders and Speerlies are dehumanized and eliminated for refusing to conform. Their marginalization is not incidental but rooted in ideological intolerance, where alternative worldviews are perceived as threats to imperial order. By portraying these communities as enslaved, demonized, and sacrificed, Kuang exposes the brutal consequences of state-enforced cultural uniformity.

4.1.9 Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing

Kuang presents the genocide of the Speerlies as the ultimate form of ethnic oppression—a complete and deliberate erasure of a people's existence, both physically and culturally:

"Every man, woman, and child on Speer was butchered, and their bodies burned. An entire race, gone in a day... They were an island people who had always been ethnically separate from the Nikara mainlanders." (Kuang, 2018, p. 53)

This passage describes the total annihilation of the Speerlies, not only as individuals but as an entire ethnic group. The genocide is portrayed as swift and systematic, reducing an entire population and its cultural heritage to ashes. Kuang underscores the severity of this act by emphasizing both its completeness ("every man, woman, and child") and its intentionality—a targeted attempt to eliminate a distinct ethnic identity. This moment exemplifies cultural erasure at its most violent and irreversible.

4.1.10 Human Experimentation

Beyond genocide, *The Poppy War* portrays a further violation of the Speerlies' humanity through involuntary human experimentation, highlighting the complete denial of their bodily autonomy and ethical personhood:

"When they occupied the Snake Province, they built a research base opposite the island and spent the decades in between the Poppy Wars kidnapping Speerlies, experimenting on them, trying to figure out what made them special." (Kuang, 2018, p. 379)

This passage reveals a chilling layer of dehumanization, in which the Speerlies are not only exterminated but also reduced to experimental subjects—objects of scientific curiosity rather than human beings. Such treatment echoes real-world atrocities, such as the Unit 731 experiments during Japan's occupation of China, where prisoners were subjected to inhumane medical trials under imperial ideology.

Within the narrative, this experimentation becomes a tool of cultural erasure, stripping the Speerlies of agency over their bodies, beliefs, and identities. It reflects the broader process by which marginalized groups are not only silenced but systematically dissected—physically and metaphorically—in the name of power and knowledge.

Together with the destruction of sacred sites, suppression of historical narratives, and mass genocide, these actions represent a comprehensive program of cultural erasure. Kuang defines cultural erasure as the deliberate and systematic dismantling of a people's traditions, language, spiritual practices, and collective memory. In *The Poppy War*, human experimentation becomes one of its most horrifying expressions.

4.1.11 Institutional Prejudice in Education and Social Stratification

In *The Poppy War*, Kuang exposes the persistence of institutional prejudice within elite educational and governmental systems, revealing how social hierarchies are upheld through seemingly meritocratic structures. Rin's experience at Sinegard Academy illustrates how access to education is shaped not solely by academic ability but by entrenched class and ethnic bias:

"Every year we get someone like you, some country bumpkin who thinks that just because they were good at taking some test, they deserve my time and attention... You are just peasant trash." (Kuang, 2018, p. 79)

This insult, aimed at Rin by a privileged peer, reveals the hostility toward individuals from marginalized backgrounds, particularly those who challenge class and ethnic boundaries through academic achievement. Although the Keju exam is presented as a symbol of meritocracy, Kuang shows that success does not guarantee respect or inclusion for those from lower social classes or ethnic peripheries. Instead, merit becomes another arena where elite dominance is reinforced and difference is punished.

The term "peasant trash" encapsulates the interlocking prejudices of classism and ethnocentrism, suggesting that the exclusion of minorities like Rin is not just personal bias but a reflection of systemic inequality. Educational institutions, in this context, are not neutral spaces of learning but ideological apparatuses that reproduce social stratification—ensuring that power remains concentrated in the hands of the elite.

Kuang's critique reflects broader social theories about education as a site of ideological control (Althusser. L., 1971), where marginalized individuals are tolerated only to the extent

that they conform—and are excluded or humiliated when they do not. Through Rin's experience, the novel illustrates how institutional prejudice legitimizes discrimination, cloaking it in tradition, merit, and discipline.

