

TRACING THE IMMIGRANT NARRATIVE IN THE NOVEL *BABEL* THROUGH MAPPING IDENTITY AND BELONGING

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman imigran dalam novel *Babel: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) karya R.F. Kuang, dengan menekankan keterkaitan antara bahasa, kekuasaan, dan identitas dalam konteks kolonial Oxford abad ke-19. Proyek ini menggabungkan teori sastra pascakolonial dan kartografi sastra untuk memetakan lintasan emosional dan spasial para tokoh imigran, dengan fokus pada Robin Swift, seorang yatim piatu asal Tiongkok yang dibesarkan di Inggris. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa penerjemahan berfungsi sebagai alat kendali imperial sekaligus sebagai ruang perlawanan, menempatkan para sarjana imigran sebagai sosok yang penting namun terpinggirkan dalam struktur kekaisaran. Melalui analisis tekstual yang cermat, penelitian ini mengungkap pola-pola asimilasi, keterasingan, dan pemberontakan, serta menunjukkan bagaimana narasi Kuang mengkritisi proses kolonial dan menegaskan kembali agensi linguistik. Pendekatan multidisipliner ini memberikan kontribusi unik dalam studi *Babel* dengan menggambarkan identitas imigran sebagai negosiasi dinamis antara memori budaya, keterpindahan, dan perlawanan.

Kata kunci: Dislokasi Budaya, Identitas Imigran, Penerjemahan

ABSTRACT

This research examines the immigrant experience in R.F. Kuang's Babel: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution (2022), emphasizing the interplay of language, power, and identity within the colonial context of 19th-century Oxford. This project employs a synthesis of postcolonial literary theory and literary cartography to delineate the emotional and spatial trajectories of immigrant characters, with a focus on Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan reared in England. The analysis demonstrates that translation serves as both an instrument of imperial control and a locus of resistance, situating immigrant scholars as both vital and marginalized within the empire. This research employs meticulous textual analysis to reveal patterns of assimilation, alienation, and rebellion, demonstrating how Kuang's story critiques colonial processes and reasserts linguistic agency.

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This multidisciplinary approach provides a unique contribution to Babel study by depicting immigrant identity as a dynamic negotiation of cultural memory, displacement, and resistance.

Keywords: *Cultural Displacement, Immigrant Identity, Translation*

A. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Babel*, or *The Necessity of Violence* (2022) written by R.F. Kuang provides a compelling reconstruction of Oxford in the 19th century as a center of colonial power and linguistic hegemony. Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan who was reared in England, is the protagonist of the novel. He is transported to Babel, which is the Royal Institute of Translation, where language becomes a tool of both imperial dominance and cultural survival. Kuang brilliantly illustrates the complicated and frequently traumatic experience of immigrants in a culture that simultaneously depends on and exploits their linguistic ability through the characters of Robin and his colleague’s immigrant professors.

Babel intricately maps the immigrant experience through Robin’s journey of linguistic assimilation, cultural negotiation, and resistance. The novel interrogates the colonial underpinnings of translation and scholarship, exploring how immigrant scholars navigate complex identities in the face of systemic exploitation and imperial violence. As Robin and his fellow immigrant students at Babel grapple with belonging and betrayal, Kuang offers a trenchant commentary on how migration is entangled with power, language, and cultural survival.

The experience of being an immigrant in Babel is characterized by competing forces of belonging and betrayal. The question that arises is how these immigrant individuals negotiate their identities within the framework of empire. These issues constitute the primary research problem of this investigation, which is to map the experience of immigrants in Babel and investigate the ways in which power, language, and identity intersect in the lives of the characters who are immigrants in the story.

By mapping the immigrant experience in *Babel*, this research seeks to uncover the ways in which language, power, and identity intersect in the lives of immigrant characters. Employing literary cartography as a methodological framework (Piatti et al., 2009), this analysis situates *Babel* within broader discourses on migration, cultural memory, and postcolonial critique.

