

SILENCING THE SUBALTERN IN R. F. KUANG'S *BABEL*: A SPIVAKIAN APPROACH

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Abstract

The concept of subaltern and epistemic violence often featured in recent literary works, among others is R. F. Kuang's *Babel*. This study uses the applications of Spivak's subaltern theory in the historical fantasy novel *Babel* by R. F. Kuang through Victoire Desgraves and Letitia Price who are the main female characters of the story. Subaltern theory by Spivak most importantly addressed the difference of western feminist and subaltern women. Women can silence other women on account of their difference, such as class and race (Spivak, 1988). Using the postcolonial feminism framework, this study will use *Babel* by R. F. Kuang as the source of data. The researcher will analyse all the data that has been collected in several steps. First, the data will be analysed with Spivak's theory of subaltern to uncover the representation of subaltern woman in *Babel* through Victoire Desgraves' character. Second, the data will be analysed with Spivak's theory of epistemic violence to prove Letitia Price's action of trivialising Victoire Desgraves' struggle as a subaltern. This study will contribute to offer understanding on how subaltern women can be silenced and harmed by invisible violence from western feminist who unconsciously disregard subaltern struggle.

Keywords: *Babel*, *Epistemic Violence*, *Postcolonial Feminism Silence*, *Spivak*

Introduction

Systems that control and restrict women are a form of occupation. Colonialism implies the domination and control of one country to others through political power or economical control. It can be seen as the expansion of power by exploitation of natural resources (Ezenwa et al., 2021). A domination to weaker people or territory by politics, economy, culture, and religion (Horvath, 1972), It creates unequal relationships from the coloniser and the colonised. The systems make women fall into marginalised groups. When colonialism arrived, women were doubly marginalised by colonialism and patriarchy. This idea was proposed by Spivak in her essay, “*Can The Subaltern Speak?*” Subaltern in Spivak’s lens is a group of marginalised people who are silenced by the dominant groups (Spivak, 1988). The dominant groups attempt to represent the marginalised often overlap with their dominant narrative, thus conceal the real voices of the marginalised. The elites often create a dominant narrative to represent the subaltern voices while it is unethical because it hinders the subaltern to speak on their own accord (Morton, 2002) and for subaltern women, the silences were doubled by colonialism and patriarchal culture. Subaltern women are doubly marginalised because of colonialism and patriarchy (Spivak, 1988). History excludes women’s active involvement in the colonial era in order to shape history to the elite’s narrative (Morton, 2002).

The harm of silencing, distorting, and erasing the subaltern is called epistemic violence by Spivak’s definition (Bezgrebelna & Teo, 2022). Epistemic violence is not normal violence that leaves a bruise, but it is an intellectual and cultural violence because it uses knowledge and language as a tool. The act of violence focused on attacking academic, cultural, artistic, and institutional discourses. Spivak focuses on how the subaltern is viewed and understood in the present and seeks the reconstruction of colonial narrative (Bezgrebelna & Teo, 2022). Through Riach, G. (2017), Spivak concludes the subaltern is unable to speak because they are represented by the dominant power who can misrepresent their experience. Therefore, Spivak ideas about subaltern

and the epistemic violence are solely focusing on decolonising the mind and the colonial narrative that has become the effect of colonialism until recent days.

The concept of subaltern and epistemic violence often featured in recent literary works, among others is *Babel*. R. F. Kuang, the author of *Babel*, is a Chinese-American best-selling author whose previous novels center on race, power, oppression, and capitalism. She received Nebula Awards in 2022 for *Babel* and Astounding Award for Best New Writer in 2020. *The Poppy War*, R. F. Kuang's debut novel uses a fantasy setting to reflect on historical events in the real world (Kanza & Thoyibi, 2025). The novel talks about oppression of ethnic people during the Opium War. Her other works, *Yellowface* explores racial capitalism. The book critiques the dominant individuals who exploit marginalised narrative and experiences for profit (Ramadina et al., (2025). R. F. Kuang is one of the brightest authors in recent years, known for her critique of the dominant groups and focusing on narrating the marginalised voices. Among Kuang's works, this study will use R. F. Kuang's work, *Babel*, as the object of the study.

Babel explores the framework of silencing subaltern with epistemic violence. Took place in the 1830s in the height of Britain's imperialist free trade, *Babel*, a historical fantasy novel, tells the journey of four students at Oxford who experienced academic exploitation and resistance. The use of silverworking, a magic system based on translation and language, required the characters to speak other languages to serve the empire and their academic institution. *Babel* explores translation as an act of betrayal and not a loyalty to the main character's origin and identity. Forcing the tongues of subalterns to submit to the colonial power. *Babel* uses the aesthetic of dark academia as a commentary to colonialism, imperialism, power, and violence (ElZayat, 2024).

