

Hybrid Subject: Postcolonial Identity and Resistance in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*

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Abstract

R. F. Kuang's novel *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translator's Revolution* reimagines 1830s Oxford as a center of imperial power, where translation, through a magical system called silver-working, fuels the British Empire's global dominance. This article employs Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space", alongside Stuart Hall's theorization of cultural identity as "becoming", to analyze the identity formation of the protagonist Robin Swift. Tracing Robin's trajectory from colonial subject to revolutionary agent reveals how language operates simultaneously as technology of imperial governance and potential site of resistance. Kuang's narrative demonstrates that the hybrid subject, positioned in the interstices between cultures, possesses unique critical vision that can become subversive power.

Keywords

Babel; Robin Swift; postcolonial resistance; hybridity; cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Rebecca F. Kuang, born in Guangzhou in 1996 and raised in the US, is a prominent Chinese-American fantasy novelist. Her works often blend historical trauma, colonial critique, and East Asian motifs, earning her numerous awards including the Nebula Award. Published in 2022, *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translator's Revolution* (*Babel*) is her landmark historical fantasy novel. Set in 1830s Oxford, it centers on Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan trained to join the Royal Institute of Translation (*Babel*), where translation fuels British imperial magic via enchanted silver. The novel sharply critiques colonialism, exploring how language and translation act as tools of domination and resistance. It became a New York Times bestseller and won the 2022 Nebula Award, cementing Kuang's status as a leading voice in contemporary fantasy.

Robin Swift's lived experience, which is rooted in his Chinese heritage yet shaped by his Oxford education and immersion in imperial culture, embodies the hybridity and "third space" theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity as a process of "becoming" rather than a fixed "being" is vividly reflected in Robin's transformative journey. Building on these theoretical frameworks, this article will delve into Robin's identity formation in *Babel*, examining how his hybrid positioning in Bhabha's "third space" and his dynamic "becoming" of cultural identity, shaped by his engagement with translation as both a tool of empire and a medium of resistance, enable him to develop a critical consciousness, and how Kuang utilizes this character arc to elaborate on the subversive potential of hybridity in challenging colonial dominance.

2. The Colonized Subject: Dispossession, Mimicry, and Dislocation

Robin's identity formation begins in the traumatic soil of Canton, a city ravaged by the First Opium War and British imperialism. Kuang anchors Robin's earliest memories in scenes of

death, hunger, and colonial violence: his mother succumbs to plague, his family collapses, and the streets echo with cries of the dispossessed. These memories are not merely backstory; they constitute what Bhabha calls a submerged “Third Space” within Robin’s psyche. Even before he leaves for England, Robin inhabits a gap between linguistic and cultural systems. Kuang complicates this memory by refusing nostalgia—Canton is not a pastoral homeland but a place of poverty and violence as much as familiarity and belonging. The novel refuses simple narratives of loss and recovery, presenting instead what Hall describes diasporic identity is “not the rediscovery but the production”^[1]. Robin’s contradictory relationship to his place of origin becomes the engine of his identity crisis: he cannot fully reclaim Canton, neither can he forget it, trapped between the land that gave him life and the empire that shattered it.

Professor Lovell’s arrival introduces a foundational colonial gesture: the gift of “salvation” that conceals violent appropriation. Lovell rescues Robin, renames him, and promises the transformative power of English education. The boy’s Cantonese name, embedded in family lineage and ancestral expectations, is deliberately left unspoken throughout the novel, an absence that mimics colonial erasure itself, as it becomes “Robin Swift”. This absence is telling: what is not spoken can be as significant as what is articulated. The erasure of Robin’s original name represents the systematic elimination of his claim to any identity outside the colonial framework. As Bhabha quoted in his work, “To give to a colony the forms of independence is a mockery; she would not be a colony for a single hour if she could maintain an independent station.”^[2] Robin is not liberated but rebound; his rescue is contingent upon the erasure of everything he once was, turning survival into a form of subjugation.

Renaming marks the inaugural gesture of colonial mimicry. Bhabha describes the colonized subject as invited to become “almost the same, but not quite”^[2], a copy perpetually deficient. Robin Swift is designed to be such a copy. He receives an English name, learns English manners, and is set on the path to Oxford. Yet renaming itself announces the impossibility of full assimilation, for one renames only what is perceived as alien. The colonial system requires Robin’s linguistic genius but needs him as a tool, not as a master. Lovell’s “salvation” creates an unpayable debt that functions as a psychological leash, tying Robin to gratitude and fear. This foundational violence installs Robin into the colonial order, stripping him of his given identity and fracturing his psyche. The split between his anglicized name and his unnamed original self becomes Bhabha’s “hybridity” as internal division. Robin becomes two persons in one: the colonial subject answering to “Robin Swift” and the ghost of an unnamed Cantonese child, a duality that haunts his every step.