This research uses a postcolonial literary framework combined with literary cartography to trace the immigrant experience in *Babel*. The postcolonial approach analyzes how the novel’s immigrant characters negotiate identity, belonging, and power within the imperial context. Meanwhile, the concept of literary cartography (Piatti et al., 2009) will enable a “mapping” of the characters’ physical and emotional journeys, providing a unique way to visualize and understand their experiences. Through this dual lens, the study reveals how the immigrant

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experience in *Babel* is intricately linked to questions of cultural translation, displacement, and resistance.

Existing scholarship on *Babel* primarily focuses on its critique of colonialism, the politics of translation, and the construction of language as a form of imperial power (Devarakonda, 2023; Lee, 2023). However, there is a notable gap in research that specifically maps the immigrant experience using a literary cartography approach. This research therefore provides a novel contribution by combining postcolonial analysis with literary mapping, offering a fresh perspective on how immigrant identity and cultural negotiation are spatially and narratively constructed in the novel. Based on these considerations, the researcher formulated two research questions such as *How do these immigrant characters navigate their identities within the structures of empire? How does the colonial context shape their personal and political struggles?* Through the guiding questions, this research not only fills a critical gap in previous studies but also contributes to broader conversations on migration, resistance, and the spatial politics of literature.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Literature

Postcolonial literature frequently explores identity and belonging as dynamic, contested terrains shaped by historical trauma, migration, and cultural hybridity. Identity is often portrayed as fragmented and fluid, especially in immigrant narratives where characters grapple with cultural alienation and the tension between inherited traditions and new sociopolitical realities. This crisis of identity reflects the psychological dislocation experienced by individuals caught between multiple cultural frameworks. Literature becomes a vital space for articulating narratives of belonging, offering voice to those who feel excluded from dominant discourses and enabling the expression of longing, resistance, and the search for community. Language plays a pivotal role in this process; the use of colonial languages such as English in postcolonial texts embodies a dual function serving as a tool of empowerment and global communication, while simultaneously representing linguistic erasure and the suppression of indigenous voices. In this context, *Babel*, though fictional, resonates deeply with postcolonial concerns. Its title evokes the biblical Tower of Babel, a symbol of linguistic fragmentation and cultural confusion, which mirrors the postcolonial linguistic anxiety experienced by immigrant characters navigating multilingual environments. These characters often embody layered identities, shaped by race, migration, and historical displacement, and their journeys reflect the struggle to locate a sense of self within fractured cultural landscapes. Moreover, the novel critiques institutional and societal structures that perpetuate exclusion, highlighting how systems of power continue to marginalize immigrant voices. Through this lens, *Babel* becomes a compelling narrative of postcolonial identity formation and the enduring quest for belonging in a world marked by colonial legacies and cultural complexity.

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This research utilizes a combined theoretical framework of postcolonial literary theory and literary cartography to explore and map the immigrant experience in R.F. Kuang's novel, *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence* (2022). Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Edward Said (1978) and Homi Bhabha (1994), offers a critical lens to analyze how the novel portrays the intersections of language, identity, and colonial power. Said's foundational work in *Orientalism* critiques how colonial discourse constructs the "Orient" as an exotic and subordinate Other, while Bhabha's concept of hybridity challenges the binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how Kuang's immigrant characters, especially Robin Swift, navigate the imperial structures of *Babel* as both linguistic assets and subjects of cultural displacement.

In the novel, language is not a neutral tool but a vehicle of both assimilation and resistance. Robin and his fellow immigrant scholars are caught in a paradox: their knowledge of foreign languages makes them indispensable to the British Empire's translation machinery, yet they remain marginalized and alienated within the imperial center. Postcolonial theory helps to unpack this ambivalence, revealing how immigrant identities are constructed, contested, and reimagined within a colonial framework.