Victoire Desgraves, one of the important female characters in *Babel*. Her role as a black woman with Haitian background in Oxford England during the colonial era makes her a complex character. She faced racism, misogyny, and exploitation as a subaltern. Despite her intelligence, Victoire is deemed as someone who is not equal to the male academics and the white female academics by the dominant narrative. Her knowledge of

Kreyòl, French, English, Latin, and Ancient Greek does not describe her identity, but rather was exploited by Oxford institutions for British imperialism. As a subaltern woman, Victoire's struggle was often disregarded by her own female friend, Letitia Price. Letitia Price is a fair Englishwoman from a military family background. She overlooked Victoire's struggle as someone who is oppressed by imperialism and patriarchy. To her, nothing is more important than being a victim of patriarchy. In Letitia's belief, the British Empire was doing a good deed for Victoire who gave her a chance to thrive as a marginalised person. She could not and would not understand Victoire's struggle. The act of overlooking Victoire Desgraves' struggle and epistemic violence to her intelligence and culture makes her character as a subaltern woman who is silenced by the elite.

Regarding previous studies, *"Can Subaltern Exist? Reinterpreting the Issue of Subalternity (Case Study of Blimbingsari Village - Jembrana Regency and Pegayungan Village - Buleleng Regency)"* by Hamel, V., Suryawan, D. & Sumawidayani, N. (2024) explores Spivak's subaltern in real life by comparing and examining villages in Bali especially Blimbingsari and Pegayaman. The study uncover the voices of subaltern and understand the village exist despite the cultural politic, economy, ideology, and conscientization. *"Capturing the Invisible: Dynamics of Abstraction and Extraction in Capitalism, Imperialism, and Photography through the Lens of R. F. Kuang's Babel (2022)"* by Benia, A. and Amrane, N. (2022) analyse the relationship between capitalism and imperialism in *Babel* that employ people to gain unethical resources. The study found that Babel not only exploited natural sources for their colonial gain, they also exploited the students and demonise them as abstract subjects. A study by Lu, L. (2023) with the title "翻译: R.F. Kuang's Babel, Jonathan Swift, and Sideways Reading" examine the transhistorical intersexuality in *Babel*. The study compares Swiftian logic by Jonathan Swift and the main character in *Babel*, Robin Swift. The study finds that the elite academy, Oxford, romanticise Robin and his survival. The connection between Robin Swift and Jonathan Swift are they made the reader to analyse back the system around. One study examines the use of translation in *Babel* as a critique of colonialism. Teliban's (2025)

“Violence and Betrayal: Translation as a Window into Understanding Colonialism in R. F. Kuang’s Babel, or the Necessity of Violence” aim is to prove if *Babel* is a tool of counterstorytelling to the colonial narrative. The findings from the study explain about translation is a tool to explore the colonialism around the novel. Schewe, A. and Schuch, M. (2025) in *“Exploring the Dark Side of Dark Academia: Postcolonial Criticism and Genre Hybridity in R. F. Kuang’s Babel”* analyse *Babel* as a literary work that uses dark academia aesthetic to give a critique about the harmful aspects of elite academic culture. They focus on postcolonial lenses in their study. The study finds that *Babel* is the opposite utopia of a dark academic aesthetic. *Babel* shows the corrupt elite academic does to the marginalised people and the reality of its tie to the empire. Whereas another study also highlights *Babel* as a tool to critique imperialism. However, ElZayat, M. (2024) in *“Gramática de la lengua de violencia: Coming of age in R. F. Kuang’s Babel: Or the necessity of violence: An arcane history of the Oxford translators’ revolution”* focus on the three main characters with different theories; Victoire Desgraves who analysed with subaltern theory by Spivak, Ramiz Rafi Mirza who is analysed with mimicry and hybridity theory by Bhabha, and Robin Swift who is analysed with Fanonian framework. The findings of this is that *Babel* is a novel with a theme surrounding colonialism told from the lens of the colonised people.

Most studies with the same literary works do not use Spivak’s subaltern as their theory. The only one thesis using Spivak’s subaltern to examine Victoire Desgraves, however the study discussion is too broad by examining multiple characters and addresses the other studies. Therefore, the study does not focus on one topic and does not explore plenty of epistemic violence. This study argues the subaltern woman was silenced through epistemic violence in *Babel* by R. F. Kuang.

In analysing the study of subaltern in the novel *Babel*, researcher has several problems to analyse:

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1. How does *Babel* portray the subaltern struggle?
 2. How Letitia Price, the white feminist, trivialises Victoire Degraives' voices as the subaltern woman in *Babel*?

