



Subaltern Resistance to Epistemic Violence and Patriarchal Oppression in R.F Kuang's *The Poppy War*

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-12 Revised: 2026-06-28 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: subaltern, epistemic violence, patriarchal silencing, postcolonial feminism, <i>The Poppy War</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11217 Corresponding Author: Latifa Maharani Gunawan latifamhrnig@students.unnes.ac.id English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Jawa Tengah	<i>This study analyzes how patriarchal structures and epistemic violence silenced and marginalized Rin as a subaltern woman in R.F. Kuang's novel The Poppy War. Her efforts to resist these systems reflect the subaltern voice through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminism. Even though postcolonial feminist scholars have begun paying attention to fantasy literature, Spivak's ideas have rarely been used to analyze this novel, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how fantasy can portray the silencing of marginalized women. This study applies a descriptive qualitative approach and close reading to explore how the novel brings ideas to life. The findings reveal that Rin is oppressed by the patriarchal structure and epistemic violence working together, not individually. Supporting Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern women cannot truly speak in their own right because the dominant system never allows their voice to be heard on their own terms, Rin's resistance is quietly reshaped by those in power. As one of the first studies to directly apply Spivak's framework to The Poppy War, this research strengthens postcolonial feminist studies by demonstrating that fantasy literature can serve as an unexpectedly strong space for understanding how marginalized women speak, resist, and are subsequently silenced.</i>

1. Introduction

The end of colonialism was never truly an ending but it stayed behind. Said (1978) argues that colonialism never simply a political or economic enterprise but a cultural one, producing lasting structures of knowledge and power that continue to define how the colonized are seen and how they see themselves. Women, in particular, suffer the greatest impact of these persistent hierarchies, caught between the burden of the colonial legacy and the demands of patriarchal structures within their own societies. Even after independence, the system that was supposed to be a place for women to seek help continued to operate under rules established during the colonial era.

A woman seeking justice, health care, or land rights often finds that the system was never designed with them in mind. The damage caused runs far deeper than it appears. One of the most long-lasting impacts is what Spivak (1988) refers to as epistemic violence. This occurs when colonizers destroyed local communities' ways of acquiring knowledge and replacing them with Western ideas, also teaching the colonized that their own knowledge is worthless. Epistemic violence is never simply a political issue but it is deeply rooted in gender dynamics. One of the most enduring of these structures is patriarchy, which colonialism actively strengthened by concentrating power, education, and resources in the hands of men.

Colonial rulers reinforced the patriarchal system by giving power, education, and resources only to men, leaving women without a voice either within the colonial system or in their own communities (Mohanty, 1988). As noted by Ashcroft et al. (1989), countries that were once occupied by colonial powers will be continue to shaped by their history of colonization. Postcolonial feminism argues that current gender inequality cannot be fully understood without recognizing how deeply that history has shaped it.

Patriarchal oppression in postcolonial societies does not exist in isolation. This condition is closely linked to the legacies of colonialism. Patriarchy and colonialism not only coexist but also reinforce one another, thereby making life more difficult for people, especially women. As a result, many women in postcolonial societies face limitations in accessing education and health services and also often excluded from important decision-making processes (Niwabiine et al., 2025; McEwan, 2001).

In postcolonial feminist studies, this condition is known as a double marginalization.' This term describes how women experience oppression from two directions simultaneously: result of the inheritance of colonialism and the patriarchal system. This concept aligns with the theory of the subaltern are social groups that are not only oppressed but also lack the space to voice their opinions or fight for their interests because they are systematically excluded from power structures.

Despite facing double marginalization, subaltern women do not simply accept the oppression they suffer. Resistance to patriarchal and epistemic violence appears alongside the efforts of marginalized women to confront the limitations they face by seeking recognition, voicing their views, and rejecting identities imposed by the dominant system. The relationship between the complexity of resistance and epistemic violence lies in the means of resistance, for instance, language, education, and institutional recognition, which are regulated and influenced by the prevailing system that created that violence.

However, resistance does not always take the form of physical rebellion but it can also involve education, self-expression, courageous decision-making, and the struggle to maintain their identity (Ahmed, 2019; Hussain, 2021). Regardless, patriarchal systems and epistemic violence continue to determine whose voices are worthy of being heard. Therefore, how they survive and resist is key to understanding women's position in postcolonial society. The conflict mentioned is addressed by R.F. Kuang's novel *The Poppy War* (2018).

