

## INTERSECTIONALITY AND OPPRESSION IN R. F. KUANG'S *THE POPPY WAR* NOVEL

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### **Abstract**

This research presents a discussion of the main female character who experienced oppression in the novel *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang. The first part of the analysis describes the forms of oppression experienced by Rin in the novel based on the intersectional perspective. The second part analyses how Rin responded to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity. This research employed feminist literary criticism as a literary approach. This study focused on oppression that is caused by intersectional identity that occurred to the main female character in *The Poppy War* novel. The results of this study showed that the types of oppression Rin experienced include marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence that intersect with gender, race, and class. Rin was marginalized by her foster parents and peers who perceived her as unworthy. They limited her opportunities due to her gender and lower socioeconomic status. She faced powerlessness as her foster parents treated her as a shop girl and forced her to marry an old man due to her status as an orphan girl. She experienced cultural imperialism when she was forced to become a bride at a young age as her foster parents believed in the village culture. The last form of oppression was violence. In this case, she was mocked because of her skin colour, underestimated because of her gender, and kicked off because she originated from a lower-class society. Finally, the study showed that Rin's response to oppression that is caused by intersectional identity was in the forms of negotiation and self-protection. These responses were carried out to escape from forced marriage, negotiate with her parents, and have more training to revenge the peers in *The Poppy War*.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality; Oppression; Feminist Literary Criticism; *The Poppy War*.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Oppression is a concept that is discussed in the human rights and social justice system. It is a topic that is still often discussed today, especially when it occurs to individuals with multiple identity backgrounds. According to Sultana (2024), oppression involves consistent

and systematic mistreatment, oppression, or discrimination against people because of their socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or other factors. Due to the intricacy of the issues African-American women experienced in the early 1960s and 1970s, there was little room for solutions to resolve the issue of social inequality because race, gender, and class influenced their experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In this case, women with multiple identities face a great deal of discrimination due to racial differences, being born as women, and belonging to lower socioeconomic classes. Consequently, the three connected issues of race, gender, and class serve as the main focus of this study.

This study analyzes the forms of oppression that is caused by intersectional identity based on the novel *The Poppy War*. This novel is an epic historical military fantasy, written by R. F. Kuang and published in 2018 and is inspired by the bloody history of China's twentieth century. The novel regards Rin, the main female character, who became a war orphan. She experienced oppression from her foster mother in the village. To escape from such oppression, she took the Keju test to become a military academy student in Nikara. However, she was oppressed by her elite peers and masters in the military academy. Rin experiences oppression due to her gender, class, and race.

There are several previous studies which utilized the same research object as this paper. The first previous study was conducted by (Healey, 2021). The study explores how Stephen Fung's film *Tai Chi Zero* (2012) and R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novels (2018-2020) investigate the possibilities and limitations of hybridity in both form and culture to reimagine history. It used the postcolonial theory. Then, Virnanda's study (2024) highlights the characteristics of liberal feminism shown by Rin as the main character of *The Poppy War* novel, which is in the form of liberal equality, equality of rights, and equality of education (Virnanda, 2024). Suryaningrum (2022) discusses the representation of Chinese women in the novel. The results reveal that Rin suffers injustice and discrimination because of stereotypes of her dark skin and social caste. Meanwhile, Mzyk (2023) highlights how Venka's trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and dysfunctional defence mechanisms are used in the novel.

Then, some other studies used the same theory regarding oppression that is caused by intersectional identity on different objects of analysis. Sultana (2024) discusses how the experience of Black women is not just the sum of racism but rather a unique form of discrimination from the intersection of two identities. Istiadah et al. (2021) use Irish Marion Young's oppression theory to explore forms of oppression and Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to provide greater attention to the existence of oppression. Marmont (2022) examines how this intersectional othering and oppression do not occur just despite republican universalism and its promises of *Liberté* (liberty), *Égalité* (equality), and *Fraternité* (brotherhood). Omar (2022) examines intersecting forms of oppression—discrimination and violence against women in Iraqi Kurdish society.