Related to the issues mentioned, to analyse the subaltern being silenced in *Babel*, this study aims to:

1. To describe the subaltern portrayed in *Babel*.
2. To uncover the epistemic violence the privileged use to silence subaltern from speaking up on their own terms and preserve western narrative.

This study uses the applications of Spivak's subaltern theory in the historical fantasy novel *Babel* by R. F. Kuang through Victoire Desgraves who is a main female character of the story and how she navigates her life in Oxford at 1830s as subaltern woman. Through Spivak's subaltern theory, this study will highlight how the subaltern voices are often silenced and disregarded. Furthermore, this study will also highlight the epistemic violence committed by Letitia Price for disregarding and betraying the subaltern. Hence, this study will contribute to offer understanding on how subaltern women can be silenced and harmed by invisible violence from western feminist who unconsciously disregard subaltern struggle.

This study focuses on analysing the character Victoire Desgraves and Letitia Price in the novel *Babel* by R. F. Kuang with Spivak's theory of subaltern and epistemic violence. The study explores the character development and storyline in *Babel* to uncover the subaltern struggle and epistemic violence experienced by the female character. This study is limited to the narrative of two female characters, Victoire Desgraves and Letitia Price. The two characters are female academics with a distinctive point of view of imperialism make the characters as an appropriate subject to analyse with postcolonial feminism framework. Using the subaltern and epistemic violence theory by Spivak to highlight the strained voice of the subaltern woman and the harm of epistemic violence to the mind.

Postcolonial feminism is an incorporated framework of postcolonial and feminism. Most postcolonialists who focus on feminism highlight the fact of the double marginalisation of women under imperialism. There is a conscious distinction in the hierarchy of western feminist and the “third-world feminist”. While western feminist address their liberation, they focus on their individual identity and overlook the other group of women who are not benefitted from their cause (Riyal, 2019). This signifies the western feminist view of the “third-world” women as a different group. The difference western feminist insist on their narrative only serves their own “fact” and ignore the other women’s voices.

Spivak’s theory built from Gramsci’s subaltern, a theory about people who are outside of dominant power. Spivak argued that subaltern’s voices are systematically obliterated. Most of the subaltern’s voices are not represented appropriately by the dominant people. The intentions to represent subaltern often attained by colonial power. The elite academic often filtered to serve the interests of the western society. The outcome of the silencing of the subaltern may demean the subaltern’s experience as the marginalised people (Spivak, 1988). Spivak’s subaltern has sociological relevancy because it offers explanation in many topics such as intersectionality, representation, and exclusion from translation within the hegemonic narratives (Piu, P., 2023).

Subaltern theory by Spivak most importantly addressed the difference of western feminist and subaltern women. Women can silence other women on account of their difference, such as class and race (Spivak, 1988). Through Naoual (2019), Spivak (1988) emphasised the third world women have to identify themselves as the third world women first before a woman themselves. Women under imperialism suffered twice of the violence and faced double marginalisation from patriarchy and imperialism while western feminist individualism trivialised those problems. Through Koobak & Kennedy-Macfoy (2025), Spivak (1988) critiques imperial feminism for their white saviour complex. She cautions against the feminist motivation to represent and save subaltern women without

recognising the intersectionality nor the epistemic violence ingrained in their actions. The theory will be used to analyse Victoire Desgraves and Letitia Price in *Babel*.

Victoire Desgraves the subaltern women faced double marginalisation in her time as an academic in Oxford. She personifies the subaltern woman at an elite academic in imperial time. She faced racism, xenophobia, and prejudices inside and outside of her academy. Her potential is not greater than her identity and looks like the subaltern. She uses her knowledge to resist imperial oppression, yet remains vulnerable from the greater force upon her. Victoire Desgraves illustrates subaltern woman Spivak's description of subaltern woman where she is doubly marginalised from the patriarchy and imperialism.

In contrast, Letitia Price is the marginal woman who lives in the socialised capital. She felt the patriarchal society as a woman. However, despite living with Victoire together, she failed to understand the subaltern story and focus on her own identity. She feels the need for a feminist-liberal concept of equality yet she fell into imperial discourse for feeling betrayed by her friends' thoughts of the British people. It demonstrates what Spivak mentioned that women can silence subaltern voices because of their belief (Spivak, 1988). The theory will enhance the understanding of the discrimination between western women and the so-called "third-world" woman and how the western feminist trivialise the problem of native women.

Method

Using the postcolonial feminism framework, this study will use *Babel* by R. F. Kuang as the source of data. The data will be examined thoroughly regarding several aspects in *Babel* including dialogue, monologue, characters behaviour, plot, setting, and other elements related to the study. Furthermore, the study will use journal articles and books related to subaltern and epistemic violence. By combining various sources, this research is expected to provide a thorough explanation of the struggle of subaltern woman and the epistemic violence they endured.