R.F. Kuang's novel has attracted significant academic attention lately. Overall, existing studies on *The Poppy War* tend to fall into a few board categories. A number of scholars have approached the novel though an intersectional lens, examining how Rin's experiences of exclusion and violence are shaped by the overlapping pressures of gender, race, and class (Jannah et al., 2024; Junaid et al., 2025). Others have focused on the psychological and moral dimensions of the narrative, particularly how war and trauma reshape Rin's identity over time (Kehrif et al., 2024).

The novel has also been read as a form of historical fantasy that uses fiction to expose the brutal realities of imperialism (Marizka et al., 2024), while linguistic analyses have explored how its language reflects both conformity and subversion (Adara et al., 2025). More recently, Nimavat et al. (2025) have examined the symbolic role of the poppy flower as an emblem of colonial exploitation. While these studies are valuable, they share a common limitation: none of them engages directly with Spivak's postcolonial feminist framework, which means the question of how subalternity and epistemic violence operate within the novel remains largely unanswered.

In addition to *The Poppy War* novel, postcolonial feminist perspectives have been widely applied to literary works. Across the broader body of scholarship, a consistent pattern emerges: women in postcolonial literature are rarely oppressed by a single force. Hussain (2021) shows that they typically carry a double burden, shaped by both imperialism and gender hierarchies, while Putri (2023) connects the dynamic to class systems and educational structures rooted in colonial history.

Scholars such as Rani et al. (2024) and Ali et al. (2025) have documented the various strategies women use to resist these overlapping pressures, strategies that align closely with Spivak's theorization of subaltern agency. At the same time,

Wulandari and Parmin (2025) and Al Awdi (2025) argue that literary narratives can play an active role in restoring the voices and identities of indigenous women. In the Indonesian context specifically, Rahmayati (2025) and Ekaristi et al. (2025) highlight how women demonstrate resilience in the face of colonial legacies and patriarchal norms. What the body of work collectively suggests is that postcolonial feminist theory, and Spivak's framework in particular, remains one of the most powerful tools for reading how marginalized women navigate systems designed to silence them.

Regardless the growing body of research on *The Poppy War* and the widespread use of postcolonial feminist theory in literary studies, a clear and specific gap remains. Rin is a poor and a dark-skinned woman who is marginalized in her society. This contrasts with the characters in Kuang's more recent novel, *Babel* (2022), which it explores the colonial system from within elite institutions. Fantasy novels are generally analysed through the lens of escapism or hyperreality (Tolkien, 1947), but *The Poppy War* did not.

As the researcher have noted by a systematic review, most studies fail to grasp how Kuang integrates the traces of colonial violence and patriarchal oppression into the fictional world itself. Previous research also tended to position Rin either as a typical victim or as a heroic figure resistance, without fully examining the tension between the roles that centre in Spivak's theory. What makes this gap even more surprising is that, very few characters in postcolonial fiction fit Spivak's idea of the subaltern as naturally as Rin does.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyse subaltern resistance to patriarchy and epistemic violence in R.F. Kuang's novel *The Poppy War*. According to Darmawan et al. (2025), qualitative research relies on textual sources and employs qualitative analytical techniques to extract and interpret the meanings contained within the text. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to interpret meaning and examine in depth the social phenomena embedded in literary texts (Creswell, 2014). The object of this research is the first book of *The Poppy War* trilogy, published in 2018. The primary data consist of textual evidence in the form of dialogues, narrative descriptions, and key events related to patriarchal epistemic violence and subaltern resistance. Meanwhile, the secondary data include Spivak's theoretical writings, particularly the book *Can the Subaltern Speak* and relevant academic studies on the novel and postcolonial feminist theory.

The data were collected through three stages. First, reading, where the researcher read the entire novel systematically and gathered passages directly involving Rin experiencing or responding to oppression, focusing only on those that contained enough contextual detail to support interpretation through Spivak's framework, such as "She began to burn herself again. She found release in the

pain.... Success required sacrifice. Sacrifice meant pain. Pain meant success" (Kuang, 2018, p. 81). Second, classifying, where the gathered passages were grouped into three thematic categories: patriarchal structures, epistemic violence, and subaltern resistance. Third, coding, where each passage was labelled according to the specific aspect of Spivak's framework it reflected and cross-checked against the broader context of the novel.

3. Result

Rin's Body and Future as Commodities

From the novel's opening pages, Rin's existence within the Fang household is already constructed entirely within a transactional framework. She is handed over as part of an opium trade deal, and is later steered toward marriage for the sake of her family's economic interests.