Based on the above previous studies, previous researchers mostly examine the object of *The Poppy War* using postcolonial theory, women's existence, liberal feminism, and defence mechanisms. It can be concluded that the novel *The Poppy War* has never been

studied using Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Iris Marion Young's theory of oppression. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher decides to conduct a new study focusing on oppression that is caused by intersectional identity. This study analyses the novel *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang using feminist literary criticism. It used the intersectionality concept by Kimberle Crenshaw and the forms of oppression by Irish Marion Young. Thus, this current study aims to explore the forms of oppression that intersect with gender, race, and class as represented in the research object. In this research, the researcher focused on examining a novel by R. F. Kuang entitled *The Poppy War* and examined the forms of oppression that is caused by intersectional identity experienced by the main female character in the novel. It also studies how the main female character responds to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity she experiences. It covers intersectionality on gender, class, and race.

## METHOD

This research was literary criticism which employed a scholarly approach to criticizing literary work or novel. According to this research's objectives, in this paper, the researcher explored the ideas in this novel. Specifically, this research focused on oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novel. To criticize the object of the study, the researcher used the feminist perspective, the oppression theory from Young (2004), and the intersectionality theory from Crenshaw (1989) which defined oppression based on the intersectionality perspective. There were four forms of oppression in R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novel, namely marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence that interact with intersectionality based on gender, race, and class.

The data source of this study was the novel entitled *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang. *The Poppy War* novel was published by Harper Voyager in 2018 with 568 pages and 25 chapters. The data in this research included dialogues, monologues, words, phrases, and sentences in this novel. In conducting this research, the authors carried out some steps to collect the data. First, the authors read the novel to find out the forms of multiple oppression that the main character experienced. Second, the author took notes and underlined important points that were considered significant to the research. Third, the authors arranged the data based on the research question.

To analyze the data, the authors conducted several steps. After finding the data, the researcher classified them according to Young's category of oppression. The authors analyzed the four forms of oppression based on race, gender, and class. Additionally, the researcher also analyzed the novel by interpreting the data on the main female character's response to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity she experienced.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Forms of Oppression that is Caused by Rin's Intersectional Identity

This research analyses data from the novel *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang. *The Poppy War* extensively examines women's lives and the difficulties they experienced. Rin experiences oppression in many ways. Her foster parents used to force her to get married to an old man. Then, at the Sinegard Academy, she was bullied by her peers. This paper analyses the types of oppression Rin experienced. According to Young (2014), oppression takes on significance when it is carried out by a group of ruling elites. According to Crenshaw (Cho et al., 2013), the kinds of oppression that Rin experienced are marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence based on intersectional gender, race and class. The cause of oppression is the intersection and interlocking process between race, gender, and class (Khan, 2020).

### Marginalization

Marginalization is an action to limit or reduce groups or individuals to become a peripheral society (Young, 2014). It is the most dangerous form of oppression because marginalization often impacts the unjust and unfair treatment in society. The marginalization form of oppression can limit women's experiences in determining women's lives (Young, 2014).

The authors found that the main female character in the novel *The Poppy War* named Rin experiences oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of marginalization. She experiences marginalization by her foster parents due to her gender and class status and she is just a foot servant in Auntie Fang's house and shop. It is emphasized that she has no family or friends to save her, as shown in the quotation below:

*She had no friends or family: no one to come to her aid if she was robbed or kidnapped. She could spend her life as a foot servant in some rich household if she found the right people to bribe. Otherwise, her options were some combination of prostitution and begging* (Kuang, 2018, p. 9).

The quotation shows marginalization based on class and gender. It is seen in the words "*She could spend her life as a foot servant in some rich house*". There is no opportunity for her to decide her life. She is marginalized in society because she is a war orphan and has a lower-class status. It illustrates how marginalized women experience oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in life because of gender and class (Utami, 2021). Rin is left with very few possibilities for employment other than becoming a prostitute, a beggar, or a slave.

Rin also faces oppression in Sinegard, the place where she pursued her education. Her friends insult her and say that Rin does not deserve to stay at the academy.

*No-they couldn't just do this to her. They might think they could sweep her away like rubbish, but she didn't have to lie down and take it. She had come from nothing. She wasn't going back to nothing* (Kuang, 2018, p. 94).

