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**AN ANALYSIS OF “BABEL: OR THE NECESSITY OF VIOLENCE” BY R.F.  
KUANG AS A METAPHOR FOR POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION STUDIES**

**FORTALEZA**

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AS A METAPHOR FOR POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION STUDIES

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao Curso Superior de Licenciatura em Letras-Inglês, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras-Inglês.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Patrick de Rezende Ribeiro

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“Language was always the companion of empire, and as such, together they begin, grow, and flourish. And later, together, they fall.”  
(NEBRIJA, 1492, s.p.).

## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the intersection between postcolonial translation theories and contemporary literature, analyzing how translation can serve both as a tool of oppression and a means of resistance. The novel “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution” by R. F. Kuang is explored as a metaphor for understanding postcolonial translation theories. The story follows Robin Swift, a Cantonese boy brought to London to study translation at the University of Oxford, where he becomes involved in colonial exploitation and magical silver-working. The research problem arises from the need to reinforce critical reflections on the role of translation in maintaining or subverting power dynamics within colonial contexts, while also considering the importance of contemporary literature in expanding these debates beyond academia. The objective is to analyze how Kuang’s narrative reflects and exemplifies the articulation of postcolonial theory and translation studies, drawing on the works of Campos (1981), Lefevere (1992), Niranjana (1992), Bhabha (1998), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), and Rajagopalan (2001), as well as the notion of “orientalism” discussed by Said (1979) and the concept of “minor literature” coined by Deleuze and Guattari (2003). Methodologically, the study is classified as descriptive research and it includes a literature review of the principal postcolonial translation theories to support the analysis of selected passages from Kuang’s novel. The study shows that “Babel” portrays translation’s dual function, both as a colonial instrument of control and as a means of resistance, while it also embodies Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literature.” Its international success demonstrates how contemporary fiction can bring complex postcolonial debates into wider public conversation.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism; Translation Studies; Babel.

## RESUMO

Esta pesquisa se concentra na interseção entre as teorias da tradução pós-colonial e a literatura contemporânea, analisando como a tradução pode servir tanto como uma ferramenta de opressão quanto como um meio de resistência. O romance “Babel: Ou a Necessidade de Violência” de R. F. Kuang é explorado como uma metáfora para a compreensão das teorias de tradução pós-coloniais. A história segue Robin Swift, um menino cantonês trazido para Londres para estudar tradução na Universidade de Oxford, onde se envolve na exploração e no trabalho mágico com prata. O problema de pesquisa surge da necessidade de reforçar as reflexões críticas sobre o papel da tradução na manutenção ou subversão das dinâmicas de poder nos contextos coloniais, considerando também a importância da literatura contemporânea na expansão desses debates para além da academia. O objetivo é analisar como a narrativa de Kuang reflete e exemplifica a articulação entre as teorias pós-coloniais e os estudos de tradução, com base nos trabalhos de Campos (1981), Lefevere (1992), Niranjana (1992), Bhabha (1998), Bassnett e Trivedi (1999) e Rajagopalan (2001), além da noção de “orientalismo” discutida por Said (1979), bem como o conceito de “literatura menor” de Deleuze e Guattari (2003). Metodologicamente, o estudo é classificado como uma pesquisa descritiva e inclui uma revisão de literatura das principais teorias da tradução pós-colonial para apoiar a análise de passagens selecionadas do livro de Kuang. O estudo mostra que “Babel” retrata a função dupla da tradução, tanto como instrumento colonial de controle quanto como meio de resistência, ao mesmo tempo em que incorpora a noção de “literatura menor” de Deleuze e Guattari. Seu sucesso internacional demonstra como a ficção contemporânea pode levar debates pós-coloniais complexos ao público em geral.

**Palavras-chave:** Pós-colonialismo; Estudos da Tradução; Babel.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

I grew up immersed in a literature focused on Western issues. In high school, when I entered a Federal Institution, I began to explore narratives that challenge what Said (1979) calls orientalism, a stereotyped and distorted view of the East constructed and perpetuated by the West, through artistic and cultural outreach events and debates in some courses.

Upon entering the Language and Literature undergraduate course at the Federal University of Ceará, I had the opportunity to further deepen my contact with these new perspectives, exploring narratives that went beyond classical Western literature and expanding my understanding of representations of the East and critiques of orientalism.

Along with this, by participating in the LETRARE (Translation Research Group, Laboratory for Translation, Revision, and Editing of Academic texts) study group, I also began to develop an interest in translation studies. However, it was only when I read “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution” by R. F. Kuang that I discovered how postcolonial issues and translation studies can intertwine and how fiction can serve as a tool to illustrate the impact of translation as both an instrument of control and resistance.

Translation played a central role in the colonial encounter, being used to establish and perpetuate the superiority of some cultures over others. As Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) argue, I believe that translation is not a neutral act and, in the colonial context, it served as an instrument to shape the colonized according to the interests of the colonizers.

However, with the evolution of translation studies through the lens of postcolonial studies, there has been an increased awareness of the unequal power relations involved in the act of translation. This shift has created an opportunity to rethink the history of translation and its contemporary practices, allowing a space for previously silenced voices, such as those of peoples portrayed in stereotypical ways, to finally be translated in ways that reflect their own narratives and identities, thus subverting colonial dominance (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999).

Therefore, “Babel” aligns with my interest in examining translation within this postcolonial perspective. In this sense, I aim to explore the possibility of Kuang’s work functioning as a metaphor for the complexities of translation in colonial contexts. I consider it important to bring the book to this debate, because, in addition to its considerable reach, it is a recent book and therefore can bring contemporary perspectives to this area of study.

## 2 JUSTIFICATION

Historically, the act of translation was often used as a form of cultural and identity erasure of colonized peoples. By employing certain translation strategies, which reinforced the hegemonic and distorted thinking of the colonizers over the colonized, an idea of superiority of the metropolis, of the European being, over the colonies was consolidated. In this way, translation can perpetuate harmful beliefs that colonizers have about the colonized, while creating an excuse to “purify” them and silence their voices since they are not considered reliable and capable of governing themselves (Niranjana, 1992).

Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) also reflect on such issues and highlight that translation is far from being a neutral or transparent practice; on the contrary, it is part of a continuous process of cultural exchange and carries meanings in all its stages. Translation rarely, if ever, occurs on equal terms, whether between texts, authors, or systems.

The articulation of postcolonial studies with translation studies recognizes the violence inherent in the translation process, and also seeks to propose ways to subvert the dominant colonial narratives. By proposing new translations for historically biased texts that served colonial interests, it is possible to challenge the power dynamics and bring to light postcolonial perspectives that rescue and give voice to oppressed peoples (Rajagopalan, 2001).

These perceptions appear in Kuang’s narrative. In “Babel”, translation is not only a linguistic practice, but also a political tool used by the metropolis, represented here by the University of Oxford, to control and exploit the knowledge of translators, who are often from the colonies, thereby maintaining European hegemony.

In addition, the book offers a reflection on the role of the translator as an agent between cultures who sometimes needs to navigate contexts of inequality, resisting or succumbing to external pressures.

In this way, the analysis of “Babel” seeks to bring a work of contemporary fiction, which has not yet been so explored in translation studies, to the center of a postcolonial debate. This research aims to reinforce how literature can act as a space of resistance and cultural criticism. Thus, the relevance of this work lies in the need to enhance critical reflections on the role of translation in sustaining power structures, as well as to highlight the importance of integrating contemporary fictional narratives into academic debates, showcasing their ability to illustrate and challenge colonial dynamics that continue to resonate in the modern world.