4.1.12 Institutional Prejudice in the Military

The Poppy War also explores institutional prejudice within the military establishment, where ethnic bias influences both policy and perception. Despite the military's dependence on the combat capabilities of marginalized groups like the Speerlies, they remain mistrusted and vilified. This tension is captured in the following dialogue:

"The Militia is afraid of Speerlies," Irjah corrected. "The Nikara have never been good at dealing with what they don't understand, and Speer has always made the Nikara uncomfortable. I expect you now know why."
(Kuang, 2018, p. 232)

This passage reveals the paradox of reliance and rejection. The Speerlies are viewed as valuable assets in warfare, yet they are simultaneously feared and excluded due to their ethnic and spiritual distinctiveness. This mistrust is rooted not in their actions but in cultural ignorance and institutionalized stereotyping, which frame them as dangerous anomalies rather than equal members of the military.

Kuang uses this dynamic to illustrate how military hierarchies are shaped by deep-seated racial anxieties. The unease expressed by Nikara officials reflects a broader imperial tendency to categorize minority groups as both useful and threatening—a duality that prevents integration and reinforces structural inequity. Even within an environment that demands discipline, loyalty, and sacrifice, the Speerlies remain "the other," never fully accepted or trusted.

In doing so, Kuang highlights how institutional prejudice in the military functions not only as interpersonal bias but as a systemic framework of exclusion, sustained by fear, myth, and a refusal to understand difference.

4.1.13 Dehumanization and Racial Othering

One of the most disturbing aspects of ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War* is the dehumanization and racial othering of the Speerlies. Kuang demonstrates how their ethnic identity is distorted through pseudo-scientific rhetoric and mythologized stereotypes that deny their humanity:

"You know how the Speerlies were. Wild and bloodthirsty... They were primitive. Scarcely more intelligent than children... I heard that they're more closely related to monkeys than human beings. Their brains are smaller. Did you know they didn't even have a written language before the Red Emperor? They're good at fighting, but not much else." (Kuang, 2018, p. 72)

This statement exemplifies biological essentialism, where an entire group is reduced to imagined physical and cognitive inferiority. By comparing the Speerlies to animals and infantilizing them, the speaker denies them full personhood. Such language is not merely offensive—it functions as a tool of systemic devaluation, justifying exclusion, violence, and exploitation.

Kuang uses this passage to critique how racist ideologies are embedded in state and cultural discourse, often disguised as common knowledge or inherited wisdom. The suggestion that the Speerlies lack language or intellect aligns with historical tactics used in colonial contexts to rationalize subjugation—such as claims of racial inferiority in 19th-century scientific racism or the “civilizing mission” used to justify imperial rule.

This type of racial othering transforms ethnic identity into pathology, rendering the Speerlies as “savage” by nature rather than victims of systemic oppression. In doing so, Kuang exposes the way such discourse sustains imperial hierarchies by positioning minority groups as biologically destined for violence, and thus undeserving of empathy or equality.

4.1.14 Ethnic Exploitation through Military Value

In *The Poppy War*, Kuang emphasizes how ethnic minorities are not only dehumanized but also strategically exploited for their military utility, with no regard for their agency or autonomy. The Speerlies are instrumentalized as living weapons—valued not as individuals or citizens, but as instruments of violence:

“Altan was a Speerly, already predisposed to rage and disaster... The Empress intervened. She knew the military value of a Speerly warrior... they... honed his rage like a weapon, instead of teaching him to control it...” (Kuang, 2018, p. 140)

This passage reveals the deliberate manipulation of ethnic identity for state objectives. Rather than addressing the trauma and marginalization that define Altan’s existence, the Empire exploits his suffering, framing it as a tactical advantage. The language of “honed his rage” illustrates a process of weaponizing trauma, where ethnic characteristics are distorted into assets only when they serve imperial power.

Kuang critiques this as a form of instrumental racism, in which the oppressed are deemed valuable only in contexts of warfare or domination. This dynamic mirrors historical practices where colonial powers recruited or coerced marginalized populations into elite military units—such as the use of African, South Asian, and Indigenous forces in British and French imperial armies—while denying them civil rights or recognition.

Through Altan’s narrative, Kuang illustrates the emotional and psychological costs of such exploitation. His rage is not innate, but a product of historical violence, systemic exclusion, and cultural loss. Yet, instead of being healed, it is commodified and directed outward in service of the very systems that oppressed him.

This reflects a broader theme in *The Poppy War*: ethnic oppression is not always enacted through exclusion alone—it also manifests in the selective inclusion of marginalized people when they can be **weaponized for imperial interests**, reinforcing a cycle of use and disposability.