As a fundamental component of marginalization, the statement *"They might think they could sweep her away like rubbish"* indicates that Rin as the main character is considered useless or unimportant. Marginalized people are frequently viewed as having little worth and are barred from social interaction. The quotation above shows that women who come from the lower class are underestimated and are deemed undeserving of being in an elite environment. The novel *The Poppy War* indicates that Rin is from the south origin of Nikara, a location which is deemed to be of a lower class by her peers. As a result, the data *"She had come from nothing"* indicates oppression that is caused by intersectional identity where Rin is a woman who originated from a lower-class society. The marginalization is related to gender and class-based intersectionality.

Another piece of evidence showing marginalization is when Rin was pushed to the periphery of society and denied access to opportunities and social interactions that others take for granted. The following data shows another example of marginalization experienced by Rin committed by her classmates:

*Rin had always felt like an outsider among her classmates, but as the year carried on, she began to feel as if she inhabited an entirely separate world from them* (Kuang, 2018, p. 225).

The statement above shows that women do not have the right to decide their destiny. The statement *"always felt like an outsider among her classmates"* depicts Rin's feeling of being marginalized by her friends. The statement she lives in *"an entirely separate world"* from her classmates also raises the possibility of severe social exclusion and marginalization. According to Young (2014), marginalization is a process of exclusion that places someone far away from peripheral society.

In summary, Rin experiences marginalization based on her gender and class three times. These instances were committed by Auntie Fang and her classmates. Aunt Fang is her foster parent who marginalized her by making her a servant. Meanwhile, in Sineward, she becomes a victim of marginalization from her friends, leading her to have unfair treatment. Croteau et al. (2002) claim that it is difficult for a person who experiences one or more forms of oppression to be acknowledged by a privileged group.

### **Cultural Imperialism**

According to Young (2014), cultural imperialism is the process by which the culture accepts a dominating authority in society as a standard that the rest of society must adhere to. Cultural imperialism demonstrates how the norms and experiences of the dominant group are shown. The experience and interpretation of the oppressed group on social life that affected the dominant culture are not extensively represented in the injustice of

cultural imperialism, while the dominant culture pushes its experience and interpretation on the social life of the oppressed group.

In *The Poppy War*, as a girl from Tikanny, Rin faces the effects of cultural imperialism. Auntie Fang is a metaphor for the social voice that forces the main female character to adhere to established rules, as shown in the quotation below:

*"What's wrong with getting married?" Auntie Fang demanded. "I married your uncle when I was younger than you are now. Every other girl in this village will get married by her sixteenth birthday. Do you think that you're so much better than them?"* (Kuang, 2018, p. 13).

The data provided above portrays how the main female character is purposely forced to conform to a particular set of cultural norms, including getting married early. The quote *"Every other girl in this village will get married by her sixteenth birthday"* exemplifies how social norms control the decisions people make in life, particularly women. In that culture, every young girl has a destiny to be married by her sixteenth birthday. This illustrates how cultural imperialism touched the young girl's life decision. When people feel compelled to follow the norms and ideals of a culture, even at the price of their own goals and capabilities, it can result in internalized oppression.

In general, *The Poppy War* also portrays oppression in the form of cultural imperialism through Southern dominance and beauty standards. The beauty standards in Sineward have historically been dominated by whites; therefore, it was imposed on Rin as shown in the following quotation:

*"Then why don't they worship me?" Rin complained. "Because you don't fight in the ring," Kitay filled in a final blank on his chart of Hesperian verb conjugations. "And also, because you're weird and not as pretty"* (Kuang, 2018, p. 229).

The statement Kitay said about Rin not being *'as pretty'* alludes to the cultural imperialism that imposes predetermined standards of beauty. Those who don't adapt to these ideals are marginalized as a result of cultural dominance. The stereotypes exist to describe what they are capable or incapable of (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004). This is a representation of how Sineward lowly regards Rin's skin colour and forces her to accept the fact. Rin experiences cultural imperialism that intersects with race and gender. As a Southern girl, Rin has a black skin colour that is different from Sinewardians. According to Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, people experience oppression in different ways and on various levels when race intersects with other social categories (such as gender, class, etc.) (Crenshaw, 1991). This reflects another method of how Sinewardians put values and practices on minority cultures by promoting an unrealistic standard of beauty.