The sea voyage from Canton to Britain performs systematic cultural severance. In the floating world of the ship, Robin’s old self is unmade while his new self has not yet formed. This transitional space exemplifies what Bhabha identifies as “Third Space of enunciation”^[2] emerging in moments of transit and displacement, where fixed cultural identities begin to dissolve. Lovell immediately sets Robin to studying Greek and Latin, forbidding Cantonese and enforcing a linguistic regime that reorients the boy’s structures of thought. Stuart Hall describes “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”^[1] By severing Robin’s daily reliance on his mother tongue, Lovell begins to reshape his mind, replacing native ways of knowing with colonial intellectual structures.

Yet cultural identity cannot be erased by physical displacement. In the darkness of his cabin, Robin dreams of Canton—narrow streets, smells, and the sound of his mother’s voice calling him by the name no one on the ship will ever speak. These dreams represent, in Bhabha’s terms, “the return of the repressed”^[2]. Colonial education, in attempting to bury Robin’s original self, inadvertently creates a subterranean space where that self survives, distorted but persistent. Robin wakes from dreams with tears on his face, unable to explain to Lovell why he is crying. The gap between his waking self and his dreaming self widens during the voyage, but the

dreaming self never vanishes. It becomes a secret counter-identity, hidden beneath the surface of compliance. As the ship approaches the English coast, Robin is no longer simply Chinese but not yet British, instead, a diasporic subject in formation, suspended between two cultural worlds, belonging fully to neither.

3. The Pretending Adaptor: Perfect Mimicry and Structural Exclusion

Upon arriving at the Royal Institute of Translation, Babel, Robin appears to embody colonial success. He masters Greek, Latin, and classical Chinese with an aptitude surpassing most English peers. He navigates Oxford's complex social rituals, adopts English manners, and internalizes the colonizer's intellectual habits. This apparent success, however, is precisely the trap of colonial mimicry. The colonizer demands the colonized become "almost the same, but not quite", demonstrating Western civilization's universal value while remaining visibly different to preserve hierarchy. Although "[Robin] soon reached a level of fluency in both Greek and Latin that any Oxford undergraduate would have been jealous of,"^[3] his excellence does not erase his Chineseness; it makes it more conspicuous. He is tolerated as an exceptional anomaly but never fully admitted into English belonging, a token success that reinforces imperial hierarchy rather than challenging it.

The psychological cost is immense. Robin never relaxes, constantly monitoring his speech, gestures, clothing, and facial expressions lest some residue of "foreignness" betray him. He suffers from imposter syndrome, a persistent fear of being discovered as a fraud, of having his achievements revealed as undeserved, and of Lovell withdrawing his patronage and casting him back into nothingness. Acceptance remains conditional and incomplete. English classmates include him in study sessions but not in every private gathering. He can debate philosophy with professors but is never considered for prestigious fellowships. When walking through Oxford's courtyards, he notices occasional stares, whispered comments, and the assumption that he must be a servant or curiosity rather than a scholar. This is what Bhabha means when he writes that colonial mimicry produces a subject "almost the same, but not white"^[2]. The "not white" is an invisible fence enclosing Robin's success. He can mimic perfectly but can never become the colonizer, confined to a permanent state of partial inclusion.

Robin's experience reveals an invisible, unnameable boundary. No written rule declares a Chinese student cannot become a fellow, marry an Englishwoman, or enter the highest circles of power. Yet the boundary exists, invisible, unspoken, and absolutely uncrossable. Its power lies in ambiguity. Robin is never told directly, "You are not one of us." Instead, exclusion comes through a thousand small gestures, each deniable, each eroding his sense of belonging from within. Institutionally, the pattern is unmistakable: English classmates are groomed for colonial postings and fellowships while Robin's name is never mentioned when scholarships are announced. The Empire needs his linguistic genius but needs him only as a tool, not as a leader. This boundary is not a wall with a sign but a series of gentle, persistent redirections that always lead him back to the same place—useful but never fully belonging.