### 3 RESEARCH OBJECT

The object of this research is the book “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution” by R. F. Kuang, published in 2022. The book tells the story of a Cantonese boy, named Robin Swift, who is taken to London to study translation at Oxford University. There, he becomes entangled in a world of magical silver-working and colonial exploitation.

The author, Rebecca F. Kuang, known by her pen name R. F. Kuang, was born in 1996 in Guangzhou, China and immigrated to the United States at the age of four, having grown up in Dallas, Texas (Kuang, 2020). Kuang’s grandparents endured the events of the second Sino-Japanese war. As she learned more about her family’s history, she considered exploring it in a biography. However, not wanting to reopen old wounds, she chose instead to address these themes through fantasy. While majoring in history at Georgetown University, she took a gap year at 19 to live in Beijing, where she taught debate to high school students. To fill her free time, she began writing what would later become her debut novel, “The Poppy War”, inspired by many 20th-century events from Chinese history. Originally published in English in 2018, the book went on to lead an award-winning trilogy (Kuang, 2023b).

Continuing her academic life, as a Marshall Scholar, she earned a Master of Philosophy in Chinese Studies from Cambridge and an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford. As of 2024 she is finishing her PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University (Kuang, n.d.).

Following “The Poppy War” trilogy, Kuang released a standalone novel titled “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution”, the object of study for this research. It was published in English by Harper Voyager in August 2022, and has been translated into more than 20 languages, including Brazilian Portuguese (Kuang, 2023a). Set in an alternate-reality 1830s England, with the Opium War serving as the historical backdrop, the novel explores themes of British imperialism and the role of academia in sustaining it. Kuang says it was inspired by her own contradictory feelings about her experience as a student of color in Oxford, understanding its troubling history but still wanting to fit in the place (Kuang, 2022a).

The focus is on the analysis of how the book dialogues with postcolonial theories in translation studies, debating the role of translation in maintaining the structures of cultural and political domination, as well as the violence present in the translation act. The problem that guides this study is to understand how the narratives of the novel not only expose, but

also challenge the power relations inherent in the translation process, questioning the supposed neutrality of the translator and how the hegemony of the metropolis over the colonies was built.

The central question guiding this research is: How does R. F. Kuang's book illustrate the dynamics of translation and power within a postcolonial perspective?

The question and problem of this research emerge from the identification of the importance of reinforcing the debates around the role of translation in colonialism and bringing new perspectives from contemporary literature. Based on this, the objectives of the work are outlined.

### **3.1 General Objectives**

The general objective of this research is to investigate and analyze the book from a postcolonial perspective, drawing on Said (1979), Campos (1981), Lefevere (1992), Niranjana (1992), Bhabha (1998), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), and Rajagopalan (2001), as well as the concept of "minor literature" proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2003).

### **3.2 Specific Objectives**

- Explore how Kuang's narrative reflects and exemplifies the articulation between postcolonial theory and translation studies;
- Analyze the representation of the figure of the translator in "Babel" and its role in the reproduction or resistance to colonial power structures;
- Investigate the relationship between translation, power and identity portrayed in "Babel";
- Reflect about the role of literature in expanding these debates outside the academic circles.

## 4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

This section provides a theoretical foundation for examining R. F. Kuang's "Babel" as a metaphor for postcolonial theories in translation studies, while also exploring the concept of "minor literature" and its relevance to understand the novel's placement in literature.

### 4.1 Minor Literature

The concept of "minor literature" was coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book "Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature", where they offered a new approach to understand and reflect about literary production created in marginalized or deterritorialized contexts within dominant linguistic frameworks and literary traditions. In other words, minor literature does not correspond to works written by minorities in a minor language or the language of these own minorities, but rather refers to literary production made by minorities using a major or dominant language (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003).

Deleuze and Guattari (2003) define minor literature by describing three central aspects of it. The first aspect is its strong coefficient of linguistic deterritorialization, which is deeply connected to what they call the "impossibility of not writing" (p. 38). This concept reflects the writer's struggle and need to articulate their experience within a dominant language that is both imposed upon them and integral to their identity. They elucidate this concept by using as an example Franz Kafka, who, as part of a Jewish minority in Prague, wrote in German rather than Czech, the language of the country he lived in, or in Yiddish, the language of his cultural community. His German, however, was not aligned with the normative and hegemonic uses of the language, instead it was marked by his marginal position, a displaced and alienated version of the major language. In that way, Kafka not only reconfigures the language but also distances himself from the ideologies of linguistic and cultural identity traditionally associated with it.

The second characteristic of minor literature is that everything in it is inherently political. This contrasts with "major" literatures, where individual concerns, like family dynamics or personal struggles, tend to remain isolated in the narrative space or are depicted in a way that does not necessarily alter or challenge the social order. While personal issues may appear in the narrative, they do not directly change or question the broader political system. In minor literature, however, even the most personal or intimate aspects of life are

directly tied to political contexts. There is no separation between the private and the political; they are intertwined and cannot be understood without considering the broader social context in which they exist. What might be hidden or considered less important in major literature – such as the social problems behind personal relationships – becomes the main focus. In major literature, these social tensions may cause brief confusion or disrupt the story, but they do not usually take the center of the stage. In minor literature, on the other hand, these tensions are crucial and meaningful to the narrative, often making the difference between life and death (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003).

Finally, the third aspect is that minor literature is collective in nature. Even when it emerges from an individual voice, it articulates the struggles and interests of a larger community. The “I” in minor literature is never entirely individual, but it is deep-rooted to the “we”, embodying the collective voice of a community that is seeking to express itself (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003).

In conclusion, minor literature thus becomes an essential space for reflection and social transformation by amplifying the voice of marginalized groups and offering a deeper understanding of power dynamics. Its importance lies in its ability to question the *status quo* and to operate as a form of praxis, one that shapes and challenges political and social structures from within, bringing certain debates to a broader audience.

In the following subsection, we delve into the emergence of a postcolonial reading of translation.

## **4.2 Postcolonial Perspectives on Translation**

The development of post-structuralism in the second half of the 20th century has remarkably altered the field of translation studies. As Eagleton (2006) explains, while structuralism following Saussure, already understood that meaning arises from the relational differences between signs rather than from inherent connections between words and things, post-structuralism builds on this premise and takes it further. Post-structuralist thinkers argue that meaning is not only relational but also inherently unstable and endlessly deferred, since language operates more like a boundless web in which signs constantly shift in relation to one another. This theoretical perspective complicates the idea that translation can faithfully reproduce fixed meanings from one language into another, and it brings new attention to the translator’s role, not as a neutral conveyor of meaning, but as an active agent navigating the complexities and ambiguities of language.

The translator is no longer seen as a mere neutral, passive vehicle for transferring meanings across languages. Instead, the translator's role aligns with Roland Barthes' (2004) view of the text as a site of multiplicity. He argues that a text is made up of many writings from different cultures, which interact through dialogue, parody, or contestation. According to Barthes (2004), the unity of a text is not found in the author, but in the reader, who brings these elements together. In this way, we can interpret that the translator acts as a reader too, interpreting and reshaping the text by carrying its multiple voices into new cultures and linguistic contexts, which means that the translator helps the text to take on new life and meaning for different audiences.