The data collection will be conducted through close reading of *Babel* by R. F. Kuang in several steps. First, the researcher reads *Babel* entirely to develop better

understanding. Second, the researcher annotated the aspects that are relevant to the study. Third, the researcher analyses the dialogue, monologue, and characters behaviour to understand the portrayal of subaltern and epistemic violence in *Babel*. Fourth, the researcher specifies the data according to the topic of the study. All the data will be analysed in accordance with Spivak's lens of postcolonial feminism, specifically subaltern and epistemic violence. This data collecting procedure supports the researcher to have comprehensive objectives.

The researcher will analyse all the data that has been collected in several steps. First, the data will be analysed with Spivak's theory of subaltern to uncover the representation of subaltern woman in *Babel* through Victoire Desgraves' character. Second, the data will be analysed with Spivak's theory of epistemic violence to prove Letitia Price's action of trivialising Victoire Desgraves' struggle as a subaltern. After all the data has been analysed, the researcher will draw the conclusions of the findings of the study.

Findings

This section presents the findings of research questions and analysis of the objectives in this study. The analysis is divided in two sections. The first section analyses how the novel portrayed the struggle Victoire Desgraves experienced in 1830s Oxford as a Haitian woman. The section will explore the discrimination and racism Victoire went through. Furthermore, how her voice filtered to fit the dominant standard. The second section analyses Letitia Price as the western/white feminist who unintentionally used epistemic violence to Victoire Desgraves. The second section explores Letitia Price's character with how she treated and viewed Victoire Desgraves. The two sections utilised subaltern theory by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak and with her view of epistemic violence mentioned in her essay to analyse Victoire Desgraves and Letitia Price as two characters who contrasted each other. Furthermore, the two sections will prove the subaltern woman, Victoire Desgraves, in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* is silenced through epistemic violence.

***Babel's* Portrayal of the Subaltern Struggle**

Babel is a novel about anti-colonialism where the story revolves around Robin Swift and his cohort at Oxford's Royal Institute of Translation during the 1830s. One of his friends in his cohort is Victoire Desgraves, a Haitian woman who came to England from France. Victoire Desgraves is the representation of a subaltern woman in the novel. As a woman with an origin outside the socialised capital, Victoire faced many obstacles at her time in Oxford. Despite the fact she is a student from a prestigious university with exceptional knowledge in her field, she is frequently subjected to racism and misogyny because of her skin colour and sex. This section discusses the *Babel's* portrayal of Victoire Desgraves as the subaltern who struggles with her time at 1830s Oxford.

A woman in 1830s Oxford did not get enough freedom as in modern society. Education is mostly seen as a man's field. There are rules that have to be obliged to please men. This patriarchy system was also experienced by Victoire Desgraves the first time she entered the Royal Faculty of Translation in Oxford as seen below.

'The university has asked us to dress like this so as to not upset or distract the young gentlemen,' the Black girl explained. Her English carried a faint accent, which Robin thought resembled French, though he wasn't sure. She shook her left leg at him, displaying trousers so crisp and stiff they looked like they'd been purchased yesterday. (p. 70)

Babel shows the struggle of subaltern through their clothing. Women are valued limitedly to how they dress. They have to be dictated on how they dress in academic areas in order to cater to men. The 'black girl' in this quote is Victoire Desgraves in her first meeting with all her cohort friends. Victoire has to wear trousers in order to 'not upset or distract the young gentlemen'. Women have limited freedom even if they are getting the same education as men. The crisp and stiff trousers indicate that the trousers are new. It shows that the women at Oxford are noticed very late before they started their school year. It shows how the academics disregard women in relation to the clothing guidelines beforehand.

Furthermore women's spaces were also dictated by the patriarchal system in *Babel* by how they have to dress.

The girls were not allowed to live in college, which was why they hadn't crossed paths with Robin and Ramy until the first day of instruction. Instead, Victoire and Letty lodged about two miles away in the servant annex of one of the Oxford day schools, which was apparently a common arrangement for Babel's female students. Robin and Ramy accompanied them home because it seemed the gentlemanly thing to do, but Robin hoped this would not become a nightly routine, as the road really was quite far away and there was no omnibus at this hour.

'They couldn't put you anywhere closer?' Ramy asked.

Victoire shook her head. 'All of the colleges said our proximity risked corrupting the gentlemen.' (p. 88)

The quote evidently shows the discrimination in where women live. Babel's female students 'live in the servant annex'. The place is outside of the campus which makes them have to walk a longer way than the boys and it is more dangerous for them especially when they have to walk back during the evening. While the boys live at the dorm in the campus area and they are closer to the campus. Once again, the rules for women always cater to men. Women also get blamed for things they have not done such as 'risked corrupting the gentlemen'. Victoire as the Haitian woman went through this struggle of the patriarchal system in her life and doubled by the oppression.