2. Literary Cartography

The second framework, literary cartography, as developed by Piatti et al. (2009), provides a method to spatialize these experiences. Literary cartography argues that fictional spaces cities, institutions, and landscapes are not mere backdrops but active participants in narrative meaning-making. By tracing the journeys of the immigrant characters in *Babel*, this approach allows for a visual and analytical mapping of how physical spaces intersect with emotional and cultural geographies. In the context of Kuang's novel, literary cartography highlights how the immigrant experience is both a literal and symbolic negotiation of belonging and exclusion.

By mapping the symbolic, emotional, and political aspects of place within narrative, literary cartography examines how literature creates and traverses both real and imagined space. It explores how spatial relationships reflect themes like identity, migration, and power, going beyond simply identifying geographic settings. Literary cartography explores how characters navigate environments influenced by colonial histories, cultural memory, and social exclusion by drawing on human geography, narrative theory, and postcolonial studies (Tally, 2013). Literary space is not neutral; rather, it is ideologically charged and narratively constructed, according to scholars like Barbara Piatti and Robert T. Tally Jr. (Piatti & Hurni, 2011; Tally, 2013). Literary cartography in postcolonial contexts shows how displaced characters navigate a sense of belonging across fractured geographies, frequently resisting dominant spatial orders through movement, language, and metaphor (Moretti, 1999). Literary cartography is a potent tool for

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examining how stories shape and are shaped by the spaces they inhabit, and this method is particularly applicable to texts like *Babel*, where linguistic fragmentation and cultural confusion reflect the experience of immigrants.

Existing scholarship provides a strong foundation for this research but leaves a crucial gap. Devarakonda (2023) examines *Babel*’s critique of colonial translation practices, focusing on how the novel positions translation as both a tool of imperial domination and a site of resistance. Lee (2023) similarly analyzes how Kuang interrogates the imperial politics of language and translation, arguing that the novel reclaims linguistic agency for marginalized voices. Piatti et al. (2009), meanwhile, lay the groundwork for applying literary cartography as a method to analyze spatial dynamics in narrative fiction.

Although these studies illuminate the novel’s themes of imperialism and linguistic power, they do not specifically address the immigrant experience as a mapped narrative space. This research fills this gap by combining postcolonial theory and literary cartography to map the immigrant experience in *Babel*, showing how Kuang constructs both physical and emotional geographies of migration. In doing so, it reveals how the immigrant experience in *Babel* is shaped by spatial and symbolic negotiations of power, belonging, and resistance.

Ultimately, this research contributes a new dimension to the scholarly discourse by offering a visual and theoretical map of how immigrant identities are constructed and contested in Kuang’s novel. It underscores how translation, as both a literal practice and a metaphor for cultural negotiation, is central to the immigrant experience in colonial settings. By integrating postcolonial literary theory and literary cartography, the study provides a comprehensive framework to understand the complexities of identity, displacement, and resistance in *Babel*.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis design, combining postcolonial literary criticism and literary cartography to explore and map the immigrant experience in R.F. Kuang’s *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence* (2022). A qualitative approach is suitable to this study because it prioritizes close textual analysis and interpretation, aiming to understand how literary elements such as characterization, setting, and narrative structure construct complex themes of identity, power, and belonging within the colonial context of the novel. By engaging with Kuang’s richly layered narrative, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which the immigrant experience is represented, negotiated, and contested in *Babel*.

Research Design

The research adopts an interpretive-analytical design, which focuses on reading and interpreting the text to reveal its deeper meanings and cultural implications. This design integrates postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994)

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to examine how Kuang portrays immigrant characters as both vital to and marginalized by the imperial system of Babel. It also incorporates literary cartography (Piatti et al., 2009) as a methodological tool to visualize and map the characters’ journeys, situating their immigrant experiences within both literal and symbolic spaces. By combining these approaches, the research design aims to highlight the intersection of spatial, cultural, and emotional geographies in the novel.