Additionally, cultural studies brought attention to the interchange between translation and power. As Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002) discuss, translation is not merely a process of accurately reproducing content but a purposeful and conscious act that involves choices being made by the translator on how they will organize the text and, in some cases, withhold information or distort it. From this perspective we can perceive translation as a political act, going beyond the linguistic aspects of it and diving into the broader cultural and sociopolitical contexts in which translations are produced and received.

Similarly, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990), in their work "Translation, History and Culture", argued for what is called "cultural turn" when they highlighted the significant influence of culture on the translation process. They emphasized the need to examine translation and its ties to power and ideology, specifically regarding translation as a cultural strategy that adapts and manipulates texts to support or challenge ideologies.

As a result of emerging ideas that criticized traditional approaches to translation, the way was paved for a postcolonial perspective, anchored in the notion that translation is not a neutral act. Therefore, scholars such as Niranjana (1992), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) and Rajagopalan (2001) explored the entanglement of translation and colonialism, observing how it contributes to the maintenance of the existing power structures, affecting the representation and perception of cultural identities, and also discussing on how to give voice to those who had previously been silenced.

In the following subsections, we will discuss how translation connects with violence, cultural identity, and resistance.

### *4.2.1 Translation and Violence*

As previously discussed, throughout the history of translation studies, there has been an intertwining with cultural studies, where reflections concerning power and resistance have been made (Niranjana, 1992). From that intersection, it was possible to realize that translation has long been employed as a tool of cultural and political imposition, often exercising symbolic violence by silencing marginalized voices or reinforcing colonial narratives. Scholars such as Niranjana (1992), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), Said (1979) and Dingwaney (1995) have explored how translation practices can perpetuate systems of domination and control.

Tejaswini Niranjana (1992), in her study “Siting Translation: History, Poststructuralism and the Colonial Context”, argues that translation played a pivotal role in the British colonial administration of India, whereas translators collected data about the population and mediated the communication between the Empire and colonized locals. By analyzing the entanglement of translation and colonialism, Niranjana demonstrates how translation has historically been central to shaping and controlling the representation of colonized people. This insight is crucial in understanding that translation has been employed not just as a linguistic exercise but as a means to impose colonial narratives.

Bassnett and Trivedi’s (1999) text, “Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars”, directly dialogues with Niranjana’s work as they state that translation does not occur in isolation but is an integral part of intercultural transfer, which means that translation is not a neutral activity, and it has often been employed as a tool of subjugation. Furthermore, the authors stress the ideological dimensions of translation, noting that it was used as a means of containing the artistic achievement of writers in other languages and asserting the supremacy of European culture. While texts from colonized cultures were translated into European languages to serve European audiences, the opposite rarely occurred, reflecting the lack of reciprocity in this process. This use of translation as a form of cultural and political dominance is particularly relevant when examining postcolonial narratives that seek to reclaim and reframe translation practices. The metaphor of the colony as a translation – a lesser copy of a European original – underscores the broader implications of translation in colonial contexts, where it was used to reinforce and perpetuate unequal power relations.

In a corresponding sense, Edward Said (1979) in his seminal work “Orientalism”, laid the groundwork for this argument by positing that the Orient was not a neutral or

objective entity but a European invention – a space permeated with exoticism and backwardness, deliberately positioned in opposition to the rationality and progressiveness of the West. The concept of the Orient was not merely a geographical or cultural distinction but an ideological discursive construct used to legitimize Western Imperial and colonial ambitions by portraying it as a region in need of intervention and control. This ideological framework relates directly to translation and violence, as it was through translation that European powers often framed non-European peoples and cultures as inferior, misrepresenting and simplifying them to fit colonial narratives. The act of translation has never been impartial, it has constantly carried the violence of erasure and distortion, reducing rich and complex cultures into stereotypes that justified European superiority. In this way, translation functioned as an instrument of symbolic violence, supporting the broader project of colonial hegemony by perpetuating the dichotomy of a “civilized” Europe against “uncivilized” others.

Additionally, Western power is not evident only in the way how non-Western cultures are translated but also in the decisions regarding what and who is selected to be translated. The Western publishing industry, driven by its preferences and assumptions about what will resonate with Western audiences, determines which voices, views and texts are going to form the non-Western literary canon. Thereby, what and who are chosen typically align with Western tastes and expectations, thus, marginalizing works that challenge or deviate from these norms. (Dingwaney, 1995).

The creation of this canon influences both what Western readers see as important and how Non-Western readers view their own cultures. This influence spreads widely, shaping the self-perception of individuals in non-Western regions and their understanding of other non-Western cultures. For example, renowned works of fiction from non-Western cultures, such as those from Latin America, often reach other regions, like India, through translations produced by Western publishers. These texts are usually accompanied by Western academic critiques and comments, which influence how they are interpreted. By the time they reach new audiences, they are far removed from their original context and are often mistakenly seen as authentic representations of their source cultures. This dynamic shows how Western translations and interpretations not only affect global perceptions of cultures from formerly colonized regions in the West but they also influence how these cultures are understood and reclaimed within other non-Western regions, making critical analysis of such translation essential (Dingwaney, 1995).

By controlling which texts are translated, how they are framed, and how they are interpreted, the West exerts cultural dominance. This process silences authentic voices,

replacing them with interpretations shaped by Western priorities. As a result, the agency and authenticity of the original culture are marginalized, further reinforcing hegemonic narratives (Dingwaney, 1995).

In the following subsection, we will look more closely at the relationship between translation and cultural identities.

#### ***4.2.2 Translation and Cultural Identities***

Translation plays a pivotal role in shaping and redefining cultural identities, functioning both as a bridge between cultures and as a tool that can either reinforce or challenge dominant cultural representations. Through the presentation of specific portrayals of the colonized and the interpretative lens applied during the translation process, translators and publishing industries influence how cultures are perceived by external audiences and the communities being represented.

Colonial translation practices, such as the projects led by the philologist William Jones in India, exemplify how translation functioned as a means of domination (Niranjana, 1992). European translators often deemed native voices unreliable, positioning themselves as the authoritative interpreters of local laws, customs and texts. According to Niranjana (1992), this allowed them to “purify” and reframe indigenous knowledge, aligning it with colonial narratives that justified their rule. The scholar also states that these translations did not merely transfer knowledge, but actively produced and reinforced hierarchical cultural models that elevated Europe as the pinnacle of civilization while subordinating colonized cultures.

In her work, Niranjana (1992) highlights that the effects of these translation practices reverberated in how colonized peoples perceived their own histories and identities, as colonial powers introduced English education in the colonies and tried to suppress modes of indigenous learning. Educated elites in these colonies like India often accessed their cultural heritage through these mediated translations, internalizing Orientalist representations that became naturalized as truth.

Aligned with this perspective, it is important to mention that Said (1979) states that these Orientalist representations, deeply rooted in colonial ideologies, filtered non-Western cultures to appease Western perspectives and interests. In this context, translation, as a practice of cultural mediation, often reinforced the West’s authority over the East. For instance, translation of Arabic or Indian texts frequently perpetuated stereotypes, portraying Orientals as irrational, childlike and “different”, while Western translators

positioned themselves as the rational and authoritative interpreters of these cultures. The Orient was “Orientalized” not because of any inherent characteristics but because it could be manipulated to fit Western frameworks (Said, 1979).

In postcolonial contexts, however, translation can subvert the dominance of colonial languages and ideologies. Niranjana (1992) noted that translation reveals how unequal power relationships are perpetuated through language and representation, therefore a postcolonial translation should aim to dismantle such hierarchies, emphasizing hybrid identities rather than essentialist or nativist perspectives.