4.2 The Depictions of Ethnic Oppression in *The Poppy War*

4.2.1 Through Character and Characterization

In *The Poppy War*, the main ethnic groups in conflict are the Nikara and the Federation, while the Speerlies represent the most marginalized and systemically oppressed minority. The Mugenese Empire embodies an external colonial power that employs military aggression and asserts racial supremacy over the Nikara. Simultaneously, the Nikara inflict severe oppression upon the Speerlies and Hinterlands, seeing them as an inferior race.

Based on the book, the identity of the oppressors and the oppressed can be seen from the passage below.

A. The Oppressor

The Federation of Mugen

The Federation represents the colonizing force, committing aggression against the Nikara and Speerlies. The Mugenese see themselves as racially superior and assert power through violence and colonial domination. This is proved by the passages from the novel portraying Mugenese soldiers in the book as brutal and superior in terms of military technology and cultural dominance:

“...Mugen has always wanted more, even when it was a tributary. The Federation is an ambitious, rapidly growing country with a bulging population on a tiny island. Imagine you’re a highly militaristic country with more people than your land can sustain, and nowhere to expand. Imagine that your rulers have propagated an ideology that they are gods, and that you have a divine right to extend your empire across the eastern hemisphere...” (Kuang, 2018, p. 52)

This passage depicted the Federation’s imperialistic ideology, claiming their sense of racial and cultural superiority and their justification for cultural expansion through colonialization.

“Alas, the Emperor Ryohai has no intentions of abandoning his designs on the Nikara continent. Expansion onto the continent is the divine right of the glorious Federation of Mugen. Your provincial government is weak and fragile. Your technology is centuries behind that of the west. Your isolation has set you behind while the rest of the world develops. Your demise was only a matter of time. This landmass belongs to a country that can propel it into the next century. (Kuang, 2018, p.288)

This passage portrayed the way Mugenese Federation asserts supremacy not just in military but also in technological advancement, describing the colonization of Nikara as a necessary act.

“To the Federation, to wipe out an entire race overnight was not an atrocity at all. Only a necessity” (Kuang, 2018, p. 374)

This passage depicts the Federation's dehumanizing perspective towards the Nikara and Speerlies, seeing genocide as a simple strategic need rather than a moral crime.

The Nikara Empire

The Nikara Empire also contribute to the oppression of their own people, particularly those from marginalized communities that they view as inferior or lower social classes that comes from rural areas.

“The Nikara believed in strictly defined social roles, a rigid hierarchy that all were locked into at birth. Everything had its own place under heaven. Princelings became Warlords, cadets became soldiers, and orphan shopgirls from Tikany should be content with remaining orphan shopgirls

from Tikany. The Keju was a purportedly meritocratic institution, but only the wealthy class ever had the money to afford the tutors their children needed to actually pass.” (Kuang, 2018, p.18)

This passage describes the claimed meritocracy of the Nikara Empire, exposing how the system maintains inequality by preventing the poor from climbing regardless of their abilities.

“..But the Empress was not the only one who had abandoned Golyn Niis. The entire army had surrendered the city..” (Kuang, 2018, p.366)

This passage depicted the Empire's betrayal towards its own people and the failure of protecting their own people towards external force.

“You know how the Warlords were so busy fighting each other that they let Mugen wreck the country during *the Poppy Wars*” (Kuang, 2018, p.152-153)

This illustrates the internal conflict inside the Nikara Empire, where warlords from different provinces were busy competing with each other that eventually led the mugenese to invade and oppressed their people.

B. The Oppressed

Fang Runin (Rin)

Rin's journey exemplifies the internal marginalization within the Nikara Empire, particularly of individuals from impoverished, ethnically distinct, or lower social backgrounds. Despite her academic excellence, she faces hostility not just from peers, but from an entire system designed to exclude people like her:

“You're a war orphan. You're a southerner. You weren't supposed to pass the Keju. The Warlords like to claim that the Keju makes Nikan a meritocracy, but the system is designed to keep the poor and illiterate in their place. You're offending them with your very presence.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 42)

This passage reveals the myth of meritocracy—a system that claims to reward talent while covertly sustaining entrenched hierarchies. Rin's background as a war orphan and southerner positions her at the margins of society, where achievement is not celebrated but treated as transgression. Her presence challenges the social order, making her a target of structural and interpersonal discrimination.