### **Powerlessness**

According to Young (2014), powerlessness is people's inability to control their existence. They are limited in making their own choices. In the novel, Rin in Sineward

experienced disparities in power and representation, which can contribute to feelings of powerlessness. The dominant can easily control the powerless; the former forcing the latter to do whatever the latter wants (Hinson & Bradley, 2013).

Oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of powerlessness happens to Rin because of her race and class. When Rin first was the situation in Sineward and the people living there, she found that most Sinewardians underestimated her due to her race as she was a Southerner. She feels powerless against the reality, and she is being underestimated. She even doubts her decision to be in Sineward, as shown in the following evidence:

*"I hate this city, the way they talk, that stupid apprentice, it's like they don't think I should be here."*

*"Of course, they don't," said tutor Feyrik. "You are a war orphan. You are a Southerner. You weren't supposed to pass the Keju. The warlords like to claim that the Keju makes Nikan a meritocracy, but the system is designed to keep the poor and illiterate in their place. You're offending them with your presence," (Kuang, 2018, p. 42).*

The data above shows how a different origin affects someone's life. People from the upper class with a famous origin have more power than the lower-class society. Rin is from Tikanny which is known as a small farming village in the southern region of Nikara. Meanwhile, Sineward is a prestigious military academy and one of the leading academies in the Nikan empire. Most students who enter the academy come from rich families or are children of province warlords.

The evidence indicates that Sinewardians have the power to control the southerners. Rin feels powerless since Tutor Feyrik tells her that the military academy considers the southerners as weak people who do not deserve to study in that academy.. Rin feels a sense of powerlessness that intersects with gender and class. She had to forcefully make compromises and sacrifices to advance her presence.

In addition, there is a power structure between the master and the student. Jiang, her master, throws annoying words at Rin because he always thinks that Rin is merely a child, a young person who knows nothing about war. As his student, Rin is not able to refute what her teacher said. Rin must remain humble because after master has more power than his students.

*"We're at war. We might die anyway. So, maybe calling the Gods gives us a fighting chance. What's the worst that could happen?"*

*"You're so young," he said softly. "You have no idea."*

*That is so frustrating. She wasn't so young that she didn't know her country was at war. Not so young that she hadn't been tasked to defend it (Kuang, 2018, p. 266).*

The quotation from page 266 shows how Rin experiences powerlessness due to status and the rule of power class. The elder character's statement illustrates that the young one is powerless and has no idea. According to Sultana (2024), it is crucial to acknowledge and address the unique issues of Black women, whose voices and perspectives are frequently

silenced in movements for racial and gender justice. This case emphasizes that as a victim, Rin cannot speak up and she is ignored because of her race and gender. According to Freire (2015), a culture of silence is a powerless experience because victims cannot voice their opinions. This illustrates powerlessness as the younger person's ideas and contributions are discounted or disregarded because of their age.

Apart from that, Rin experienced oppression because of her gender as a woman and her social status. It means that she has multiple identities that pose a unique challenge. Intersectionality is a system of oppression that overlaps and creates distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989). The data above shows how Rin's double identity caused powerlessness.

Concerning Nikara's cultural role over a woman in general, the author suggests that Nikara's women face oppression that is caused by intersectional identity. The oppression that is caused by intersectional identity of the main female character in the novel *The Poppy War* is caused by the social roles in the Nikara culture that are tightly regulated. In this empire, the people are born into certain positions. This arrangement points to a well-established class system with little to no mobility. The way the system works is that those who are born into lower social classes stay in those classes, while people who are born into higher social classes keep their privileges and positions of power. Rin experiences oppression based on class and gender as can be seen from the data below:

*The Nikara believed in strictly defined social roles, a rigid hierarchy that all were locked into at birth. Everything had its place under heaven. Princes became warlords, cadets became soldiers, and an orphan shopgirl from Tikanny should be content with remaining. The Keju was a purportedly meritocratic institution, but only the Wheatly class ever had the money to afford the tutors their children needed to pass (Kuang, 2018, p. 10).*

The quotation "orphan shopgirls from Tikanny" illustrates how powerlessness is caused by the oppression of several factors, including birthplace and class. The fact that these girls are expected to maintain their lower status shows how many axes of identity such as class and the status as orphans combine to further marginalize them. The intersectionality theory developed by Crenshaw describes how different social statuses such as gender, class, and race intersect to produce distinct experiences of discrimination and oppression. This is demonstrated in the statement that Rin with the birth status as an orphan shopgirl and the wealthy class interact to restrict opportunities and uphold social hierarchies.