This concept of “hybridity” was coined by Homi Bhabha (1998) in his work entitled “The Location of Culture”, referring to the space of encounter between different cultures where a dynamic process of negotiation, exchange, and mutual transformation occurs – an idea that can be applied to translation. This space is not merely one of fusion but of reconfiguration, where new cultural forms emerge, challenging binaries such as colonizer/colonized and fostering new perspectives and meanings.

Regarding cultural identity, hybridity emphasizes its fluid and constantly evolving nature. Instead of being static, cultural identity is shaped by interactions and encounters between cultures, reflecting an ongoing state of negotiation and reinvention. This perspective celebrates cultural hybridity as a form of resistance against the homogenization imposed by colonial powers (Bhabha, 1998).

In the following subsection, we will discuss the relationship between translation and resistance.

#### ***4.2.3 Translation and Resistance***

As discussed throughout this section, translation has historically been employed as a tool for colonial violence and domination. However, it also holds the potential to serve as a powerful mechanism of resistance. In this subsection, we will examine the reflections of authors who have explored this dual role.

Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) argues that translation and history often operate within the same framework of representation, constructing coherent narratives by repressing differences. This process, central to colonial domination, has shaped the ways in which colonized peoples understand their own pasts. Nevertheless, she also highlights the revolutionary potential of translation to disrupt these hegemonic representations and provide alternative ways of engaging with history and identity.

One of the key insights Niranjana (1992) offers is the necessity of “disturbing” or “displacing” history rather than interpreting it within the confines of colonial frameworks. By reading against the grain of colonial historiography, translators can uncover contradictions and silenced forms of resistance, bringing them to the forefront as counter-narratives to the dominant colonial discourse. This approach transforms translation from a tool of containment into one of disruption, challenging established truths and giving voice to the complexities of postcolonial identities.

As discussed in the previous subsection, Niranjana (1992) remarked on the role of English education and the decline of indigenous learning in shaping colonial discourse and cultural identities. Through the imposition of colonial translations and histories, colonized subjects were distanced from their cultural origins and encouraged to view their past through Western lens. However, according to the author, a resistant practice of translation can reclaim these narratives by revealing their constructed nature and emphasizing the heterogeneity and contradictions within them. This approach allows translators to acknowledge a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial identities, moving beyond the search for pure origins or essentialist representations. At the same time, Niranjana (1992) calls attention to the need to deconstruct anti-colonial narratives that may end up replicating imperialist frameworks. Translators must critically engage with myths of nationalism, tradition and “purity” that risk suppressing diversity in decolonizing nations. Rather than reinforcing binary oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized, translation should recognize the complicated notions of *self* and *other*, portraying identities as dynamic and hybrid, as proposed by Bhabha (1998). In doing so, translation may open space for alternative and more inclusive representations.

Ultimately, envisioning translation as a practice that inscribes heterogeneity, Niranjana (1992) argues that it is through retranslation and critical intervention that translators can transform colonial narratives, making visible the complexities of postcolonial identities. This shift reimages translation not as a force of containment but as a disruptive and liberating act – essential for challenging existing power structures and fostering diverse representations of the non-Western world.

Vieira (1999) also emphasizes the need to rethink translation, but through the lens of *Antropofagia* and *cannibalism*, highlighting its role in challenging colonial narratives while embracing hybridity. Originating from Brazil’s cultural movement in the early 20th century, the idea of cannibalism in translation metaphorically captures the process of “devouring” dominant foreign texts, a process in which the translator consumes the source work, dismantles it and reconstructs it within their cultural context. In this context, translation is no

longer viewed as a passive reproduction of texts but as an act of creative reclamation. As Vieira (1999) explains, Haroldo de Campos' notion of transcreation transforms translation from a neutral act into one of resistance and reinvention. It is through the process of "digesting" hegemonic texts that translators can assert agency and reframe cultural narratives rather than simply transmitting them. Translation then becomes a site of political transformation as it allows marginalized voices to reshape dominant discourses in their own terms.

Haroldo de Campos (1981), a central figure in the movement, deepens this metaphor by likening translation to a "blood transfusion", highlighting the reciprocal and nourishing nature of the process. Both the source text and its translation undergo significant transformations, exchanging elements that enrich and revitalize each other, ultimately creating hybrid forms of expression. In cannibalistic translation, the translated text transforms into a new original work, with the translator taking on the role of a creator. In this process, any "obligation" to the original text is dissolved.

The idea of cannibalism, once considered taboo in European Christian's thought, now symbolizes a form of cultural reclamation. This shift represents a resistance to colonial dominance and a celebration of multilingualism and cultural hybridity, acknowledging the complex and interconnected nature of these processes (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999).

In parallel, Rajagopalan (2001) views translation as an inherently violent act, yet also as a tool for resistance, especially in postcolonial contexts. He challenges the traditional logocentric perspective, which idealizes translation as a transparent transfer of meaning between languages, free from distortion. Instead, he argues that violence is intrinsic to translation and should be critically examined, with a focus on the conditions that produce it and the resistance it inspires.

Rajagopalan (2001) compares the role of the original author in translation to that of a colonizer in a colonial context, arguing that both exert control over those subject to their authority. The author, often imagined as jealously guarding their work, dictates the boundaries within which the translator must operate, much like the colonizer imposes limits on the colonized. This dynamic places the translator in a subordinate position, constrained by the perceived authority of the author, who monitors and resists any reinterpretation or appropriation of their work. Rajagopalan's critique challenges this hierarchical view, suggesting that translation, much like acts of colonial resistance, can subvert these power structures and empower the translator as a creative agent.

Furthermore, Rajagopalan (2001) discusses the tensions in translation between domestication and preserving foreignness. Domestication, common in Anglo-American practices, prioritizes fluency but often erases the cultural identity of the original text, openly appropriating it. In contrast, preserving foreignness, often seen in European practices, can make the text inaccessible while subtly exoticizing it. He suggests, then, that translation is always an act of appropriation, whether explicit or subtle, revealing the inherent power dynamics and the challenge of balancing fidelity with accessibility.

For Rajagopalan (2001), achieving a non-violent translation is impossible, as even the most respectful practices inherently impose changes. However, he identifies a form of resistance to the dominant translation practices: the creation of alternative translations that challenge and subvert colonial interpretations of classical works. By offering these alternative readings, translators not only critique the colonial agenda but also actively contribute to the construction of new colonial identities and the reimagining of citizenship for oppressed peoples.

In essence, these perspectives collectively highlight that translation is not merely a linguistic or textual process, but a transformative, politically charged act capable of disrupting colonial structures and contributing to the formation of postcolonial identities. Thus, translation serves as both a means of decolonization and as an ongoing negotiation of cultural and linguistic power.

## 5 METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach as it seeks to analyze and interpret textual elements within their theoretical and social contexts, in this case specifically from R. F. Kuang's "Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution", through the lens of postcolonial and post-structuralist translation theories.

As Creswell (2007) defines it, qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups give to a social or human problem. Rather than focusing on numbers or statistics, this approach seeks to examine phenomena in depth. Its flexible structure supports the nuanced analysis of literary texts, allowing for the exploration of layered, context-dependent meanings while also accommodating new questions or directions that may arise during the analysis. This type of approach is particularly suited to the current research, which examines how the novel embodies characteristics of minor literature, engages with translation theories, and critiques colonialism.