"...one foster orphan in exchange for a near monopoly over Tikany's black market in opium." (Kuang, 2018, p. 12)

In a single narrative line, Rin's body is rendered equivalent in value to a trade commodity. Spivak (1988) explains that women positioned as poor, dark-skinned, and female experience oppression across three interlocking layers such as, class, race, and gender not as a single, independent disadvantage, but as a system that mutually reinforces itself.

The three-layer framework becomes the key to reading why Rin never has room to voice her own consent or objection regarding her fate. Her poverty renders her "available" to be exchanged. Her provincial origins reduce her value in a marriage market that prizes northern lineage and her gender makes marriage rather than education or employment but the only path considered legitimate for determining her future. These three layers do not operate in succession, but simultaneously. Tyagi (2014) describes the condition as "double colonization," a term that captures how postcolonial women are subjugated simultaneously as colonized subjects and as women, such that their colonized male counterparts far from being allies become additional agents of their oppression within nationalist and patriarchal structures alike.

It is true that there is a possibility of interpreting this arrangement as a reflection of broader cultural norms, rather than as an act of intentional cruelty. The Fang family itself operates within a system that has normalized the treatment of daughter as exchangeable assets.

However, this interpretation actually strengthens, rather than weakens, Spivak's argument: if individual cruelty is not the point, then the structural impact of Rin's silencing is actually deeper, because there is no single perpetrator to blame or accountable. There is only a system that operates without having to listen to Rin

at all. This is what Spivak (1988) means when she says that subaltern cannot speak, not because they lack a mouth or a mind but because the entire structure surrounding them was never designed to accept their voice as something relevant to be heard.

The silencing that follows from the commodification becomes explicit when Rin is instructed on how to conduct herself once she is married.

"...become his mute little household slave until he trusts you. But once he does? You start plying him with opium." (Kuang, 2018, p. 18)

The use of the word "mute" reflects what Spivak (1988) describes more abstractly regarding how the ideological construction of gender continues to sustain male dominance.

What makes this moment theoretically dangerous is that Rin is not merely asked to be silent for a moment, but is trained to make silence a long-term survival strategy, a role she must inhabit, not a temporary restriction she can shed once circumstances change. It means the silencing imposed on Rin does not come from outside alone, but is internalized as a skill she herself must master for her own survival. One could read the woman who offers the advice as a fellow survivor sharing practical wisdom within an unjust system a form of female solidarity rather than complicity.

However, this reading does not resolve the core issue, if even a fellow woman, herself a victim of the same system, becomes the primary conduit for a logic of silencing, then that is the strongest possible evidence that the system has normalized women's silence so deeply that the silencing itself no longer feels like oppression, but like good advice. This is what Spivak means when she says the subaltern cannot speak, not only because the dominant party does not listen, but because the mechanism of silencing has already been transmitted and reproduced from within the subaltern community itself, making any way out of that silence almost unimaginable.

This finding aligns with Hussain (2021), who observes that women in postcolonial literary texts are frequently required to perform compliance as a precondition before being granted autonomy, a precondition that, in practice, rarely actually results in that autonomy.

The Delegitimization of Rin's Ambitions and Knowledge

In addition to the patriarchal silencing of her body and future, Rin also faces an equally powerful form of marginalization, which is the systemic rejection of the ambitions and knowledge she brings from her community.

"The Keju was a purportedly meritocratic institution, but only the wealthy class ever had the money to afford the tutors their children needed to actually pass." (Kuang, 2018, p. 15)

The word "purportedly" in this narrative is not just a stylistic choice. It shows the difference between the system's claim that everyone is treated fairly and the reality that social class still shapes people's opportunities. Spivak (1988) explains that colonial power often works by creating the image that the system is fair, while people who are marginalized continue to be treated as "the Other". In Rin's case, the system does not stop her from succeeding. Instead, it makes her believe that success or failure depends only on individual ability.

Because of this, if Rin fails, it is seen as her own weakness instead of the result of an unfair system. This kind of oppression is difficult to fight because there are no clear rules or people to blame. The system hides behind the idea of meritocracy. As a result, Rin finds it difficult to question the system. It is not because she does not want to speak, but because the system has already shaped the way people think about fairness and success.

This institutional delegitimization extends from Rin's class position to her cultural and spiritual knowledge upon her arrival at Sinegard.