## **Violence**

Violence is the most common and visible form of oppression (Young, 1990). Several types of gender-based oppression can often be linked to social violence. Women may have been the initial victims of oppressive violence and continue to suffer violence as a result of the ongoing oppression because men nearly exclusively commit violent crimes against women. Young (1990) describes violence as negative acts or behaviours carried out by dominating groups against subordinate groups to dehumanize, obliterate, and stigmatize



the victim and inflict physical and psychological pain. Female-perpetrated violence is an instance of gender-based violence, with both direct and indirect effects (Williams et al., 2009). There are three kinds of violence experienced by the main female character in *The Poppy War* novel, namely physical and psychological violence.

In this novel, Rin experienced sexual assault, domestic violence such as physical violence, and psychological violence based on her gender, race, and class status. Physical violence is directly related to the human body, while psychological violence is related to people's psyche. Then, sexual violence means violence that contains an element of sexual desire (Wahyuni & Lestari, 2018).

### ***Psychological Violence***

Psychological violence or emotional violence happens when an abuser causes violence that can hurt the victim's psychological condition or make them emotionally disturbed. Iris Marion Young (2014) states that the victim's psychological state may be hurt or emotionally frustrated by the perpetrator's violence. As a person who is from a different region, Rin is a stranger who often experiences psychological violence, such as being insulted. According to Putri and Santoso (2012), psychological violence is the use of harsh language without using physical force, threatening, slandering words, frightening, insulting, or exaggerating other people's mistakes. One of the acts of violence is shown in the quotation below:

*"And being from Sinegard does not make us special. Nezha and I have trained for the academy since we could walk. It's in our blood. It's our destiny. But you? You are nothing you are just some tramps from the south. You shouldn't even be here"* (Kuang, 2018, p. 74).

The above statement shows how Rin becomes the object of psychological violence based on her race. It is stated that Venka considers her as unworthy because she comes from the South. The phrase *"You are nothing, you are just some tramps from the south. You shouldn't even be here,"* serves as insulting words that question the victim's right to present or be as successful as others. As a black woman from the South, Rin faces psychological violence due to her identity. Black women experience racism in almost every sphere of society (Sultana, 2024). It illustrates that destiny reflects a social structure that privileges certain backgrounds from Sinegard over the South.

The next psychological violence that Rin experiences happens when her friend tries to compare her and Nezha, where Nezha is the second son of the Dragon Warlords and has the potential to be a commander. Meanwhile, Rin does not come from such a privileged background. It enforces a hierarchy where one is inherently superior to the other, as shown in the quotation below:

*"Every year we get someone like you, some country bumpkin who thinks that just because they were good at taking some test, they deserve my time and attention. Understand this"*

*Southerner. The exam proves nothing. Discipline and competence- those are the only things that matter at this school. That boy" Jun jerked his thumb in the direction Nezha had gone, "May be an ass, but he has the making of a commander in him. You, on the other hand, are just peasant trash" (Kuang, 2018, p.69).*

The quotation above depicts oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of psychological violence based on the main character's class status. Master Jun insulted her by comparing her with Nezha and considering her as a "country bumpkin" and "peasant trash." Those terms are blatant examples of verbal abuse, intended to demean and degrade the individual's social status. The example above shows the different social class statuses between Rin and Nezha. Rin is known as a woman from the South, especially Tikanny, who faces unfair treatment from her master. She is banned and prohibited from doing many things, such as touching and using weapons, entering the training room, practising, and entering the Combat class. Master Jun emphasizes that Rin's chance to enter the military academy was only due to her luck rather than her capability. Oppression is the unjust treatment of power often under the governmental, cultural opprobrium, or authority (Young, 2014).