The most painful manifestation is emotional. Robin and Ramy enjoyed joyful days together in Oxford, hanging out and embracing their new friendship and freedom. On their way home late one night, they were harassed and racially insulted by drunk students, who mocked Ramy's his race and ordered him to remove his academic gown. After escaping safely, Robin realized bitterly that despite their status and efforts, they could never feel safe or fully accepted in Oxford due to their racial identities. He can learn Greek, wear English clothes, and speak without an accent, but he cannot be accepted as an equal by the people of this country. "They are men at Oxford, but not Oxford men."^[3] The Empire will take his labor, talent, and obedience, but it will not give him a home. This structural exclusion is inscribed into colonial knowledge itself, and the invisible grammar of belonging admits no exception.

Robin's psychological burden remains heavy. He never feels entirely safe. In English company, he is alert to the possibility of casual racism; in private moments, he mourns the China that may no longer exist and the self he can never recover. He is too English for some futures and too Chinese for others. A hybrid life offers no safety net. Yet this is also freedom. Because Robin belongs fully to no single identity, he cannot be fully claimed by any single narrative. He is always "becoming" rather than "being", as Hall argued, "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [culture identities] are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."^[1] Moreover, this unfixedness enables his awakening. A pure Englishman would never see through the Empire's lies; a pure Cantonese boy would never gain access to Babel's secrets. Robin sees what he sees precisely because he is hybrid. The double vision that causes him pain becomes the lens through which he recognizes translation's true nature.

4. The Awakened Reflector: Recognizing the Truth and Hidden Resistance in Linguistic Gaps

Because Robin lives between languages and sees through double consciousness, he uniquely recognizes what his English peers cannot: translation is not a neutral cultural bridge but the secret engine of colonial violence. This recognition does not arrive as a single thunderclap. It accumulates slowly through encounters with silver-working, conversations with Griffin, and the quiet horror of realizing every word he translates feeds the empire destroying his homeland. The novel's central fantastical invention operates on a simple but devastating principle: when a word is engraved on one side of a silver bar in one language and its supposed equivalent on the other side in another language, the inevitable loss of meaning during translation produces energy. It is the imperfect match, the slippage, and the untranslatable remainder that power the Empire's trains, weapons, communications, and infrastructure. Every silver bar in every colonial outpost is a monument to failed translation. The Empire does not run despite translation's inadequacy; it runs because of it.

This recognition forces Robin to reconsider his life's work. He came to Babel believing translation was an act of love, bringing cultures together and making the wisdom of one language available to another. Now he sees that under the Empire, translation is an act of extraction. Texts arriving from India, China, Africa, and the Middle East are not treasures to share but mines to exploit. Robin and his fellow translators are not bridges but miners, digging into linguistic heritage for untranslatable fragments turned into imperial power. His mastery of Chinese, which he once thought a precious inheritance from his lost mother, has become a tool for the very system that orphaned him.

Trapped by this knowledge, Robin finds an unexpected loophole in the machinery imprisoning him. The gaps between languages, the same gaps that power silver-working, paradoxically become the space where Robin can hide his mind. He learns that the Empire's magic exploits the inevitable loss of meaning during translation; the "lost match" between a Chinese word and its English equivalent produces energy. These gaps are the Empire's most valuable resource. But Robin realizes the gap works both ways: if meaning can be lost, it can also be withheld. If the Empire cannot capture every nuance of a word, then there are always fragments of meaning that escape colonial appropriation. These fragments become his hiding place. The gaps the Empire mines for power are also the places where surveillance ends. The paradox is exquisite: the very gaps that the empire mines for power become Robin's refuge and arsenal.

Robin's translation work becomes camouflage. On the surface, he continues producing the silver bars Lovell expects. He finds English equivalents for Chinese terms, meets quotas, and appears the obedient scholar. But he learns to perform his work while holding something back. When translating a classical Chinese poem, he might choose a slightly weaker English word, subtly reducing silver output, a kind of sabotage so small no one notices. More importantly, the

mental process of translation—the back-and-forth between languages, the weighing of alternatives, the lived experience of untranslatability—is entirely private. Lovell can see the final English text but cannot see the Chinese swirling in Robin's mind during the act.

Robin begins thinking in Chinese whenever he needs to be critical. In English, he speaks politely, agrees with Lovell's pronouncements, and never utters a word of dissent. But in his head, he curses in Cantonese. Ramy explains to Robin that the British Empire connects India and China through a vicious cycle: Indian opium is traded for Chinese silver, which then flows back to Britain. Robin visualizes this as a vast, predatory spider's web of colonial exploitation and whispers in revulsion that "it's sick, it's so sick..."^[3] No one can hear this inner voice because no one around him understands Chinese. The colonizer's inability to master the colonized tongue becomes, for once, an advantage.