"They still believe in shamans down in Tikany?" Rin's cheeks felt hot..." (Kuang, 2018, p. 69)

Spivak (1988) explains how the knowledge systems of colonized peoples are reduced to the naive and placed far beneath what is called scientific. The flush on Rin's cheeks is a visual marker of a far deeper and invisible process. The moment she begins to internalize the idea that her own knowledge and origins are inferior. This is the subtlest and most dangerous form of silencing, because it does not come from an external prohibition, but from the planting of shame toward her own knowledge before she even has the chance to articulate it as something legitimate. Tyagi (2014) argues that postcolonial women are not only oppressed by colonial power structures but are also silenced by the very discourses that claim to represent them, whether nationalist or Western feminist, each of which imposes its own framework onto colonized women's identities while rendering their specific cultural and epistemic positions invisible.

Within Spivak's framework, this is the core of the subaltern's inability to speak, not the absence of words, but the absence of an epistemic framework that would allow those words to be heard as knowledge, rather than as superstition. The long-term implications of this epistemic violence for Rin's subaltern identity will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Hidden Survival, Self-Sacrifice, and the Cost of Power

Rin's resistance to the systems that marginalize her is rarely visible or triumphant, as resistance is often imagined. More often, it takes the form of self-directed sacrifice, performed privately and recognized by no one but herself.

"She began to burn herself again. She found release in the pain.... Success required sacrifice. Sacrifice meant pain. Pain meant success." (Kuang, 2018, p. 81)

Spivak (1988) argues that for the subaltern woman's voice to be heard, the postcolonial subject must systematically relinquish the feminine privilege she holds, meaning that recognition within the dominant system is never given for free, but must be "paid for" through a process that reshapes the subject according to standards she never set for herself.

The finding shows that Rin's choice to remain within an institution never designed to accept someone like her is not freedom, but another kind of commodification she enacts upon herself. The price of the choice is paid in full upon her own body, privately, in a place that never needs to be witnessed or acknowledged by the institution itself, so that even her greatest sacrifice produces not a single sentence that can be heard by the system oppressing her.

Rin's own use of the word "trade-off" to describe her pain is not a stylistic coincidence; it is textual evidence that Rin has internalized the very same transactional logic that once sold her body as a marital commodity now she trades her own pain for the right to remain at Sinegard, wrapping it in the language of personal choice. Tyagi (2014) notes that postcolonial women are frequently imprisoned within traditional stereotypes that conflate their bodies with collective or institutional value, a process that strips them of genuine agency while simultaneously presenting their compliance as a matter of personal choice rather than structural necessity.

This is the most critical point in Spivak's argument: Rin's resistance does not escape the logic of commodification that shaped her childhood, but reproduces it within her own body, such that Rin simultaneously becomes both the one who pays and the one who is paid. There is no moment here in which Rin's voice truly breaks free from the value system that oppresses her there is only a shift of position within that same system. This finding extends the observation of Rani et al. (2024) that subaltern women's strategies of resistance are often shaped by the very value system they resist, such that resistance and complicity are not always opposites, but can coexist within a single act.

The most powerful and theoretically complex moment of resistance in the findings occurs when Rin uses the Phoenix's shamanic power the very knowledge that was mocked as primitive in the Sinegard classroom to destroy the island of Mugen.

"They aren't people. They're animals. I want you to make them burn. Every last one... I can give you worship. I can give you an unending flow of blood...." (Kuang, 2018, pp. 412–413)

Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern cannot speak in any simple sense, not because she lacks a voice, but because the dominant system has no space to receive that voice as something meaningful.

On the surface, this moment might appear to be a triumph: knowledge once dismissed is now proven real and forces the dominant system to acknowledge it. But it is precisely at this point that Spivak's argument appears sharpest. Rin's power is never truly "heard" as self-expression or as a legitimate political claim; it is immediately consumed, absorbed, and reframed by the ruling authority, whether as a weapon to be controlled, a threat to be wary of, or a tool to be exploited for the war effort.

None of these framings give Rin room to become a subject who speaks on her own behalf; she remains an object, now an object of feared power rather than an object of pity, but an object nonetheless. It is precisely at this most spectacular moment of Rin's action that Spivak's thesis is most consistently proven: the greater the force Rin unleashes in order to be considered real, the clearer it becomes that the system around her was never designed to receive her as a speaking subject only as a force to be managed.

Across all three themes, one consistent pattern emerges: Rin's silencing is not enforced through a single visible act of violence, but is produced gradually through the interaction of patriarchal structures and epistemic violence, both of which present themselves as natural rather than oppressive. These findings affirm that Spivak's framework remains relevant, indeed necessary, for reading Rin: not a single moment in this novel, whether in the silencing of her body, the delegitimization of her knowledge, or her greatest sacrifice and power manages to escape the logic that the subaltern, however powerfully she acts, still has no room to be truly heard on her own terms.