From this perspective, the nature of this research is considered applied, as it uses theoretical concepts to analyze a specific literary work with broader implications for understanding translation as a postcolonial practice. According to Gil (2002), applied research aims to solve practical problems or address challenges within specific societal contexts. Although this research does not directly intercede in a practical issue, it applies theoretical frameworks to cast light upon how Kuang's novel critiques colonial ideologies and translation practices. Applied research often bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical understanding, contributing to both the academic discourse and the societal conversations on themes such as translation, power, identity, and resistance.

Regarding its objectives, this study can be classified as descriptive research. As Gil (2002) explains, descriptive research focuses on describing the characteristics of a phenomenon or the relationship between variables. In this case, the study fits this classification as it analyzes the novel through the lens of postcolonial translation theories. Specifically, it aims to describe and compare how these theories apply to the text, highlighting specific aspects of the work and examining how they are reflected in or influenced by the broader theoretical framework.

The research procedure is bibliographical (Gil, 2002), as it is primarily based on analyzing published material to establish its theoretical foundation and support the textual analysis of "Babel". This approach involves a review of postcolonial and post-structuralist

theories, drawing on key works by scholars such as Niranjana (1992), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), Lefevere (1992), Rajagopalan (2001), Bhabha (1998), Campos (1981), and Said (1979). This review aims to provide a robust framework for contextualizing and analyzing R. F. Kuang's novel within these theoretical perspectives.

Additionally, the integration of Deleuze and Guattari's (2003) concept of minor literature is central to this study, which emphasizes deterritorialization, politicization, and collective enunciation. These characteristics are present in the novel's portrayal of translation as a site of conflict and its focus on collective struggles of colonized students against British imperial forces. By applying the framework of minor literature, this research highlights how Kuang's novel transcends the boundaries of traditional literary critique to engage with broader political and cultural discourses.

After establishing the theoretical framework to support the analysis, the next step is the analysis itself, in which key passages from the book were selected for their strong relationship to postcolonial theories and the concept of minor literature. By comparing these findings with established theoretical principles, the research identifies connections and nuances that deepen the understanding of the novel's themes.

Following the textual analysis, the interpretation and discussion phase reflects on how the book challenges or expands traditional ideas of translation, particularly in relation to its colonial implications. It examines the broader relevance of the novel's themes within postcolonial discourse and its potential to reshape the perception of translation— not only as a tool of oppression but as a means of resistance. Additionally, the discussion highlights how the book extends these debates beyond academia discourse, engaging wider audiences and demonstrating that literature is not merely a form of entertainment but also a space of deterritorialization within the dominant linguistic and cultural structures (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003). This process of deterritorialization challenges hegemonic narratives, allowing marginalized voices to reshape dominant discourses. In this context, the concept of minor literature, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2003), becomes relevant, emphasizing how language and literature can function as acts of resistance within oppressive structures.

## 6 ANALYSIS

With the theoretical foundation and methodology placed in previous sections, it is possible to explore in this present one R. F. Kuang's "Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution" and its connections to postcolonial translation theories and the concept of minor literature. Key excerpts were selected for their engagement with the role of the translator in colonial power dynamics, the influence of translation in shaping identity, and the novel's broader critique of the relationship between language, authority, and culture, as well as its ability to extend these reflections to wider audiences.

In "Babel", the narrator asserts the indispensable role of translation agencies in the consolidation of great civilizations, illustrating how empires such as the Spanish and British systematically institutionalized translation to govern their vast territories:

Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools of – nay, the centres of – great civilizations. In 1527, Charles V of Spain created the *Secretaria de Interpretación de Lenguas*, whose employees juggled over a dozen languages in service of governing his empire's territories. The Royal Institute of Translation was founded in London in the early seventeenth century, though it didn't move to its current home in Oxford until 1715 and the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, after which the British decided it might be prudent to train young lads to speak the languages of the colonies the Spanish had just lost. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 73)

Although the novel incorporates fictional elements, such as The Royal Institute of Translation also known as Babel, its portrayal of translation as a fundamental tool of the empire aligns closely with postcolonial discussions on the political and ideological dimensions of translation. As Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002) argue, translation is not a neutral linguistic practice but a strategic and conscious act that shapes the way knowledge is disseminated and controlled. This resonates with the British and Spanish translation institutions referenced in the novel, which were not mere academic enterprises but rather essential to colonial administration. The Royal Institute of Translation, for instance, was established in the novel to train individuals in the language of newly acquired colonies, reinforcing the empire's ability to dominate and manage those territories.

It also finds resonance in Niranjana's (1992) work, particularly in her discussion of William Jones's translation efforts in colonial India as she highlights how Jones's project exemplified the Eurocentric control of colonial knowledge:

The most significant nodes of Jones's work are (a) the need for translation by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture;

(b) the desire to be a lawgiver, to give the Indians their ‘own’ laws; and (c) the desire to purify Indian culture and speak on its behalf. (Niranjana, 1992, p. 13)

Kuang’s portrayal of translation as a fundamental tool of empire mirrors this dynamic, in which translation is not merely about linguistic transfer but also about establishing authority over colonized populations. The British emphasis on training translators after 1715, as referenced in her novel, echoes this desire to control colonial subjects by mediating their languages and, consequently, their knowledge systems.

Said (1979) also offers a relevant perspective in his discussion of Orientalism, when he analyzes William Jones’s role in translating and codifying Indian knowledge:

In due course he was appointed to “an honorable and profitable place in the Indies,” and immediately upon his arrival there to take up a post with the East India Company began the course of personal study that was to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn into a province of European learning. (Said, 1979, p. 77-78)

Said’s (1979) insight reinforces how translation functioned as an imperialist mechanism, transforming indigenous knowledge into something comprehensible, and, crucially, controllable, by European powers, which is depicted in “Babel” as it posits translation central to empire-building by placing and addressing translation agencies as institutions of linguistic, cultural, and political dominance.

This critique is further developed, as a footnote in the novel, in a later passage where Letty<sup>1</sup>, debating with friends, attempts to justify The Royal Institute of Translation’s global educational mission as a force for good, while her friends argue that it is complicit in imperial expansion and domination and that is the reason why they must rebel against it:

Here Letty was referring to the establishment of humanitarian societies for the protection of Indigenous peoples in British territories, such as the evangelical authors of the 1837 ‘Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes’, which, though recognizing British presence had been a ‘source of many calamities to uncivilized nations’, recommended the continued expansion of white settlement and spread of British missionaries in Australia and New Zealand in the name of a holy ‘civilizing mission’. The Aborigines, they argued, would not suffer so greatly if only they learned to dress, talk, and behave like proper Christians. The great contradiction, of course, is that there is no such thing as humane colonization. The contribution of Babel to such a mission, meanwhile, was to supply English teaching materials to missionary schools and to translate English property laws to peoples displaced by colonial settlement. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 353)

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<sup>1</sup> Letty is a white British woman and one of Robin’s classmates at The Royal Institute of Translation (Babel). She is the daughter of a British former admiral and was only admitted at Babel after her older brother, who studied there and was considered less apt for translation studies, died. She often struggles to comprehend the colonial oppression experienced by her friends Robin, Ramy and Victoire.

Her reference to humanitarian societies mirrors the rhetoric of the 1837 ‘Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes’, which framed colonial intervention as a civilizing mission while rationalizing the dispossession and cultural erasure of Indigenous populations. This excerpt exemplifies Bhabha’s (1998) critique of colonial discourse as an apparatus that simultaneously acknowledges and repudiates racial, cultural, and historical differences. The colonial project legitimizes itself through the production of knowledge that represents the colonized both as subjects in need of governance and as threats requiring surveillance and regulation (Bhabha, 1998).