Data Source

The primary data source is the novel *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution* written by R.F. Kuang published Harper Voyager. The novel consisted of 595 pages.

This novel serves as a rich textual landscape that foregrounds the immigrant experience through its narrative strategies and thematic concerns. Supporting this primary data are secondary sources including academic articles, journal reviews, and theoretical texts that provide critical insights and contextual frameworks for interpreting the novel.

Data Collection

Data collection involves close reading and annotation of the primary text. This process identifies passages, scenes, and dialogues that highlight the immigrant experience, particularly those that address themes of linguistic identity, cultural negotiation, and imperial power. These annotated sections will be coded and categorized according to emerging themes relevant to the research questions.

Secondary data collection involves a literature review of relevant scholarship on *Babel*, postcolonial theory, and literary cartography. This review provides additional interpretive frameworks and ensure that the research engages critically with existing discussions in the field.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis combines thematic analysis and spatial mapping. Thematic analysis involves coding and categorizing key passages from the novel according to recurrent themes such as assimilation, alienation, resistance, and translation as power. These themes will be interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on how immigrant identities are negotiated within colonial structures.

Simultaneously, literary cartography will be employed to create visual maps of the novel’s narrative spaces. Using Piatti et al.’s (2009) framework, this process chart the movements of immigrant characters, mapping their transitions between physical and metaphorical spaces such as Babel itself, the city of Oxford, and spaces of cultural memory. These maps serve as interpretive tools, revealing how the

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novel’s spatial dynamics reflect the broader struggles of immigrant identity and agency.

By combining thematic and spatial analysis, this research methodology will provide a comprehensive understanding of how *Babel* represents the immigrant experience. It highlight the ways in which narrative structure, setting, and language converge to articulate the complex emotional and cultural geographies of Kuang’s immigrant characters.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several notable patterns to answer two research questions which have been formulated as follow : *How do these immigrant characters navigate their identities within the structures of empire? How does the colonial context shape their personal and political struggles?*

The data is organized into three interrelated themes: Identity Erasure and Assimilation, Emotional Dislocation and Cultural Severance, and Colonial Exploitation and Resistance. Each theme is supported by textual evidence from *Babel* and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework.

1. Identity Erasure and Assimilation

This theme explores how immigrant characters are forced to abandon their cultural identities and conform to imperial norms.

Data 1

“Pick... a surname?”

“The English reinvent their names all the time,” said Professor Lovell. “You only need a handle to introduce yourself by. Any name will do.” (Page 11-12)

Robin Swift, orphaned by cholera in Canton, is brought to London by the mysterious Professor Lovell. He trains for years in Latin, Ancient Greek, and Chinese He enters the Oxford Translation Institute (Babel) as a precious linguistic commodity, cultivated to serve empire. When Robin arrives in England, he’s forced to abandon his Chinese name and adopt “Robin Swift”. This data was classified as identity erasure, a symbolic violence of language that enforces assimilation. Robin’s forced renaming reflects how empire erases cultural identity to mold subjects into tools of imperial power. Robin’s new name marks the first fracture in his journey. His assimilation begins with a loss of self, a moment that foreshadows deeper alienation.

Data 2

“Did you think... enough time in England would make me just like you?”

Lovell’s racist response triggers Robin’s final break: he kills him by speaking a word on silver that means “to explode”—Bào (page 518-519)

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That moment is one of the most emotionally and thematically charged scenes in *Babel*. "Did you think... that spending enough time in England would make me just like you?" was the inquiry that Robin posed. This is a direct confrontation with the assimilation process, the expectations of colonial rule, and the erasing of distinct identities. In addition to being a personal rebuke to Lovell, this is also a rejection of the entire imperial system, which attempted to shape him into a tool that would comply with its demands. The word "Bào," which can be translated as "to explode" or "violent eruption" in Mandarin, is engraved on a silver bar after Lovell has been murdered. Through this act, which is both physical and metaphorical, Robin uses language, which is the very instrument that the empire used to subjugate him, as a weapon to destroy its representative. During this moment of linguistic resistance, translation transforms into violence, and those who have been colonized seek to restore their power.