The data above shows how Rin experiences multiple levels of psychological violence because of her various identities. Both her dark skin and southern heritage contribute to her becoming a victim of violence. Understanding and addressing every aspect of Rin's identity is necessary to address her oppression that is caused by intersectional identity, as demonstrated using Crenshaw's intersectionality approach in the statement below:

*"Runin" she said. "Rin for short."  
 "Runin? What kind of name is that?"  
 "It's southern," Rin said "I'm from Rooster Province."  
 "That's why your skin's so dark," Venka said, lip curling.  
 "Brown like cow manure" (Kuang, 2018, p. 50).*

The data above illustrates violence by insulting a person. Psychological violence is proven in the statement "What kind of name is that?" when Venka feels strange to hear Rin's name and the statement "'That's why your skin's so dark,' lip curling, 'brown like cow manure,'" By utilizing Kimberley Crenshaw's intersectional perspective, the exchange between Rin and Venka illuminates the intricate web of racial discrimination throughout the community. Rin experiences psychological violence because of her dark skin and southern heritage as well as characteristics based on gender and race.

Another data that interacts with an intersectional perspective based on race and gender is when Rin experiences an increasing amount of psychological violence due to the intersection of her identity as a southern shopgirl with preconceptions based on class. Her experiences of this oppression are shaped by both her social status and her race, as shown in the data below:

*"So skinny. Weren't you a farmhand or something?"*

*"Not everyone from the south is a farmer," she snapped. "I was a shopgirl."  
 "Hm. No heavy labour, then. Pampered. You're useless."  
 She crossed her arms against her chest. "I wasn't pampered-"(Kuang, 2018, p. 124).*

The statement above shows that a woman who is from a certain origin is vulnerable to oppression, especially when it is caused by race and class status. The statement "'So skinny, weren't you a farmhand or something?'" illustrates Rin's identity that caused psychological violence from her friend. Because of her work as a shopgirl, Rin is exposed to experience violence based on her class as she comes from a lower socioeconomic class. Venka's hasty judgment of Rin's work history as "... pampered. You're useless" shows that she devalues some forms of labour, especially those connected to lower socioeconomic and Rin's lack of experience with heavy labour. Rin's story demonstrates how compounding psychological violence results from intersecting identities. Her social status and treatment are shaped by a combination of factors, including her work, class, and the potentials of her race. The notion that a person from the South has to be a farmhand emphasizes local oppression.

### ***Physical Violence***

Physical violence is a kind of violence that makes the victims physically suffer because of the abuser. It is violence that affects the part of the body (Wahyuni & Lestari, 2018). In this novel, Rin does not only experience psychological violence but also physical ones from her friends during her time at Sineward Academy. The physical violence she experienced is accompanied by psychological violence. It is not only caused by bodily harm but also induces intense fear and psychological trauma. In this context, Nezha's violence against Rin can be seen as an assertion of dominance that reflects and reinforces existing power hierarchies:

*His staff connected with her kneecap with a sickening crunch. Rin's eyes bulged. She crumpled to the ground. Nezha kicks at her while she was still down, each blow more vicious than the last.  
 He's going to kill me. He's actually going to kill me (Kuang, 2018, p. 90).*

Rin is in charge when she gets kicked to the ground. Nezha is abusing physical power to control Rin, showing a power imbalance. The fact that Rin realizes fundamentally that "He's going to kill me" emphasizes how dangerous the violence is. According to Iris Young (2011), violence shows up not just in physical victimization but also in the common awareness that all members of oppressed groups are vulnerable to abuse just because of their status in the group.

Rin does not only experience physical violence from her peer once. It happens when in the ring, as Nezha looks happy to attack her many times. It is seen in the quotation below:

*He'd slapped her.*

*He'd slapped her.*

*A kick she could take. A knife hand strike she could absorb.*

*But that slap had a savage intimacy. An undertone of superiority.*

*Something in Rin broke. She couldn't breathe (Kuang, 2018, p. 133).*

The quotation above shows that physical aggression takes the form of slapping. A slap, in contrast to more obviously violent actions like kicking or hitting with a weapon, can convey certain meanings of dominance and shame. As stated by Krantz and Garcia-Moreno (2005), kicking, biting, slapping, beating, or even strangling are all forms of physical violence. Rin feels an inability to breathe and something shattering inside of her. Physical violence against women is a result of gender discrimination, which places men superior to women and allows them to treat women like property (Sultana, 2024). This demonstrates the profound effect that a violent act of this kind may have on a person's mental health and sense of identity.