The dual function of colonial knowledge production is evident in “Babel”, as the novel explicitly portrays how The Royal Institute of Translation contributes to the colonial mission by supplying English teaching materials and translating property laws for displaced communities. This finds resonance again in Niranjana’s (1992) discussion of William Jones, whose translations of Hindu laws were not simply acts of linguistic mediation but instruments of colonial governance. By depicting natives as unreliable interpreters of their own traditions, Jones legitimized British intervention to “purify” and codify their own legal systems. A similar paternalistic logic underlies the missionary impulse in “Babel”, where translation is deployed as a means of containment, shaping indigenous knowledge in ways that facilitate imperial control. As Niranjana (1992) notes, translation in the colonial era was intricately linked to economic, religious, and racial ideologies, ensuring that the colonized internalized narratives that justified their subjugation.

Said’s (1978) critique of Orientalism further elucidates the role of translation in sustaining imperial power. By constructing the Orient as inherently inferior, its people portrayed as indolent, deceitful, and incapable of self-governance, Western discourse rationalized colonial rule as both a necessity and a moral duty. This echoes the justification for British missionary efforts in “Babel”, where the purported goal of uplifting indigenous populations is inseparable from the broader mechanisms of imperial control. Said (1978) also notes how Western scholars rarely sought to engage directly with Oriental sources, instead reinforcing stereotypes by relying on previous colonial narratives. This recursive system of representations is mirrored in Letty’s argument, which disregards the exploitative foundations of The Royal Institute of Translation’s work and instead recycles the humanitarian rhetoric that has long accompanied colonial expansion.

On the other hand, Griffin Harley, brother of the protagonist Robin Swift and member of the Hermes Society in the novel, a secret organization that aims to combat

England's imperialism even if it means to use violence, continues to question the role of The Royal Institute of translation in the expansion of the British Empire:

How does all the power from foreign languages just somehow accrue to England? This is no accident, this is a deliberate exploitation of foreign culture and foreign resources. The professors like to pretend that the tower is a refuge for pure knowledge, that it sits above the mundane concerns of business and commerce, but it does not. It's intricately tied to the business of colonialism. It *is* the business of colonialism. Ask yourself why the Literature Department only translates works into English and not the other way around, or what the interpreters are being sent abroad to do. Everything Babel does is in the service of expanding the Empire. Consider – Sir Horace Wilson, who's the first endowed chair in Sanskrit in Oxford history, spends half his time conducting tutorials for Christian missionaries. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 100)

This critique finds strong parallels in the work of Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), who argue that translation has historically served as an instrument of cultural containment as it was used to subordinate colonized voices to European perspectives. They also highlight how translation has often functioned as a means of asserting European cultural superiority, with literary intellectual production from non-Western cultures being translated primarily for the benefit of Western audiences. This type of dynamic is exemplified in “Babel”, where Griffin points to translation as a unidirectional process that reinforces imperial authority rather than fostering genuine intercultural exchange.

Dingwaney (1995) elaborates on this issue too, as she highlights how the Western publishing industry dictates which texts and voices from non-Western cultures are made visible. This process, driven by commercial and ideological interests, marginalizes perspectives that do not conform to Western expectations. Kuang's novel critiques this mechanism when Griffin explicitly calls attention to the selective nature of translation at Babel, where texts are only translated into English, ensuring that the knowledge flows in a manner that consolidates imperial control rather than promoting equitable intellectual exchange.

Beyond restricting which texts enter the Western literary canon, “Babel”, in another footnote, also critiques the way non-Western works are framed and mediated through the lens of European translators:

A comparative analysis of the quantity of footnotes added to translation of European texts versus non-European texts. Non-European texts, Griffin found, tended to be loaded down with an astonishing amount of explanatory context, to the effect that the text was never read as a work on its own, but always through the guided lens of the (white, European) translator. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 383)

This practice, which subjects non-European texts to an excessive amount of annotations and explanatory notes, reflects what Dingwaney (1995) describes as a form of epistemic control. By presenting non-Western literature as something that requires extensive mediation, Western translation practices prevent these works from being read in their own right, instead ensuring they are interpreted through a Eurocentric framework.

Additionally, Bhabha's (1998) concept of cultural containment also resonates with this critique. He argues that non-Western cultures are often framed within a Eurocentric epistemology that reduces them to mere objects of knowledge rather than active agents of discourse. "Babel" illustrates this dynamic by portraying how translation at the institute is used to serve colonial expansion rather than to facilitate cross-cultural understanding. The lack of reciprocal translation, highlighted by Griffin's character, reinforces a hierarchical relationship in which non-English texts are stripped of their agency and appropriated to serve imperial interests. Also, by controlling how knowledge is perceived, translation functions as a gatekeeping mechanism and an assertion of colonial authority.

The interrogation of translation's ideological function is further explored through Professor Playfair's lecture on translation theory. As a firm ally of the British Empire and its colonial endeavors, Playfair reinforces the institutional role of translation as a fundamental mechanism of imperial control. His argument aligns with both historical realities and theoretical critiques when he acknowledges that translation extends beyond linguistic mediation, functioning instead as an act of rewriting that inevitably reflects and reinforces ideological structures:

So you see, translators do not so much deliver a message as they rewrite the original. And herein lies the difficulty – rewriting is still writing, and writing always reflects the author's ideology and biases. After all, the Latin *translatio* means "to carry across". Translation involves a spatial dimension – a literal transportation of texts across conquered territory, words delivered like spices from an alien land. Words mean something quite different when they journey from palaces of Rome to tearooms of today's Britain. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 106)

This assertion resonates with Lefevere's (1992) conceptualization of translation as an act of rewriting. In his view, every translation inherently carries ideological and poetic agendas, whether intentionally manipulative or not, thereby shaping how texts are received and interpreted. Playfair's description of translation as the "transportation of texts across conquered territory" (Kuang, 2022b, p. 106) illustrates this argument by evoking the image of texts being physically and metaphorically moved into spaces where they are reconfigured to serve imperial interests. In this metaphor, the journey of a text mirrors the process of

rewriting: as it moves from its original context into the domain of the colonizer, its meaning is transformed to align with dominant cultural values, and in the particular context of the novel, reinforcing power structures in the process.

This notion is further supported by Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002), who, as mentioned before, emphasize that translation is always shaped by the socio-political context in which it occurs. His statement “words mean something quite different” depending on their journey stresses how translation is conditioned by its socio-political context. When words move between one cultural and linguistic place to another, they are reinterpreted through the translator's own experiences, values, and the dominant ideologies of the target audience. This process is a deliberate rearticulation of meaning that positions the translator's role as a cultural mediator. For instance, when translating texts embedded in colonial contexts, translators may consciously or unconsciously reproduce or challenge the power dynamics inherent in the original work. Their interpretations can reinforce dominant cultural narratives or, otherwise, open up spaces for alternative voices and counter-hegemonic perspectives.

Professor Playfair explicitly acknowledges the ideological nature of translation and its role in maintaining colonial hegemony. For him, the politicization of translation is now a flaw but an attribute as he embraces it and believes it should be mobilized in favor of the dominant powers. In this way, the author constructs a character who, while upholding colonial structures, does so with a surprisingly solid understanding of how translation functions ideologically, an awareness that subsequently turns personal convictions into institutional reinforcement.