Victoire access to certain places is more limited since she is a black woman. In addition to another segregation she faced:

"You didn't care," Victoire continued. 'Letty, you don't even care that our landlady doesn't let me use the indoor bathroom—' (p. 355)

Victoire faced segregation during her stay in Oxford. How she is separated and isolated because of her skin colour. She has to use different bathroom facilities. This

segregation because of her skin colour and the restriction in how she lives is evident that Victoire is a subaltern woman who faced double marginalisation.

Apart from the segregation she faced, Victoire also faced racism in many ways. Victoire Desgraves is aware of how people will treat her because of her race. She is a black Haitian woman. People are prejudiced when a black woman walks alongside a white woman. In one of the cases, Victoire made an example that the shopkeeper will only let her in if she pretended to be Letty's maid. Among other cases is how people still uphold a stereotype of black people as a servant.

Without looking at her, Colin held his wineglass out in front of Victoire's face. 'Get rid of this and get me a burgundy, will you?' (p. 241)

Oxford held a ball where students could pay for the ticket to participate in it. Victoire joined the ball despite her initial rejection because Letty persuaded her to come and bought the ticket for her. She wore an emerald dress because she is one of the attendees of the ball. Nevertheless, she still faced racism from one of the male students who attended the ball. The stereotype of slaves ingrained in white people's mind that they considered every black person to be servants despite their identity as a free person. Because of her skin colour, the white people disregard Victoire as if she is the servant while she is also an Oxford student who is trying to mingle and have fun in a ball full of Oxford students.

Apart from the limited space Victoire has as a subaltern, she also struggled in language as her identity. As a Haitian, she speaks Haitian Creole as her mother's tongue. Yet, her language is recognised as beneath the colonial language such as French, a language she learned since she was a slave in a French family household in France.

'I gave them a Kreyol-French match-pair,' Victoire said. 'And it worked, worked like a charm, only Professor Leblanc said they couldn't put it in the Current Ledger because he didn't see how a Kreyol match-pair would be useful to anyone who doesn't speak Kreyol. And then I said it'd be of great use to people in Haiti, and then he laughed.' (p. 235)

In this context, Professor Leblanc is the dominant group where he is the one who holds authority against the students of the Royal Faculty of Translation since he is a professor. He is also a western academic and a man, making him double dominant. Victoire is the subaltern, a black woman from Haitian background. She does not have authority equivalent to Professor Leblanc. From the passage above, Victoire has been through an exam about practicing her invention of match-pair. Match-pair is a two words with similar meaning although not identical inscribed on a silver. Silver is the fantasy in the story where it is used as a tool to create weapons or new reality. It is suggested in the quote above that Kreyol is not seen in a high regard nor the people who speak it because it is considered beneath the colonial language. Professor Leblanc said he could not put the match-pair in the ledger or legalised it because it won't be used since no one speaks Haitian Creole. Victoire suggested that people in Haiti can benefit from it, however Professor Leblanc laughed in response. His laugh indicates that Professor Leblanc considered Victoire's suggestion as unusual. His laugh suggests that he dismissed Victoire's words as something unimportant and that the interest of Haitian people is as insignificant.

Another struggle for the subaltern is the struggle to speak. Spivak's essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) does not necessarily claim that the subaltern can not speak. Spivak focuses on how subaltern voices are silenced and filtered therefore it is equivalent to them not speaking their feelings and experienced as the oppressed group. In *Babel*, Victoire Desgraves went through the struggle of being silenced as shown in this passage:

But it was impossible to tell from within the tower. They had no way to gauge public opinion in either Oxford or London, except through the papers which, hilariously, were still delivered to the front door every morning. This was how they learned about the Cotswold family tragedy, the traffic accidents, and the countryside courier slowdown. But the London papers made hardly any mention of the war on China or the strike, save for a brief announcement about some 'internal disturbances' at the 'prestigious Royal Institute of Translation'.

"We're being silenced," Victoire said grimly. 'They're doing this on purpose.' (p. 470)

The students of Babel and some of their Professors were making a strike of not working on silverwork. They are taking the silver bars from its system in Babel tower, resulting in a halt in some of the industries in London such as transportation and mail. Despite that, the newspaper is still delivered door to door. However, they are still being silenced despite the blatant resistance from their side. The newspaper never told the public about the war on China nor the strike Babel's students did and their justification to strike. The papers write the news about 'internal disturbance in the Royal Institute of Translation', diminishing and silencing the people's struggle to resist the Empire who oppressed them and their homeland. It is a form of reducing their intention to tell the people about the corruption of the Empire against their people and others.