Yet thinking in gaps is not acting. Robin can resist Lovell mentally all day, but it changes nothing outside his skull. He can hide his thoughts but cannot make them matter. This limitation gnaws at him. He begins to understand that the space he found is only a beginning: it allows him to breathe and preserve a self not fully colonized, but breathing is not fighting. Outside Babel's walls, the Empire's violence continues unabated.

5. The Revolutionary Agent: Rupture, Patricide, and Hybridity as Weapon

External catalysts shatter Robin's protective shell. The Opium War, previously framed as "trade disputes" and "civilizing missions", reaches Robin unmediated through Griffin's intelligence network. He reads reports of burned villages, mass executions, and the calculated flooding of China with British opium, among them the faces he left behind in Canton and the ghost of his mother. The war ceases to be an abstraction; instead, becomes faces, voices, and names. Robin can no longer tell himself his translation work is neutral.

The second catalyst is the Hermes Society itself. Griffin has long understood what Robin is only now grasping: knowledge without action is complicity. The Society is preparing an operation—targeted sabotage of a critical silver-working node to disrupt the Empire's logistics. Griffin does not pressure Robin directly, but his presence is a constant question: you see the truth, what are you going to do about it? The invitation to join is not a recruitment pitch; it is a mirror. Robin must look at himself and decide whether he is a man who merely thinks or a man who acts.

Robin's choice, when it comes, is a double rupture: from the colonial system and from the spiritual father who embodies it. External catalysts, the war, the revolutionary invitation, and the revelation of paternal betrayal, converge into a single unbearable pressure. Robin can no longer stay in the gaps. The choice is stark: join the Hermes Society and commit sabotage, knowing discovery means death; or refuse, continue as an obedient translator, preserve his life but lose his soul. Kuang does not present this as a heroic dilemma. Robin does not stride toward revolution with a clear conscience. He hesitates, makes lists of reasons to refuse, and tells himself one small act of sabotage will not end the war, that death would be pointless, and that he owes Lovell his life regardless of how that life was taken. These are not cowardly thoughts, but the honest calculations of a young man with everything to lose and very little to gain. However, in the end, he chooses resistance.

Lovell is Robin's "spiritual father" and biological father. This dual paternity makes the rupture more than murder—it is patricide, the killing of the father who created the son. In committing it, Robin kills not only Lovell but also the obedient, grateful, self-denying "Robin Swift" that Lovell made. On the ship returning from Canton, Robin confronted Lovell with his mother's death—why Lovell, knowing he could have saved her, let her die of cholera in Canton. Robin repeatedly demands that Lovell "say her name"^[3]. This is an eruption of years of suppressed emotion. In anger and fear, he instinctively activates Evie Brooke's silver bar, which had killed Eveline Brooke. This strips away the fiction of "salvation". Robin was never a random orphan rescued by a kind scholar but a child abandoned

by his father to die in Canton while Lovell returned to England. The “rescue” years later was not an act of love but a cold calculation, for Lovell needed Robin’s linguistic gifts.

The violence that erupts is not premeditated. It explodes from years of suppressed rage, the accumulated humiliations of invisible boundaries, and the horror of seeing his own labor power the destruction of his homeland. Robin kills Lovell not as a calculated political strategist but as a son who finally realizes his father never loved him. The aftermath is not liberation but vertigo. Robin and his friends conceal the body, construct an alibi, and continue living as if nothing happened. The act severs every tie that bound Robin to his former life. He can no longer return to Babel as a scholar, pretend to be an obedient translator, or even imagine a future within the Empire’s structures. He has become a fugitive, a conspirator, a man with blood on his hands. Kuang refuses to romanticize this moment. Robin does not feel triumphant; he feels hollow. He has killed the man who gave him language, education, and a new identity. In doing so, he has also killed the self Lovell created.

Amid the wreckage of his old identity, Robin discovers that what he once regarded as a wound, his hybridity, can now be wielded as a weapon. The in-betweenness that once made him vulnerable becomes his greatest source of strength, just as Bhabha argued, “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority).”^[2]

Robin’s first transformation is perceptual: at Babel, Robin is the object of the colonial gaze, who is watched, evaluated, measured for usefulness. After the rupture, he reverses the gaze. He begins using his double vision to observe the Empire itself. Because he moves fluently between Chinese and English cultures, he sees what a pure English observer cannot: the hypocrisy beneath civilizing rhetoric, the violence hidden inside every silver bar, and the fear driving Lovell’s control. He is inside the system, he knows its languages, rituals, and magical infrastructure, but he is no longer invested in its survival, because “[Robin] had fully converted now to Griffin’s theory of violence, that the oppressor would never sit down at the negotiating table when they still thought they had nothing to lose.”^[3]