The Speerlies

The Speerlies represent the most severely oppressed ethnic group in the novel, subjected to systematic dehumanization and exploitation by both the Nikara Empire and the Federation. Their cultural uniqueness is not protected but weaponized and feared:

“The way that the Speerlies were treated was... regrettable. They were used and exploited by the Empire for centuries. Their warriors were regarded as little more than vicious dogs. Savages.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 93)

This statement illustrates the depth of their objectification—valued only for their utility in warfare and despised for their difference. Referred to as “savages” and “vicious dogs,” they are stripped of dignity and autonomy, confirming their role as disposable subjects within the imperial machine.

The Hinterlanders

The Hinterlanders are another marginalized group, subjected to exile and cultural demonization due to their beliefs and practices, which do not conform to the dominant ideology of the Empire:

“Once an empire has become convinced of its worldview, anything that evidences the contrary must be erased. The Hinterlanders were banished to the north, cursed and suspected of witchcraft.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 174)

This passage underscores the ideological rigidity of the Nikara Empire. Cultural nonconformity is framed not as diversity but as deviance—grounds for banishment and suspicion. The Hinterlanders’ fate reflects how empires often suppress pluralism to maintain ideological and cultural homogeneity.

The Nikara People

Even the broader Nikara populace suffers under the internal fractures of the Empire. The self-serving rivalries between provincial warlords expose ordinary citizens to external invasion and internal abandonment:

“You know how the Warlords were so busy fighting each other that they let Mugen wreck the country during the Poppy Wars.” (Kuang, 2018, pp. 152–153)

This passage illustrates how internal disunity and political power struggles can render an entire population vulnerable to external aggression. Here, the oppression is not ethnically targeted but systemic, showing how imperial neglect can also victimize the majority.

4.2.2 Setting of Place

The physical and geographical settings in *The Poppy War* are crucial to understanding how ethnic oppression is spatially represented and reinforced. Each location functions not only as a backdrop but as a symbolic extension of power dynamics, marginalization, and resistance.

Nikara

The Nikara Empire, the primary setting of the novel, is defined by its rigid social hierarchies and deep ethnic divisions. These divisions are not merely social but territorial, as different ethnic and cultural groups are confined to specific regions, often subjected to imperial control or exclusion. The Empire’s political structure reflects an inflexible worldview that both enables and sustains systemic oppression.

Sinegard Academy

Sinegard Academy, an elite military institution, serves as both a site of opportunity and exclusion. While it is meant to represent meritocratic advancement, it is deeply embedded in classism and ethnic prejudice. For Rin, it becomes a microcosm of the Empire's broader social injustices—a place where her capabilities are questioned due to her background, and where social stratification is reproduced under the guise of discipline and tradition.

Golyn Niis

Golyn Niis, a major city within the Nikara Empire, becomes the setting for one of the novel's most harrowing events—the massacre by the Federation of Mugen. This location symbolizes the vulnerability of the Empire's people when internal discord weakens state defenses. The massacre marks a turning point in the narrative and serves as a stark illustration of how imperial failure can result in devastating consequences for civilians, especially when national unity is compromised by internal elite rivalries.

Speer Island

Speer Island, home to the Speerlies, represents geographical and cultural isolation. Located between the Nariin Sea and Omonod Bay, adjacent to the Snake Province, the island is both physically distant and symbolically excluded from Nikara's imperial center. Its marginality is enforced through historical exploitation, military occupation, and eventual genocide, making it the most vivid spatial representation of ethnic oppression in the novel.

4.2.3 Key Events Depicting Ethnic Oppression

The setting of *The Poppy War* plays a role in depicting the ethnic oppression experienced by different groups within the narrative.

Speer Island Genocide

This dialogue illustrates the total annihilation of the Speerlies by the Federation, portraying genocide as an intentional and ruthless attempt to obliterate an entire ethnic community.

“Every man, woman, and child on Speer was butchered, and their bodies burned. An entire race, gone in a day.. They were an island people who had always been ethnically separate from the Nikara mainlanders.”(Kuang, 2018, p. 53)

The Federation's exploitation of the Speerlies, through forced scientific human experiments, using marginalized ethnic for Mugen imperial advantage.

“When they occupied the Snake Province, they built a research base opposite the island and spent the decades in between *the Poppy Wars* kidnapping Speerlies, experimenting on them, trying to figure out what made them special. (Kuang, 2018, p. 379)

Massacre of Golyn Niis

This dialogue depicts the dehumanization of the Nikara people by the Federation, justified their aggression by the conviction that the Nikara are unequal as human beings.

"The Federation had massacred Golyn Niis for the simple reason that they did not think of the Nikara as human" (Kuang, 2018, p. 374)

The paragraph describes Rin's observation of the massacre inflicted by the Federation.