2. Emotional Dislocation and Cultural Severance

This theme highlights the psychological and emotional toll of migration and imperial assimilation.

Data 3

"The word loss was inadequate... this terrifying un-anchoring from all that he'd ever known." (Page 15)

Robin's migration from Canton to London is not just physical, it's a severance from language, culture, and self. It underscores how emotional truth often exceeds the bounds of rational, imperial language. Un-anchoring" suggests that identity is rooted in place, memory, and cultural continuity, and empire severs all three. His trauma is silently shaped by the imperial narrative of salvation. He is "saved" from cholera, but into a life that demands assimilation and self-erasure. The emotional dislocation becomes the backdrop for his later political awakening.

Data 4

"The university ripped us from our homes and made us believe that our futures could only consist of serving the Crown," Robin says. (Page 531)

During a confrontation with Sterling in the last chapters of *Babel*, Robin utters the powerful remark, "The university ripped us from our homes and made us believe that our futures could only consist of serving the Crown." This line is delivered by Robin. During this particular moment, Robin's complete disillusionment with *Babel* and the imperial system that it maintains is made manifest. He is no longer only questioning his position, rather, he is indicting the institution that molded him, pointing out the ways in which it coerces immigrant scholars into collaboration while simultaneously disconnecting them from their fundamental background.

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3. Colonial Exploitation and Resistance

This theme examines how empire exploits immigrant labor and knowledge while suppressing autonomy and resistance.

Data 5

“This is no accident; this is a deliberate exploitation of foreign culture and foreign resources... Babel is the business of colonialism.” (page 99)

Griffin’s words expose how immigrant scholars are used to extract linguistic value for imperial gain, while being denied true belonging. Robin benefits from elite education and privilege, yet this privilege is built on colonial exploitation. He oscillates between loyalty to Babel and allegiance to his homeland. The statements made by Griffin refute the idea that the function that Babel plays in empire is merely incidental. It is his contention that the structure and purpose of the institute have been purposefully designed in order to get value from cultures that have been colonized. “Deliberate exploitation” is an indication that translation is not neutral; rather, it is an instrument of control. Babel does not just study languages; rather, it exploits them in order to feed British domination. The phrase reveals the deception of academic rigor that has been created. Babel maintains that it is a haven for knowledge, but in reality, it is inextricably intertwined with imperialism and commercial activity.

Data 6

“This is how colonialism works. It convinced us that the fallout from resistance is entirely our fault...” (page 497)

This line, which was stated by Robin, encapsulates a harsh reality that colonialism not only abuses bodies and labor, but it also manipulates conscience. The colonized are led to believe, through the use of gas lighting, that any attempt to resist or express autonomy is fundamentally evil whether viewed from a moral, social, and political perspective. The dominance of an empire is maintained not just through the use of violence but also through the internalization of guilt. Robin’s realization shows how empire manipulates immigrant guilt to suppress rebellion, making resistance feel immoral.

Data 7

“This is no accident; this is a deliberate exploitation of foreign culture and foreign resources... Babel is the business of colonialism.” (page 99-100)

Griffin’s words expose how immigrant scholars are used to extract linguistic value for imperial gain, while being denied true belonging.

In the word “**No accident**”, Griffin emphasizes intentionality. The exploitation isn’t incidental. It’s designed. Babel’s recruitment of multilingual scholars from colonized lands is a calculated strategy to harness their cultural capital. Furthermore, “**Deliberate exploitation**” explains that the Institute doesn’t

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merely study languages. It extracts value from them. Translation in *Babel* isn't neutral. It's a tool of domination. Silver bars, powered by linguistic “match pairs,” are used to manipulate reality, and this magic fuels British supremacy. “*Babel is the business of colonialism*” this is the heart of Griffin's critique. *Babel* isn't just an academic institution. It's a colonial engine. It translates not to understand, but to control. The knowledge produced is weaponized to maintain imperial dominance.