In that quotation above, it is proven that violence can take many forms in one character. Moreover, the main character does not only experience physical violence but also psychological violence. Throughout *The Poppy War* novel, Rin's relationship with her peers and the masters around her is profoundly explored through the different forms of violence that she experiences in her private or public life. This includes psychological violence and physical violence. Moreover, the novel examines the intersectionality by Crenshaw that supports these types of violence, particularly based on gender, power, and class where men are more dominant.

In summary, the main female character named Rin in the novel *The Poppy War* experienced four kinds of oppression; namely powerlessness, cultural imperialism, violence, and marginalization based on her gender, race, and class as her multiple identities. On top of that oppression, Rin as the main female character also faces oppression that is caused by intersectional identity. Intersectionality is a method to map oppression. This oppression does not appear one time in the main female character's life, but it intertwines and mostly happens simultaneously. Rin generally encounters intersectionality based on race, gender, and class.

### **Rin's Responses to the Oppression Caused by Intersectional Identity**

The novel *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang portrays the various forms of oppression that is caused by intersectional identity that the main female character experiences and her response to oppression that is caused by intersectional identity. In the previous sub-chapter, the researcher has discovered and examined the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity experienced by Rin, which is frequently connected to larger social status, such as marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence that intersect with gender, class, and race. Meanwhile, this sub-chapter examines how Rin responds to oppression that is caused by intersectional identity.

The following is how Rin responds to the marginalization she experienced based on gender and race. The previous chapter describes Rin as unworthy of staying at the academy because she is just a woman from the South. Both identities make her experience marginalization. She experiences unjust treatment by her master because she fights against Nezha. Thus, she is banned from the practical class and prohibited from using weapons. Besides that, she must defeat Nezha in the fight at the Combat exam. This is Rin's response to marginalization:

*Rin alone continued to frequent the Lore garden, but only because it was a convenient place to train. Now that first-year avoided the garden of spite, it was the one place where she was guarantee to be alone (Kuang, 2018, p. 88).*

The quotation above shows Rin's response to the problem by studying and practising independently. This was because she did not have any choice except to practise alone without peers. She has ambitions to beat Nezha at the combat exam to prove to her masters and peers that she can fight. Rin decides to practice alone in Lore Garden, as she prefers to stay in a place where no one sees her.

The next is Rin's response to oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of cultural imperialism. The main female character in the novel shows how crucial it is for women to face oppression to achieve equal rights and opportunities. She illustrates the importance of the main female character's empowerment as covered in the excerpt below:

*"But I'm stubborn, I study hard, I really don't want to be married. It took me three days to memorize Mengzi, it was a short book, so I'll probably need a full week for the longer texts" (Kuang, 2018, p. 10).*

This statement is an illustration of Rin's response to the oppression in the form of cultural imperialism in the village. The previous chapter explains that Rin experiences cultural imperialism based on her gender and class status. She is a war orphan who lives alone. She is a woman who is forced to follow cultural rules, especially the culture that a young girl must be married on her sixteenth birthday. Rin's response is to study hard to learn and memorize books to escape from the forced marriage by her foster parents. Even though it is hard to learn all the lessons, she does not care about the process. In her mind, it is to set her free from the force of marriage.

The data shows how Rin responds to the oppression she endured through self-protection. Her response was based on the factor that she is a young girl in Tikanny who is pushed into an arranged marriage. Rin's response to conventional gender norms is also shown in her disobedience to the foster parents' expectations to marry early.

Then, Rin's response to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of powerlessness is based on her gender and class. She has been oppressed since

she was in Tikanny and she is powerless to make her own choices for her life. Auntie Fang as her foster parent threatens her with death. Rin's response is the quotation below:

*"Do you want to die?" Rin knew that wasn't an empty threat. Auntie Fang was more than willing to tie up her loose ends. She'd spend most of her life trying to make sure she never became a loose end. But now she could fight back.*

*"Let me at least try," Rin begged. "It can't hurt you to let me study. If I pass then you'll at least be rid on me- and if I fail, you still have a bride" (Kuang, 2018, p. 15).*

The above quotation depicts Rin's response by demonstrating her movement to negotiate for her benefit to obtain the opportunity to prove herself through education. She is considered powerless because she is a woman and a war orphan. This was because women in her village must follow the cultural rules to be married at a young age. It is forbidden for a woman to be more successful than a man. Moreover, she is a war orphan who becomes Aunt Fang's foster child. Thus, her life depends on Aunt Fang. Therefore, her act of negotiating is a solution to address her goals and Aunt Fang's concerns. She suggests that by studying and potentially passing the test, she can prove her worth and no longer be a burden to Auntie Fang. Even, Auntie Fang can still marry Rin off if she fails the test. The statement illustrates that Rin begs to be given a chance to study and try the military test.