"the Federation had arrayed the corpses in states of incredible desecration, grotesque positions that defied human imagination. Corpses nailed to boards. Corpses hung by their tongues from hooks. Corpses dismembered in every possible way; headless, limbless, displaying mutilations that must have been performed while the victim was still alive. Fingers removed, then stacked in a small pile beside stubby hands. An entire line of castrated men, severed penises placed delicately on their slack-jawed mouths." (Kuang, 2018, p. 360)

The passage here describes the variety of the Federation's brutality and their capacity to use misery as a tool for domination.

"Rin could not understand how the Federation had found so many different ways to inflict suffering. But each corner they turned revealed another instance in the string of horrors, barbarian savagery matched only by inventiveness. A family, arms still around each other, impaled upon the same spear. Babies lying at the bottoms of vats, their skin a horrible shade of crimson, floating in the water in which they'd boiled to death." (Kuang, 2018, p.361)

The distressing statement from the survivor depicts the sexual assault and physical abuse inflicted on the victims as one of the forms of ethnic oppression.

"..They made me watch. I saw women disemboweled. I saw the soldiers slice off their breasts. I saw them nail women alive to walls. I saw them mutilate young girls, when they had tired of their mothers. If their vaginas were too small, they cut them open to make it easier to rape them." (Kuang, 2018, p. 369)

Rin's Personal Discrimination

The passage depicts how Rin, despite her capabilities, is oppressed by the strict social hierarchy of the Nikara Empire, which restricts underprivileged groups such as war orphans and southerners to the lowest classes of society.

"You're a war orphan. You're a Southerner. You weren't supposed to pass the Keju. The Warlords like to claim that the Keju makes Nikan a meritocracy, but the system is designed to keep the poor and illiterate in their place. You're offending them with your very presence." (Kuang, 2018, p. 42)

This passage highlights the betrayal experienced by oppressed groups inside their own empire, showing the political and social neglect they endure from both their empress and the system.

“Your Empress gave you up, you and your precious band of shamans. You were sold, my dear Speerlies, just like Speer was sold. Just like your Empire was sold.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 417)

4.2.4 Styles

Language and Diction

Kuang’s use of derogatory language in *The Poppy War* serves as a potent tool for illustrating the depth of ethnic oppression and dehumanization embedded in the worldview of the oppressors. The diction employed by characters from the Federation of Mugen reflects entrenched racial superiority and a brutal disregard for the humanity of the Nikara people.

For instance, the slur: “Nikara scum.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 220) is a direct expression of racial contempt. Its repetition throughout the narrative reinforces the systemic nature of ethnic prejudice, where language becomes a mechanism for both justifying and normalizing violence. This insult is not an isolated instance but part of a larger lexicon of hate, as echoed in: “This is how we deal with Nikara scum.” (Kuang, 2018, p. 217). Here, the derogatory phrase is linked to violent action, illustrating how language functions not only as verbal degradation but as ideological reinforcement of oppression. It provides a linguistic justification for brutality, portraying the Nikara as inherently inferior and therefore deserving of punishment.

The most harrowing example is found in a survivor’s recollection of sexual violence, where the dehumanization is intensified: “Did you know they called us public toilets?” (Kuang, 2018, p. 369). This metaphor exemplifies extreme dehumanization, reducing victims to objects of public use and humiliation. It reveals how racialized and gendered violence are linguistically intertwined, showing that ethnic oppression extends beyond physical domination to psychological and symbolic destruction. Such language not only reflects hatred but actively reshapes identity into abjection.

Through these examples, Kuang demonstrates how language serves as a conduit for institutionalized racism, embedding prejudice in both speech and structure. The consistent use of such diction exposes the Federation’s ideological commitment to racial hierarchy and affirms the novel’s critique of verbal violence as a precursor and partner to physical atrocities.