His second transformation is operational. Robin once used linguistic gaps to hide his mind as a defensive tactic. Now he turns those gaps into offensive weapons. Working with Griffin and the Hermes Society, he begins sabotaging silver-working from within. A deliberately weak English equivalent for a Chinese term reduces a silver bar’s output. A subtly mismatched pair of words—correct enough to pass inspection but flawed in critical nuance—causes a silver mechanism to fail at a crucial moment. A message encoded in a dead language, embedded in a routine translation task, reaches contacts across the Empire without triggering suspicion. Robin’s intimate knowledge of untranslatability, which once made him the ideal tool of imperial extraction, now makes him the ideal saboteur.

Robin’s relationship to mimicry also undergoes a profound shift. Now mimicry becomes tactical camouflage. He continues performing the role of the obedient Babel scholar, speaking politely, meeting translation quotas, never missing a deadline. But the performance is no longer aimed at acceptance; it is aimed at deception. He wears the mask of the loyal translator while underneath building a network of sabotage. This is the subversive potential of mimicry, as Bhabha hinted that “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.”^[2] Most importantly, Robin comes to recognize that hybridity is not a curse but a privilege. A pure Cantonese boy, never admitted to Babel, would never gain access to its secrets. Robin can see and act precisely because he is hybrid. His suffering was not an obstacle to his effectiveness; it was the tuition for his revolutionary education.

The threshold separating a potential revolutionary from an actual one is concrete, irreversible, life-risking action that forecloses all retreat. Kuang makes clear that action does not come easily. Robin has been trained his entire life to obey to Lovell, to Babel, to the Empire's unspoken rules. The habit of compliance is etched into his muscles and nerves. When the Hermes Society finalizes its plan to sabotage a critical silver-working node, Robin hesitates. His hands tremble. He imagines every possible failure. This is not the hesitation of cowardice but of a man who has never been allowed to choose for himself. For the first time, the choice is entirely his.

What pushes him across the threshold is not courage alone but the recognition Hall might describe as identity produced through all kinds of practice.^[1] Robin understands he will never know who he is until he does something that commits him to an answer. Only when he places his hands on a silver bar and deliberately mismatches the words, only when he watches the resulting magic flicker and die, does he become, in fact, the person he has been telling himself he is.

In the end, Robin chooses to stay inside the tower as the army prepares to storm it. He deliberately triggers a chain reaction by repeating the forbidden match-pair, causing the entire tower to self-destruct. Rather than being killed by others, Robin actively sacrifices himself, perishing with the tower. Yet the manner of his death matters profoundly. Robin is not killed as a passive victim, not like the nameless bodies in Canton's plague pits, not like the silenced orphans of empire. He is killed because he chose to act. His death is not defeat but completion. The passivity forced upon him as a child—being taken, renamed, reshaped—is finally reversed.

6. Conclusion

This analysis reveals that Robin Swift's identity formation follows a dialectical arc: from forced mimicry and hybridity as a site of alienation, through an identity crisis triggered by seeing translation's true colonial nature, to the conscious transformation of hybridity into a weapon of resistance. His journey confirms Bhabha's insight that the colonial mimic is "almost the same but not quite", and that this "not quite" can become the ground for subversion. It also vividly illustrates Stuart Hall's conception of identity as production rather than rediscovery. Robin never returns to a pure Chinese identity nor achieves complete British assimilation. Instead, he produces himself through decisive action: rupture with Lovell, sabotage of silver-working, and sacrificial death. Identity is something Robin does before something he has.

Kuang's novel updates postcolonial theory for a new generation of readers. The "third space" is not merely a site of ambivalent suffering but can be deliberately occupied as a strategic position of resistance. Translation, the novel's central metaphor, functions simultaneously as the engine of colonial extraction and the gap through which resistance emerges. Kuang uses a micro-level individual narrative to allegorically map macro-level socio-historical issues: colonial history, academic ethics, racial politics, and linguistic hegemony. Robin Swift's experiences resonate with the lived realities of diasporic subjects, transnational intellectuals, and culturally marginalized groups worldwide. Through the tensions in Robin's hybrid identity, Kuang illuminates how language operates at once as a technology of imperial governance and a potential site of subjective awakening, a kind of duality that deeply mediates individual identity formation and ethical political agency in a colonial and postcolonial world.

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