Victoire's struggle with identity as a subaltern:

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

Subaltern struggles with their identity because they are only seen when they die. Suddenly all their rebellion is seen as great and celebrated when they're dead. Even then, all of their rebellion is just seen as a pity from the dominant groups to cry and tell like a myth. Victoire here made a choice to live and hold on to the hope of a better future because existing and being happy is also a part of resistance. From the novel's footnote, it is explained that Oroonoko is a novel written by Aphra Behn in 1688. It is about an African prince, Oroonoko, who killed his lover Imoinda with the intention to save her from the English troops to not be violated. Oroonoko was captured and dismembered at the end. Victoire uses the story of Imoinda and Oroonoko as an example to her concern because their tragedy is seen as a great romance when it is adapted to theatre by Thomas Southerne. This comparison is identical to Spivak's example of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri in

her essay “*Can The Subaltern Speak?*” (1988). Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s suicide created a lot of assumption from many groups of people. Her death is either seen as a tragedy or shame, which does not help to represent the voice she tried to convey. Victoire refused her resistance to be seen as a tragedy and decided to live on as her form of resistance.

‘I’m just terrified that we’ll make this grand statement.’ She lifted her hands, let them fall. ‘And they’ll see it only as a temporary setback, something to recover from. That they’ll never understand what we meant.’ (p. 531)

Victoire and her friends made a big choice of rebellion to the Empire. Her fear of not being understood for their cause is justified. An act of resistance somewhat seen as radical and bad than the source of the resistance exists is worse. Especially Victoire and her friends are foreigners, mostly not from the dominant group. Their resistance will be seen as an error that could be simply fixed. As a subaltern Victoire wants them to be heard and seen, especially their effort of dismantling the corrupt Empire and academic institution.

As illustrated by the analysis above, Victoire Desgraves faced many challenges and struggles as a subaltern. Victoire has limited space, limited choice of fashion, and limited way to speak up against the corrupt system. Moreover, her voice is often silenced and trivialised, it makes the substance she wants to convey seem unimportant. From the analysis, it is shown that Victoire Desgraves, as a subaltern woman, faced double marginalisation. She is a victim of patriarchy and misogyny as a woman, and she is also the victim of imperialism as someone from a Third World country with dark skin. *Babel* depicted the struggle of subaltern women through the dialogue of the characters and by the narration of Victoire’s life as a Haitian woman pursuing education in 1830s Oxford.

The Epistemic Violence the Privileged Use to Silence Subaltern

As opposed to Victoire Desgraves who is the subaltern woman in *Babel*, Letitia Price is the privileged woman in *Babel*. Letitia Price, frequently referred to as Letty, is one of

the main characters of the story. She is a British woman and her father is a former admiral. She grew up in a household that uphold patriarchal values. Since she was a little girl, her brother has always been the priority of her father. He is the only one who got the education despite studying classical studies was not his passion. Letty despised her brother for that. Her brother attended the Faculty of Translation or Babel before her until he passed away in an accident. Only after her brother died, her family lets Letty study at Oxford.

As a woman who grew up in the socialised capital with a respected father, Letty gained more privileges than Victoire. While she is also subjected to patriarchy and misogyny, she failed to empathise and understand Victoire as the subaltern. Often dismissing Victoire's experiences and voices. This section will analyse Letitia Price's dialogues and narratives that suggest her to do epistemic violence to the subaltern, especially Victoire. The first act of epistemic violence by Letty is by trivialising Victoire's struggle and experience as a subaltern.

'Perhaps not,' said Victoire. 'I haven't — I mean, I don't know. But they're not meant to be shared. Would you be content to sit hour after hour with a white man as he asks you the story behind every metaphor, every god's name, so he can pilfer through your people's beliefs for a match-pair that might make a silver bar glow?'

Letty looked unconvinced. "But it's not real, is it?"

'Of course it's real.'

'Oh, please, Victoire.' (p. 191 - 192)

Letty refuses to understand Victoire's story of her Haitian identity when she explains her uneasiness about her professor asking her about Vodou. According to Victoire, Vodou is sacred for her people. She does not want a white man to study it just to steal and exploit the knowledge. Letty dismissed Victoire's worry by trivialising Vodou as a religion that is not real. Victoire tried to explain that Vodou is real for people of Haiti who practiced the religion. Nevertheless, Letty is still adamant on her own belief without trying to understand

Victoire's explanation of her own culture. Letty is trivialising Victoire's feelings by believing her own reality.

Apart from trivialising Victoire's story, Letty acts of epistemic violence includes her policing Victoire's feelings as shown in the quote below:

'But it doesn't. I know it doesn't! She's not the slightest bit religious; I mean, she's civilized—'

He whistled. 'That's a loaded word, Letty.'