4.3 The Reasons Kuang’s Addressed Ethnic Oppression in *The Poppy War*

4.3.1 Personal and Familial Trauma

Kuang developed *The Poppy War* as a literary tool for processing her family’s historical experiences of war, oppression, and the silence surrounding trauma. Her writing is deeply influenced by her family’s history, especially their experiences during the encounters with Japanese occupation. As mentioned with her interview with Kendra Winchester from Reading Women in 2021:

“...So, when I went to Beijing, and I was learning Chinese again and able to hold conversations with my grandparents really for the first time, I was just

astounded by what they were telling me. There was this moment later that year when my dad came to visit China as well, and we went to his childhood home in Hunan, where he showed me his childhood home and the bullet holes left in the mud brick walls by Japanese soldiers when they occupied his village.” (Rebecca F. Kuang, 2021, [00:09:26])

Rebecca F. Kuang also mentioned her initial plan was to write an autobiography for her family, but she is not qualified enough to write it down and she mentioned that it was not plausible to let her grandparents to relive those moments,

“...So I did what I actually always have done since I was young. I processed things through fiction, through imagination, through trying to empathize with what things would have been like for them in like the 1960s, for example. And yeah. And then that hodgepodge of stories and inspirations became *THE POPPY WAR*.” (Rebecca, 2021, [00:10:57])

4.3.2 Historical Inspiration

The Poppy War draws significant inspiration from 20th-century Chinese history, particularly the events surrounding the Second Sino-Japanese War. Kuang has explicitly acknowledged that the plot structure of her novel is modeled on key historical events, including the Chinese Civil War and the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army. In one interview, she stated:

“The first was that the plot of the story was structured by the events of China's twentieth century. So, it maps the Chinese Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War...” (Kuang, 2021, [00:12:26])

A particularly harrowing historical reference is the Rape of Nanking (1937)—a mass atrocity committed by the Japanese forces in Nanjing, China. Kuang identifies this event as a core thematic and moral influence in shaping the genocide of Golyn Niis depicted in the novel. In an interview with *The Cowl*, she shared: “I started with Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking*, which forms a lot of the thematic and moral core of the story.” (Kuang, 2018). These acknowledgments clarify that *The Poppy War* is not simply inspired by East Asian history in a general sense but is deliberately structured as a fictional reinterpretation of real historical traumas. Kuang's integration of these references serves to both ground her fantasy world in real-world atrocity and to highlight the enduring impact of wartime violence, especially as it pertains to ethnic cleansing, imperial expansion, and collective memory.

4.3.3 Critique of Western Historical Narratives

Rebecca F. Kuang's motivation for writing *The Poppy War* is partly rooted in her critique of Western historical narratives, particularly the lack of representation and acknowledgment of East Asian wartime atrocities in Western education and media. Her frustration with this erasure informs the novel's function as a literary act of historical reclamation.

In an interview with *National Public Radio*, Kuang expressed her anger at the silence surrounding atrocities such as the Rape of Nanking:

“I was writing from a place of rage and anger because I thought it was just astonishing and really tragic that something like this was not really talked

about in the West and also not really acknowledged or apologized for, on the part of Japan.” (Kuang, 2020)

This emotional and intellectual response signals a deliberate authorial intent to confront global historical amnesia and to fill the void left by dominant Western narratives that marginalize non-Western trauma. The novel becomes a counter-narrative, offering readers a fictionalized but thematically accurate account of historical violence often omitted from Western educational curricula.

Kuang reiterates this concern in an interview with Kendra Winchester on *Reading Women*: “...Chinese history isn't really something that you become familiar with in American high school curriculum...” (Kuang, 2021, [00:10:22]). This observation underscores the systemic invisibility of East Asian history in Western pedagogy. Kuang’s work thus serves as a corrective lens—both introducing and interrogating histories that remain underrepresented or misunderstood in Western discourse.

Through *The Poppy War*, Kuang not only exposes historical trauma but also challenges Eurocentric frameworks of historical importance, contributing to a growing body of literature that foregrounds postcolonial perspectives and transnational memory.

4.4 Discussion

This study set out to analyze ethnic oppression in R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* through three research questions. First, it identified the indicators of ethnic oppression, addressing systemic marginalization through historical, cultural, economic, and social practices, such as the forced militarization and slavery of the Speerlies, the destruction of sacred sites, and the economic exploitation by the Nikara and Federation. Secondly, the study found that ethnic oppression in the novel is depicted through characterization, setting, and key events, particularly through the brutal depictions of genocide, cultural erasure, and institutionalized prejudice within the Nikara Empire. Finally, the study explored the reasons why Kuang addresses ethnic oppression, connecting the novel to her personal background, inspired by the historical events like the Second Sino-Japanese War, and her critique of Western historical narratives. Kuang’s fictionalization of historical violations, including the Rape of Nanking, along with her critique of Western historical narratives, deepens the novel’s depictions of the social, political, and emotional effects of oppression. The findings show that Kuang uses the fictional world of *The Poppy War* to reflect on real-world ethnic injustices and to process personal and societal trauma.