Furthermore, Barthes' (2004) perspective on textual multiplicity provides an additional lens through which to interpret Kuang's (2022) portrayal of translation. If we accept that it is readers, not authors, who determine a text's meaning, then translation becomes an act of interpretation and transformation rather than simple transmission. The novel acknowledges this complexity, illustrating how translation is deeply linked to cultural and historical contexts, shaping and altering meaning rather than merely transmitting it.

Additionally, the tensions involving translation and colonialism began to affect Robin's personal friendships in the novel, especially between Letty and Ramy<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Ramy is a Muslim Indian student from Calcutta and Robin's closest friend at The Royal Institution of Translation. He is outspoken in his criticism of the British Empire's exploitative practices and ultimately joins the Hermes Society.

And Letty and Ramy bickered most of all, largely over Ramy's claim that Letty had never stepped foot in the colonies and therefore shouldn't opine on the supposed benefits of the British presence in India.

'I do know a thing or two about India,' Letty would insist. 'I've read all sorts of essays, I've read Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*—'

'Oh, yes?' Ramy would ask. 'The one where India is a lovely Hindu nation, overrun by tyrannical Muslim invaders? That one?'. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 128)

Letty's insistence that she possesses knowledge about India despite never having set foot in the colonies echoes a long history of Western epistemological dominance, where textual authority often replaces lived experience. Her reliance on Hamilton's "Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah" – a text that Ramy, an Indian himself, immediately critiques as a distortion of Indian history – illustrates how translation has historically been an instrument of ideological control, as it is not neutral in any way, but rather, in this context, becomes an act of appropriation, shaping colonial narratives that reinforce the supremacy of Western perspectives.

Edward Said's (1979) concept of "orientalism" provides a critical lens through which we can analyze this passage. He argues that the Orient, as noted earlier, was constructed as an ideological and discursive space, defined by European representations that sought to portray it as exotic, backward, and in need of Western intervention. Letty's understanding of India, shaped not by Indian voices but by European-authored translations and studies, reflects this colonial framing.

"Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah" is representative in this sense. While it critiques British hypocrisy, it also perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes, presenting India as an exotic country that somehow benefits from British influence. Ramy's sarcastic comment on India having been presented as a "lovely Hindu nation, overrun by tyrannical Muslim invaders" highlights how translation has come to be used to reinforce colonial narratives. This aligns with Said's (1979) argument that European representations of the Muslim world have historically served as instruments of control, reducing complex histories to simplistic dichotomies of civilization versus barbarism to justify colonial dominance.

Ramy's critique echoes Said's (1979) argument that Islam was constructed in European discourse as a symbol of terror and barbarism:

Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. (...) The point is that what remained current about Islam was some necessarily diminished version of those great dangerous forces that it symbolized for Europe. (Said, 1979, p. 59-60)

Ramy's frustration with Letty's uncritical acceptance of colonial narratives stems from this same historical phenomenon. The work that Letty cites presents India's history through a distorted European lens that paints Hindu India as a victim of Muslim oppression, thereby reinforcing the British colonial justification of their rule as a 'civilizing' force. This reflects how European Orientalist discourse, as described by Said (1979), selectively constructed Muslim identity as threatening, chaotic, and requiring European intervention. The use of translation in this manner thus served not only to simplify and distort but also to frame non-European histories in ways that justified colonial hegemony.

In addition to it, the fact that Letty, a white European woman and the daughter of a British military officer, speaks with authority on a colonized land she has never visited highlights the persistent power dynamics at play in knowledge production. Her position in the argument, seemingly well-intentioned but ultimately condescending, reflects the broader issue of Western paternalism in colonial discourse. Throughout the novel, Letty often struggles to understand the racism experienced by Ramy, Robin, and Victoire, all coming from colonies of the British Empire, depicting her detachment from the lived realities of colonial subjects. This reflects Said's (1979) observation that the European representation of the East was never about the East itself, but actually about the East as framed for Western consumption. Letty's perspective, shaped by colonial texts, reflects her implicit belief in British superiority, demonstrating how translation serves as a tool for maintaining imperial ideology.

Moreover, Letty's inability to perceive the racism endured by Ramy, Robin and Victoire can be understood through Cida Bento's (2022) concept of the pact of whiteness. Bento (2022) argues that whiteness is maintained by a tacit and often subconscious agreement among white people that secure their social and economic privileges while marginalizing racialized groups. This pact manifests itself as a strategic silence, an implicit complicity, that preserves and protects white privilege. Letty exemplifies this as although she claims to support humanitarian causes, her loyalty ultimately lies with the structures of power that secure her position at Oxford.

In this sense, Letty embodies what Bento (2022) describes as the "narcissistic pact of whiteness", a mechanism through which white individuals sustain a self-image of moral innocence while remaining complicit in racial hierarchies. As Bento (2022) explains, white people often position themselves as legitimate heirs to their privileges, viewing their status as deserved and natural because of their efforts, while perceiving other racial groups as undeserving. They repress the violent histories that enabled their privilege and avoid recognizing themselves as a racial group, instead treating whiteness as the neutral and

universal standard, with others marked as different. Letty's moral disengagement, her inability to recognize her own complicity, and her eventual betrayal<sup>3</sup> of her friends are rooted precisely in this narcissistic pact.

Despite her education, Letty fails to grasp the violence embedded in the system. Her whiteness shields her from the consequences faced by her racialized peers, just as the pact of whiteness shields white individuals from accountability in broader society. In the end, Letty's role in the novel highlights how deeply whiteness permeates institutions and knowledge production. Her betrayal is not merely personal, it is systemic. It is the inevitable result of a system in which white identity is bound to privilege, silence, and historical erasure.

A similar tension emerges later in the novel when Robin speaks with Commissioner Lin, a Chinese official resisting British imperialism and the opium trade:

'You belong to their school, then? The Translation Institute?'

'I do. It's the reason why I left for England. I've studied my whole life to be a translator.'

'A very honourable profession,' said Commissioner Lin. 'Many of my countrymen look down on learning barbarian tongues. But I've commissioned quite a few translation projects since I assumed power here. You must know the barbarians to control the barbarians, don't you think?'

Something about the man compelled Robin to speak frankly. 'That's rather the same attitude they have about you.' (Kuang, 2022b, p. 311)

Lin's resistance to colonial exploitation is intertwined with his belief that mastering the colonizer's language is crucial for countering their dominance, an approach that turns the empire's own strategies against itself. His perspective illustrates how translation, rather than serving as a bridge for mutual understanding, often becomes a strategic tool within imperial power struggles. This, once more, reflects Bhabha's (1998) argument that colonial discourse constructs the colonized subject as both an object of governance and a potential threat that requires surveillance and regulation. Lin, in positioning linguistic knowledge as a means of countering British dominance, mirrors the logic of colonial administration itself, where knowing the Other is framed as a prerequisite for control. Yet, his approach is inherently subversive: while the British use translation to impose their authority over China, Lin wields it as a means of defiance. Robin's observation that the British view the Chinese in the same way, as "barbarians", exposes this paradox, emphasizing how translation operates as a political site, where power is both reinforced and subverted.

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<sup>3</sup> Letty betrays Robin and the Hermes Society by reporting their revolutionary plans and location to the authorities, leading to the arrest and death of key members.