Discussion

The experience of immigrants in *Babel* is not merely portrayed, rather, it is theorized as a structural outcome of imperial regimes. The novel presents Robin Swift and his group as individuals positioned between cultural realms by drawing on postcolonial frameworks, especially Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and mimicry (Bhabha, 1997). Their academic prowess and fluency in the language are tools of imperial utility rather than indicators of belonging. This supports Bhabha's claim that mimicry is “almost the same but not quite,” a tactic that fosters ambivalence and upholds colonial power (Bhabha, 1997).

Griffin's claim that “*Babel is the business of colonialism*” provides a theoretical framework for comprehending how translation works as a control mechanism. Edward Said's criticism of Orientalism, which holds that knowledge about the colonized is created to further the goals of the colonizer (Said, 1989). It is reflected in the institution's purposeful extraction of linguistic value from immigrant scholars. In this situation, translation serves as a siphon rather than a bridge, drawing cultural nuances to support imperial expansion.

Historical narratives of colonial educational systems, like Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's thoughts on language and power in *Decolonising the Mind*, can be used to draw empirical comparisons (wa Thiong'o, 2024). Similar to Robin, colonized students were instructed to learn the language of the colonizer but were later denied access to its cultural heritage. This dynamic is literalized in *Babel* by the silver bars, which turn language into imperial infrastructure and reaffirm that linguistic proficiency does not equate to agency.

The phrase “Oxford was never home, no matter how long we stayed” epitomizes Robin's alienation, which is structural rather than just emotional. Postcolonial critiques of institutional belonging are reflected in his experience of spatial and symbolic exclusion. Oxford, a place where knowledge is created, turns into a metaphor for the empire since it accepts immigrants but opposes their assimilation. This is similar to Sara Ahmed's idea of institutional whiteness, which holds that diversity is only acceptable if it doesn't challenge established conventions.

It is possible to see Robin's destruction of *Babel* as a drastic reassertion of agency. It is a theoretical break as well as a narrative climax. Robin defies the imperial logic that links control and knowledge by demolishing the tower. Through his sacrifice, the immigrant subject is reframed as a transformative agent rather than

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a helpless victim. This is consistent with Gayatri Spivak's idea of the "subaltern" speaking back through disruption rather than assimilation (Spivak, 2012).

E. CONCLUSION

The journey of Robin Swift in *Babel* represents the immigrant subject's intricate identity negotiation within the oppressive frameworks of empire. Robin's journey shows how colonial systems use language as a weapon to obliterate cultural specificity, impose assimilation, and devalue marginalized bodies from the time of his forced renaming to his last act of linguistic rebellion. His emotional dislocation, which is described as "un-anchoring," emphasizes the separation from his homeland, memory, and self; this breakup serves as the catalyst for his political awakening.

Kuang reveals *Babel* as an imperial control mechanism and criticizes the false neutrality of translation through Robin's developing consciousness. Colonial power demands allegiance while denying belonging, as demonstrated by the institution's exploitation of immigrant scholars under the pretense of academic rigor. By destroying *Babel* with the language it attempted to commercialize, Robin's ultimate act of defiance reclaims linguistic agency and recasts the immigrant voice as a force for resistance.

In conclusion, *Babel* portrays immigrant identity as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation, emotional upheaval, and political reclamation rather than as a fixed category. Robin's narrative demonstrates how the colonized subject can rewrite the rules of power and how translation can become insurgent within the imperial archive.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported the completion of this research. Finally, this work is dedicated to all those who navigate cultural displacement and identity negotiation in the shadow of empire. May this research contribute, in some small way, to the broader understanding of language, power, and resistance.

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