4. Discussion

Rin's marginalization is produced by patriarchal and epistemic violence working together rather than separately. At the patriarchal level, her body and future are treated as economic assets that belong to others from the very beginning of the novel. It describes double colonization as the condition where postcolonial women are oppressed simultaneously by both colonial and patriarchal systems, so that gender cannot be understood apart from class and racial positioning. In Rin's case, it is precisely the combination of her poverty, her provincial origins, and her gender that places her in a position where her silence appears inevitable rather than imposed.

This finding aligns closely with Hussain (2021) and Putri (2023), both of whom demonstrate that women in postcolonial literary contexts are rarely silenced by a single system but by the way multiple structures such as, class, gender, and colonial legacy. The analysis of *The Poppy War* adds to existing scholarship is a particularly clear illustration of how that normalization works at the most intimate level: it is delivered not by an oppressor but by another woman, framed not as control but as practical wisdom.

In addition to Spivak, these findings are also consistent with Hooks's (1984) concept of the interrelated nature of racial, gender, and class oppression, which also argues that these systems cannot be understood individually. While Spivak focuses on the structural impossibility of the subaltern's voice, Hooks directs attention to the everyday relationships that marginalized women use to negotiate and sometimes disrupt these structures. Viewing Rin through both of these lenses gives a more complete picture. Spivak explains why her resistance is always limited, while Hooks helps explain the moments in which Rin's choices retain real meaning despite those limitations. Rather than contradicting Spivak's framework, this interpretation builds on it by recognizing that subaltern women can still show agency, even within systems that are designed to suppress them.

The findings also speak to a broader question about the role of fantasy literature in postcolonial feminist scholarship. Marizka et al. (2024) argue that *The Poppy War* uses the conventions of historical fantasy to expose the realities of imperialism, and the present findings support and extend this claim. The novel does not simply reflect postcolonial conditions but it theorizes them, embedding Spivak's central arguments about subalternity and epistemic violence into the texture of its narrative in ways that are accessible to a broad readership.

This suggests that fantasy literature deserves more serious attention as a site of postcolonial feminist discourse, not despite its fictional framing but because of it. Fiction allows authors to isolate and dramatize structural conditions such as, the commodification of women's bodies, the institutional dismissal of indigenous knowledge, the self-destructive cost of resistance in ways that are often harder to achieve in purely theoretical or historical writing. *The Poppy War* functions less as an illustration of Spivak's ideas and more as an independent argument about the conditions under which subaltern women live, resist, and are silenced.

The findings on both research questions point to a consistent pattern. Rin can act, and her actions carry real consequences in the novel's world. However, she remains unable to be heard or recognized as a speaking subject in her own right. Her silence is presented as natural, her knowledge is dismissed as inferior, her resistance is paid for with her own body, and even her greatest act of power is immediately absorbed and reinterpreted by those who hold institutional authority.

The condition Rin embodies is precisely what Spivak's (1988) framework was built to describe, and the findings from *The Poppy War* confirm that the condition is not unique to any historical moment but continues to operate wherever

subaltern women are placed at the intersection of patriarchal and epistemic systems of domination. For feminist literary criticism more broadly, this study suggests that the question is not simply whether marginalized women speak in literature, but whether the systems represented in that literature and in the real world are ever truly built to listen.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how patriarchal structures and epistemic violence silence and marginalize Rin as a subaltern woman, and how her resistance reflects the subaltern voice through Spivak's postcolonial feminist perspective. The results show that Rin is silenced through a combination of patriarchal and epistemic violence, making her marginalized position appear natural and inevitable, when in fact it is shaped by an oppressive system. Although Rin tries to resist, her resistance is often carried out quietly, to her own disadvantage, or is ultimately suppressed by those in power. The findings support Spivak's view that subaltern women cannot truly speak freely.

In addition to addressing the research question, this study also demonstrates that modern fantasy literature serves not only as entertainment but also as a space to showcase the experience of women who have long been silenced and marginalized. *The Poppy War* proves that fantasy novels can be used to critique colonialism and various forms of oppression that are often invisible in everyday life. This study focuses only on the first book of *The Poppy War* trilogy and employs a single theoretical framework; therefore, its findings cannot yet fully capture the overall character development of Rin or other characters. Further research could thus examine the next two books in the trilogy or adopt other feminist or postcolonial perspectives to broaden our understanding of the representation of subaltern women in modern fantasy literature.

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