Concerning subversion, Robin and Victoire plan to take over the tower of The Royal Institute of Translation and start a strike, as they refuse to continue supporting the British Empire. Oxford, which strongly relied on Babel's work with silver, and therefore on their translation works, begins to collapse:

The bells were a funeral dirge to an illusion. The city of dreaming spires was no longer. Oxford's degradation was visible – one could see it crumbling by the hour like a rotting gingerbread house. What became clear was how deeply Oxford relied on silver, how without the constant labour of its translation corps, of the talent it attracted from abroad, it immediately fell apart. It revealed more than the power of translation. It revealed the sheer dependence of the British, who, astonishingly, could not manage to do basic things like bake bread or get safely from one place to another without words stolen from other countries. (Kuang, 2022b, p. 471)

In this excerpt, Oxford's crumbling state becomes a metaphor for the erosion of British cultural autonomy, a direct consequence of an empire that commodifies foreign linguistic resources to uphold its imperial order. Thus, the very tool the British used to spread their influence also reveals their dependence on the knowledge of others. In this way, Kuang critiques the colonial project, demonstrating that translation is a double-edged sword: what upholds the imperial edifice simultaneously exposes its fragility.

As Niranjana (1992) argues, translation can serve as a counter-hegemonic force when it disrupts narratives made by Western lenses, making space for alternative perspectives to emerge. The moment Oxford collapses reveal that translation, rather than being a passive tool of empire, can become a site of resistance. The scholars in the tower reclaim translation by refusing to participate in the system that upholds British power, demonstrating how linguistic agency can be a means of subversion. This reversal echoes Niranjana's (1992) notion that translation, when approached critically, can challenge the dominant colonial agenda rather than simply perpetuate it.

Rajagopalan's (2001) view of translation as an inherently violent act further reinforces this reading. He challenges the idea of translation as a neutral process, instead framing it as a site of struggle where power is negotiated. The novel illustrates this dynamic by depicting the British Empire's reliance on translation as also being its greatest weakness: once the system collapses, so does the illusion of British superiority. This aligns with Rajagopalan's (2001) argument that translation functions both as a tool of appropriation and as a form of resistance. The characters in the novel expose and destabilize the very structures that sustain colonial power when they disrupt the mechanisms of translation, thereby reclaiming translation as an act of agency rather than submission.

Furthermore, R. F. Kuang, whose own experiences as a Chinese immigrant and student of color at Oxford deeply permeate her narrative, embodies the essence of what Deleuze and Guattari (2003) describe as minor literature. Although written in English, a language imposed by colonial power, Kuang repurposes it to articulate the struggles and identities of those marginalized by imperial structures. Moreover, the collective resistance articulated through the characters in “Babel” mirrors the idea that minor literature is rooted in a communal voice. Her work challenges the dominant Western narratives as she uses a major language as a means of resistance, destabilizing hegemonic discourse.

Kuang not only reappropriates English as a language of resistance, but also weaves intimate, personal struggles into a broader political system, an attribute of minor literature as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (2003). While major literatures often isolate individual concerns, “Babel” ties the characters’ personal experiences directly to the systemic inequities of colonial power. For example, the internal conflicts and identity crises experienced by Robin, who is caught between his heritage and his imposed role within the British Empire, illustrate how personal issues become inseparable from political realities.

Kuang’s personal background, immigrating from Guangzhou to Dallas, studying history at Georgetown, and later immersing herself in East Asian studies at Oxford and Cambridge, gives her a distinctive perspective on cultural and linguistic hybridity. In her novel, this experience translates into a narrative where the voices of the colonized and the displaced struggle to negotiate their identities within a system that favors Western knowledge and power. This dynamic aligns with core aspects of minor literature, especially the use of a dominant language by minorities not simply to communicate, but to contest and subvert established cultural hierarchies.

Ultimately, the novel expands these critical conversations beyond traditional academic circles, enhancing literature's power as praxis for social transformation and the reimagining of cultural identities.

## 7 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this research, the analysis of “Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution” has demonstrated how literature can serve as an important platform for reflecting on the political dimensions of translation and the lingering structures of colonial domination. Drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Said (1978), Niranjana (1992) and Bhabha (1998), as well as the concept of minor literature coined by Deleuze and Guattari (2003), this study has shown how Kuang’s novel exposes the ideological mechanisms behind supposedly neutral acts of linguistic mediation. Translation, in the novel, is revealed to be a site of struggle, where choices are never neutral, but rather always immersed in systems of power and historical violence.

Importantly, this discussion extends beyond academic circles. Kuang’s novel became a New York Times bestseller, has been translated into over 20 languages and has also won multiple awards, such as the Blackwell’s Books of the Year for Fiction and the Nebula Award for Best Novel, both in 2022<sup>4</sup>. More recently, in 2024, it won the Best Translated Work at the 15th Xingyun (Nebula) Awards for Chinese Science Fiction<sup>5</sup>. This wide circulation highlights the transformative potential of literature in reaching broader audiences who may not be familiar with theorists such as Said or Niranjana, but who nonetheless engage, even in pleasurable or playful, creative ways, with critical questions about race, empire, and language. The book’s success illustrates how fiction can create spaces of reflection and discomfort, pushing readers to reconsider dominant narratives, including the belief in the neutrality of translation.

Furthermore, “Babel” exemplifies the core characteristics of minor literature. Although written in English, a dominant and colonial language, Kuang uses this very language to challenge imperial ideologies and amplify the experiences of those who have been historically silenced. Her personal history, shaped by migration and academic training in both the United States and the United Kingdom, permeates a narrative that is at once deeply personal and openly political. In “Babel”, the personal is inseparable from the political, and the act of storytelling becomes a means of resistance.

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<sup>4</sup> According to University College Oxford, Babel reached the top of The New York Times bestseller list and has won both the Nebula Award for Best Book of the Year and the Blackwell’s Book of the Year for Fiction in 2022. Disponível em: <https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/news/babel-wins-nebula-novel-of-the-year/>. Acesso em: 20 abr. 2025.

<sup>5</sup> According to People’s Daily Online, Chinese-American author R. F. Kuang won Best Translated Work at the Chinese Nebula Awards. Disponível: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0520/c90000-20171710.html>. Acesso: 20 abr. 2025.

The novel invites us to rethink the role of literature itself, not as a passive mirror of reality, but, similar to translation, as an active force in influencing how we understand history, identity and power. It reminds us that language is never neutral and that translation is not merely a bridge between cultures, but also a battleground where meaning, ideology and memory are constantly negotiated. In this sense, literature, especially when aligned with the strategies of minor literature, emerges as a crucial space for contesting hegemonic structures and imagining new possibilities.

This study highlights the crucial role of literary literacy and the transformative potential of works like “Babel” within educational contexts. By presenting complex debates about colonization, language, politics and power structures through an engaging narrative, the novel demonstrates how literature can encourage critical thinking even outside explicitly philosophical or academic texts. Introducing novels such as “Babel” into school curricula can significantly expand students’ linguistic and literary repertoires, while simultaneously prompting reflections on their own positions within societal systems. Literature thus constitutes a praxis of artistic and linguistic enrichment, one that fosters empathy, political awareness, and a deeper understanding of historical and contemporary forms of oppression.

As possible developments for future research, it could be valuable to investigate how contemporary speculative fiction, particularly narratives that intersect with postcolonial and translation studies, can be employed pedagogically to foster dialogue around social justice, identity and resistance. It could also be illuminating to compare how readers in different cultural contexts (for example, Brazil, China and the UK) react to and interpret Babel’s interrogations of colonialism and translation. By mapping these varied responses, scholars can both rethink classroom approaches and reinforce the insight that reading is never a neutral activity, rather, it is a formative process through which individuals shape their identities and envision alternative possibilities for the future.

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