"You know what I mean," she huffed. 'She's not Haitian. She's French. And I just don't see why she has to be so difficult.' (p. 192)

The dialogue happened between Robin Swift and Letitia Price. Letty complained about Victoire's behaviour after the argument about vodou to Robin. Victoire is obviously offended by Letty's statement about her identity. Letty is policing Victoire's feelings and behaviour after she offended her about her identity by calling Victoire not religious and civilised. The way Letty refers to Victoire as civilised conveys that her thoughts about Haitian are uncivilised. Furthermore, she sees Victoire as civilised because Victoire is an academic, lived in French, currently studies at Oxford, and she speaks colonial languages. Her statement about Victoire's nationality also dismissed Victoire's true background as a Haitian woman. It is the same as trying to diminish Victoire identity. Letty feels Victoire does not have the right to be upset since she is French and not Haitian. She failed to understand Victoire point of view and identity even if she is her closest friend.

Furthermore, Letty simplifies the complexity of what Victoire went through by stating Victoire as a French. Her non-empathetic statement is the same as silencing Victoire in her own identity and culture. Letty also overlooks her friend's background as someone who is oppressed by the France government as a Haitian woman.

Furthermore, not only policing Victoire's feelings, Letty also policing her acts of resistance with her other friends. In the end of the book, Victoire and some of her friends tried to stop the war plan from British imperialism.

'It simply seems to me that all this aggression is quite pre-emptive,' Letty insisted. 'I mean, you haven't even tried making your case to the public. Have you ever considered you might better make your point by being nice?' (p. 389)

Letty is in a discussion with her friends from the Faculty of Translation, including Victoire. They are discussing their plan of resistance. They are trying to target the House of Lords, the decision maker in the country, rather than the general public by pressuring them to stop the war. Letty voices her opinion that aggression is not needed and suggests speaking to the lords nicely. From the quotation above, Letty is policing the resistance by the oppressed. She judges how to oppose nicely and by being "civilised".

Another example of Letty policing the subaltern feelings and resistance is when she faced Robin and Victoire after betraying them and she tried to "save" them by surrendering.

'They're not your motherlands,' said Letty. 'They don't have to be.'

'They do have to be,' said Victoire. 'Because we'll never be British. How can you still not understand? That identity is foreclosed to us. We are foreign because this nation has marked us so, and as long as we're punished daily for our ties to our homelands, we might as well defend them. No, Letty, we can't maintain this fantasy. The only one who can do that is you.' (p. 519)

Letty refuses to listen to her friends until the end. She ignores her friend's feelings and how they should resist and view their own experience. As Victoire said in the quote, *'...we're punished daily for our ties to our homelands...'* she experienced the mistreatment in daily occurrence as if it is given because of her identity as Haitian woman. As a foreigner, Victoire experienced many discriminations. She does not feel belong to England even if she stayed and studied there. By policing the subaltern feelings and resistance, Letty denies the subaltern action because it is not aligned with her standpoint. She essentially silencing the subaltern voices.

Among the epistemic violence conducted by Letty is by ignoring the subaltern struggle. Letty consistently ignored Victoire's experience despite her telling her.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Letty, I tried.' Victoire's voice broke. (p. 354)

This depicted how Letty would not understand what Victoire was going through despite Victoire had tried to explain her struggle in Babel by how Professor Leblanc always shows his invention of chattel bars to Victoire and how he explained the chattel bars are intended for slaves. Letty ignores the segregation Victoire faced. It happened constantly throughout their time together, yet Letty fails to notice Victoire's struggle. In the novel, Robin as the narrator, expressed his sorrow for Victoire because Letty, even though she always expressed her fondness and love for Victoire, she always failed to understand her if Victoire's experience does not comport with her point of view.

Another evidence of Letty's lack of consideration is by universalising Victoire's experience as a subaltern woman who was subjected to both misogyny and racism during the Oxford ball. Victoire and Letty, along with Robin and Ramy, their friends from the same cohort, went to an Oxford ball. Letty convinced Victoire, Robin, and Ramy to go to the ball. Victoire refused it at first because she knew she wouldn't be accepted well at the ball because of her skin colour.