Other results of this study can be examined through the lens of Karl Marx’s sociological theory, through his focus on class struggle, exploitation, and alienation in agricultural societies. Marx’s analysis of class dynamics in agricultural societies, particularly within feudal and colonial systems, resembles the experiences of the Speerlies and other marginalized ethnic groups in *The Poppy War*. In Marxist terms, the Speerlies represent the proletariat, the oppressed working class, who are exploited by both the Nikara Empire and the Mugenese Federation, the ruling bourgeoisie, who control the means of production. The land, resources, and labor of agricultural societies are key elements that sustain the power of the ruling class, whereas the Speerlies’ forced militarization and labor exploitation illustrate how agricultural societies are used as tools for colonial domination and imperial expansion. In Marx’s theory of agricultural societies, peasants and agricultural workers often face dual oppression from landowners who dominate land and resources. The novel

illustrates that the Speerlies are initially exploited for labor and military service by the Red Emperor, who exploits physical labor for the Empire's profit. Marx's theory of alienation is also relevant in this context. In agricultural societies, alienation occurs when laborers become disconnected from the results of their work, from fellow persons, and from their own intrinsic nature. In *The Poppy War*, the Speerlies are separated not only from their labor's result but also from their cultural and spiritual identity. Their forced militarization and exploitation as tools in imperial wars strips them of their autonomy, identity, and land. The destruction of sacred sites, shown by the Federation's destruction of Speer's temples, symbolizes how the Speerlies are alienated from their heritage. Their cultural practices and beliefs are erased to fit with imperial ideology. This aligns with Marx's argument that the ruling class uses both physical and cultural control to maintain power and prevent resistance. Meanwhile, the protagonist, Rin, illustrates the Marxist concept of revolutionary praxis. Despite being initially marginalized as a Southerner and war orphan, Rin's journey reflects Marx's idea that revolution happens when the oppressed class gains consciousness of their circumstances. Rin's growth into a powerful figure who eventually resists both the Empire and the Mugenese Federation shows the potential of praxis to take down established social structures.

The results of this study align with (Healey, 2021), the exploration of hybridity and colonial themes by analyzing the novel's reinterpretation of historical trauma. However, this study specifically focuses on ethnic oppression. While (Jannah et al., 2024) focus on intersectional oppression, addressing racial, class, and gender discrimination, meanwhile this research emphasises ethnic oppression, showing the broader systematic and cultural oppression endured by marginalized ethnic groups such as the Speerlies. This study further develops (Bosma 2024), research providing an in-depth examination of ethnic oppression, specifically with the Mugenese Federation's colonization of the Nikara, while Bosma focuses on postcolonial themes in Kuang's works. This study complements (Khoirunnisa and Wulan 2023) analysis of social marginalization, focusing on gender oppression, by linking it with ethnic oppression in the novel, showing how marginalized ethnic groups suffer systemic exploitation similar to gender-based discrimination. lastly, while (Mzyk, 2023), research on trauma and PTSD addresses individual suffering, this study explores ethnic oppression as a broader societal issue. This research enhances the previous literature by providing an in depth analysis of ethnic oppression.

5. Conclusion

The study addressed the indicators of ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War*. The study identified several key indicators, including systemic marginalization, cultural erasure, and institutional prejudice. These indicators are reflected through practices such as forced militarization, economic exploitation, slavery, the destruction of sacred sites, and genocide, all emphasizing the systemic and violent oppression of the Speerlies by the Nikara Empire and the Mugenese Federation.

The study also found that ethnic oppression in the novel is depicted through characterization, setting, and key events, particularly through the brutal depictions of genocide, cultural erasure, and institutionalized prejudice within the Nikara Empire. The depiction of the Speerlies' struggle under the oppressive rule of both the Nikara and Mugenese empires shows their systemic exploitation, from their forced labor and militarization to their eventual genocide.

Finally, the study revealed that Kuang addresses ethnic oppression in *The Poppy War* as a result of personal and historical trauma. Kuang uses the novel to process her family's historical injustices, particularly the Japanese occupation of China, connecting the novel to her personal background, inspired by historical events like the Second Sino-Japanese War. The depiction of ethnic oppression also critiques the Western historical narrative, highlighting the lack of attention given to the atrocities committed in East Asia, especially the experiences of ethnic minorities. Kuang's work serves as a protest against how Western media often neglects or minimizes the suffering of marginalized ethnic groups, drawing parallels between the historical genocide depicted in the novel and contemporary issues faced by minority communities around the world.