Then, Rin responds to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity in the form of violence. As portrayed in the novel *The Poppy War*, Rin is a brave girl. She isn't scared of her peers because she feels that she has been usually underestimated. She ends the violence she experiences through revenge. This form of oppression causes her to think that she must respond to it by proving that she is also worthy of appreciation. This thought emphasizes Rin to meet her master and learn to fight, as the data below:

*If she surrendered to Nezha, he would hold it over her for the rest of their time at the academy.*

*"Because I can," she said. "Because he thought he could get rid of me. Because I want to break his stupid face" (Kuang, 2018, p. 166).*

The quotation above shows that Rin's response to the violence by self-protection is revenge. It can be proven that Rin was oppressed by her classmates and masters. She has a strong belief in defeating Nezha because she won't let herself be considered weak and unworthy to study at the academy. She wants to prove herself to the people who have underestimated her. She has a big determination to win the fight. She asks her master to teach her to gain power and practices hard to defeat Nezha. Her life experiences were misery for her and she tries to end this by having more capabilities than Nezha.

The last is Rin's response to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity she experienced, especially from her foster parents. Rin faces marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence because of her gender, class, and race. She is

constantly strong in receiving such oppression until she is forced to marry an old man. She seeks to run away from oppression. Then, she decides to respond to the oppression that is caused by intersectional identity by going to Sinegard. Her way to escape is explained in the quotation below:

*She had bribed a teacher. She had stolen opium. She had burned herself, lied to her foster parents, abandoned her responsibilities at the store, and broken a marriage deal. And she was going to Sinegard* (Kuang, 2018, p. 26).

The quotation above shows her response to oppression that is caused by intersectional identity, such as bribing a teacher and stealing opium, because she faces socioeconomic hardship as a war orphan who works as a shopkeeper in Aunt Fang's shop and lacks access to education. She abandons her responsibilities as a shopkeeper and breaks the marriage deal as her response to cultural imperialism based on her gender as a woman. The quotation above demonstrates an understanding of oppression that is caused by intersectional identity and shows how the main character decides to free herself from the oppression.

Finally, the novel shows the importance of seeking out against oppression. Rin experiences oppression that is caused by intersectional identity from her classmates and masters in the military academy because of her multiple identities. Her responses in facing all oppression have a purpose to save herself from oppression. She develops to become influential in Sinegard after beating Nezha at the combat exam. She has finally achieved her dream to become a fighter in Sinegard. When Sinegard is under attack, she is the girl who fights and wins the war. It means that the victory of Sinegard at war is caused by Rin's courage to fight and defeat all foes. She uses her power to stand up and silence those who underestimate and oppress her. Overall, Rin's journey becomes a symbol of empowerment that inspired women to make decisions to achieve professional success, including creating a fair professional environment and silencing the oppressors.

## CONCLUSION

In *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang, the main female character, Rin, faces various forms of oppression based on her intersectional identity. She experiences marginalization from her foster parents and classmates due to her low social status and gender. This marginalization results in limited opportunities and reinforces her powerlessness, as she is the sole survivor of her family after the opium war. Living with her foster parents, Rin is forced into menial labor and an arranged marriage. Cultural imperialism is evident when Auntie Fang attempts to marry Rin off at a young age, a common practice in her village. Rin also endures psychological and physical violence from her elite classmates at Sinegard, who mock her for her skin color and gender. Despite this oppression, Rin responds by striving to join the military academy, negotiating with her foster parents, and training to overcome her oppressors. The study, thus, highlights how Rin's intersectional

identity as a woman from a low social class and her race compound her oppression. However, the focus is solely on Rin, and the researcher suggests future studies should examine all female characters in the novel to explore the intersectionality of ethnicity, tribe, nationality, and other aspects.

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