'They had a go at me too, you know.' This was a bizarre line of argument, and Robin was not sure why Letty made it at all, but she said it with vehemence. Her voice went up by several octaves. 'It wasn't just because she's—'

'Stop!' Victoire shouted. Tears streamed down her face. 'Stop it, it's no one's fault, we just — I should have known better. We shouldn't have come.' (p. 246)

The argument started when Ramy specified Letty's insensitiveness for asking them to come to the ball despite Victoire's initial disagreement. Ramy accused Letty as the reason why Victoire was getting violated by an Oxford student named Pendennis because Letty was the one who asked them to go to the ball despite Victoire's disagreement. Letty acts defensive since she was also being violated by Pendennis. The reason why Pendennis started to violate Victoire was because he was 'curious' about the colour of Victoire's intimate part and tried to compare it to Letty's intimate part. Letty defended that

Pendennis' violation was purely a misogyny by saying, although cut off by Victoire, 'It wasn't just because she's—'. Her words signifies she dismissed the racial violation Pendennis did to Victoire. It shows her unawareness of Victoire's struggle as a subaltern who was doubly oppressed in one night because of her skin colour and sex.

Another evidence of Letty universalising her friend's struggle is shown in her personal narrative in the novel.

It was infuriating. Her friends were always going on about the discrimination they faced as foreigners, but why didn't anyone care that Oxford was equally cruel to women? (p. 438)

This shows Letty will only understand the struggle if it includes her in the conflict. In the quote, she does not mention Victoire which can be interpreted as she generalises women's struggle as one without acknowledging the complexities of other groups of women who are not benefited from her feminism. Especially Victoire because she is a doubly marginalised individual. Victoire gets a lot of discrimination just as the same as Letty, however it is doubled by racism and the empire's oppression. Letty will never understand her friend's struggle as a subaltern because she is the part of the socialised capital that gives her more privilege than Victoire.

From the evidence uncovered in this section, Letitia Price is a privileged woman from the socialised capital. She silenced Victoire Desgraves as the subaltern woman by trivialising and policing her struggles. Additionally, Letty is policing Victoire and her friend's resistance against the injustice and oppression she faced. Letty also ignores the injustice Victoire went through and universalises Victoire's struggle, ignoring the layer of struggle Victoire has as a subaltern woman. Moreover, Letty silenced the subaltern in order to uphold her own narrative which is deeply influenced by the western view. This section uncovers Letitia Price uses epistemic violence to silence subaltern from speaking up on their own terms and preserve western narrative.

Discussion

R. F. Kuang's *Babel* is considered a dark academia novel published in 2022. *Babel* follows the story of Robin Swift and his cohort's journey at Oxford. He studies in the Faculty of Translation or known as Babel as well as practicing silverworking, a magic tool which keeps the industry afloat by translating two different languages with the same meaning. Throughout the story, Robin and his friends—Ramy, Victoire, and Letty—uncover the connection of Babel's professors and the British Empire. The British Empire plans on cunning free trade and war against China with the help of Babel professors. Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letty are trying to dismantle the wicked plan with the help of other students, alumni, professors, and the civilians.

Babel illustrates the life of subalterns living as a diaspora in Oxford. Considering most of the characters in *Babel* are from outside of the socialised capital before they moved to England, the characters faced many struggles as the subaltern. This study focuses on Spivak's subaltern theory. Spivak believes that the subaltern has full authority of their voice, yet the dominant groups are the one who silenced them by filtering the subaltern's voice to their belief. Spivak mentioned epistemic violence as a tool to silence subalterns systematically through unethical representation by the dominant group to fit the subaltern narrative on their own. Moreover Spivak believes that subaltern women suffered twice as a marginal group from the patriarchal system and the oppression.

Subaltern struggle in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* is represented by Victoire Desgraves, one of the main characters in the story. She is a Haitian woman who faced the discrimination and prejudices because of her ethnicity. Victoire's struggle reveals how *Babel* portrays subaltern struggle. Victoire struggles from navigating her life in Oxford's spaces by facing segregation. She struggles from her own identity and language which is deemed worth less than colonial languages she studies. Furthermore, she faced patriarchy and misogyny in her life at Oxford. Simultaneously, Letitia Price is the representation of a privileged woman who uses epistemic violence to silence the subaltern. Letty is a marginalised woman who lives within the socialised capital. She receives many privileges

because of her background as an English woman. She firmly holds onto the dominant narrative she believes to view the world around her. The epistemic violence Letty does uncover by how she trivialises, universalising, and policing the subaltern's struggles and resistance.

This study analyses R. F. Kuang's *Babel* using Spivak's subaltern and epistemic violence. However, R. F. Kuang's *Babel* has many elements to analyse that were unable to be addressed in this study due to the limitation of the scope. *Babel* heavily explored the theme of translation and betrayal, future study could analyse the connection between translation and betrayal through postcolonial lens. Furthermore, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said's frameworks can also be applied to future studies to explore the topic of violence resistance and colonialism in the story. Future study could also analyse the neo-victorian theory since *Babel* took place in the Victorian era and use alternate history settings with a touch of fantasy to critique the British Empire and the free trade through the perspective of the colonised.

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