References

- Al-Ramadan, M. F. (2023). Racism as reflected in *The Kite Runner*: A critical reading. *English Didactic*, 2(2), 58. <https://doi.org/10.55171/ed.v2i2.843>
- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Alvinus, A. (2022). "It will be difficult for you to move on from this..." An autoethnographic study of hitting the glass ceiling in an academic recruitment process. *Revija za Sociologiju*, 52(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.5613/rzs.52.1.1>
- Attebery, B. (2022). *The politics of fantasy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bosma, I. (2024). *From fantasy to realism: R. F. Kuang's exploration of postcolonial themes* (Unpublished master's thesis). Utrecht University.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dhobi, S. (2022). Sociological dimensions of representation: Othering & stereotyping. *Patan Pragma*, 11(02), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.3126/pragya.v11i02.52113>
- Dimaano, M. H. (2018). Oppression amidst socio-political tapestry of Azucena Grajo Uianza's *Bamboo in the Wind*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 3(2), 165–173. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.3.2.7>
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). New York: Grove Press.
- Fitri Amalia, & Hartono. (2023). Women's resistance to marginalization in Oka Rusmini's novel *Tempurung*: A study of feminist literature. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 6(10), 104–111. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.10.14>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Garcia, D. (2021). *Fantasy*. *Ploughshares*, 47(4), 49. <https://doi.org/10.1353/plo.2021.0097>
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Eds. & Trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
- Hannum, C. M. B. A. (2024). *Girls against gods: Divinity as the antagonist for the morally grey female protagonists in contemporary fantasy* (Unpublished undergraduate thesis). Georgetown University.
- Healey, C. (2021). Reimagining China's colonial encounters: Hybridity in Stephen Fung's *Tai Chi Zero* and R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* trilogy. *Comparative Literature & World Literature*, 6, 1.
- Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jannah, S. S., Istiadah, & Jaafar, N. (2024). Intersectionality and oppression in R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novel. *Paradigm: Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7(2), 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.18860/prdg.v7i2.29330>
- Khoirunnisa, H., & Wulan, D. A. (2023). Representasi kehidupan masyarakat dan nilai sosial dalam novel *The Poppy War* (Perang Opium) karya Rebecca F. Kuang: Kajian sosiologi sastra. *Jurnal Cakrawala Mandarin*, 7(2), 74. <https://doi.org/10.36279/apsmi.v7i2.303>
- Kuang, R. F. (2018). *The poppy war*. New York: Harper Voyager.
- Lemkin, R. (1944). *Axis rule in occupied Europe: Laws of occupation, analysis of government, proposals for redress*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Lovell, S. (2011). *The shadow of war: Russia and the USSR, 1941 to the present*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *The communist manifesto*. London: Workers' Educational Association.
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>
- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.
- Meerman, J. (2005). Oppressed people: Economic mobility of the socially excluded. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 34(4), 542–567. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2005.07.002>
- Memmi, A. (1965). *The colonizer and the colonized* (H. Greenfeld, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Muś, A., Iwan-Sojka, D., & Depta, A. (2024). Fifty shades of discrimination: How does fantasy portray prejudice and discrimination? *Law and Humanities*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2024.2384791>
- Mzyk, A. (2023). Maladaptive coping mechanisms of Sring Venka in response to sexual trauma and PTSD in *The Poppy War* series by R. F. Kuang. *Media i Społeczeństwo*, 19(2), 96–107. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0054.1956>

- Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. In P. Nora (Ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire* (Vol. 1). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Oakes, R., Oakeley, A. K., & Goke-Pariola, R. (2021). The victimization and disparate treatment of racial and ethnic minorities. In *Invisible victims and the pursuit of justice*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Ormrod, J. S. (2014). *Fantasy and social movements*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Putra, W. E., Kistanto, N. H., & Suryadi, M. (2023). Colonial discourse and resistance in the novel *Perawan Desa* by W. R. Supratman. *Suar Betang*, 18(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.26499/surbet.v18i1.453>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Schroeder, M. (2024). Authorial freedom. In *Analytic existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Semino, E., Demjén, Z., & Koller, V. (2014). ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ deaths: Narratives and professional identities in interviews with hospice managers. *Discourse Studies*, 16(5), 667–685. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445614538566>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Boston: Beacon Press.