Nonpersons in Nikan: Violence & Vengeance in R.F. Kuang's The Poppy War

Nonpersons in Nikan: Violence & Vengeance in R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War*

by

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Abstract

Empire building and the consequences of colonization are pervasive in R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* (2018); however, the complicated relationship between patriarchy and personhood in the novel is far more subtle and yet to be explored. As the novel's protagonist Fang Runin (Rin) attempts to navigate Nikan's political landscape, her superiors violently revoke her agency as they commandeer her shamanistic powers to commune with a powerful god as a means of furthering their military goals and defending the nation. This paper conveys how Kuang's novel emphasizes the intimate relationship between patriarchal oppression and the characterization of people as nonpersons.

Rin's unique ability to commune with a god determines her irreplaceable value for the Nikan government while simultaneously "othering" her, which I argue establishes her status as a nonperson who is only necessary for as long as she is useful. Complicating Rin's status as a nonperson is her willingness to obey the orders of her superiors as they recognize and praise her impressive abilities; however, this recognition is manipulative and accompanied by violence. Pulling from Imani Perry's exploration of personhood in patriarchal structures can expose how those who fall outside of patriarchy's normative standards are effectively oppressed and "othered," inextricably linking violence to the creation of nonpersons. Through this link, I examine how the use of violence against Rin both in public and in private spaces informs the development of Rin's character as a nonperson, as well as her increasingly violent resistance to oppression as the novel unfolds. This essay articulates that the patriarchal power utilized within Nikan can be wielded to destroy personhood and ultimately alter the future of the nation. It concludes by detailing the destructive consequences of cultivating a nation dependent on nonpersonhood.

Introduction

The Poppy War series, a grimdark historical-fantasy trilogy by R.F. Kuang, provides an intimate look at the consequences of patriarchal dominance while simultaneously exploring ways to respond to oppressive societal control. These themes are overt and dictate the arc of each of the characters through the narrative. Consisting of *The Poppy War* (2018), *The Dragon Republic* (2019), and *The Burning God* (2020), the series follows Fang Runin (Rin) as she navigates the fictional country of Nikan, based on twentieth-century China, and its tumultuous political landscape. At the start of the trilogy, Rin is seen as a useless body from Nikan's southern provinces whose dark skin, impoverished status, and meager education make her a disposable object. Still, when her powers as a shaman manifest, those in power become invested in what her violent abilities might offer to them. In this thesis, I will contend that Rin moves through Nikara society as a nonperson, an identity status conceptualized by Imani Perry. Patriarchal societies, according to Perry, are made up of a hierarchical system of subjects designated either as patriarchs, lieges, or those "outside legal recognition" known as "nonpersons" (Perry 21). Because of her many intersectional marginalized identities, including her socioeconomic status, gender, skin color, and ethnicity, Nikan's ruling figures refuse to recognize Rin as a person with rights, a fact that forces her to endure violent oppression. This exploration of Nikan's patriarchal structure and Rin's nonpersonhood will demonstrate how Nikan's patriarchal hierarchy creates nonpersons. Further, I will elucidate how living through nonpersonhood, like Rin does, can forge the desire to dominate others, effectively claiming personhood while designating others as nonpersons, and perpetuating a system of oppressive, patriarchal violence. With this, it becomes clear that the use of violence by both oppressor and survivor becomes a cyclical practice that insists upon the subjugation of others.

In interviews, Kuang has divulged the horrific inspiration for *The Poppy War*, referencing her anger at the Nanjing Massacre, an event where the Japanese military raided the Chinese city of Nanjing in the 1930s in a genocidal act (Yu). Articulating that she, as a Chinese-American, had only learned about the Nanjing Massacre while in college, Kuang reveals the silencing of Eastern histories of trauma and violence in Western education systems (Kuang qtd. in Kwok). The immensity of the Nanjing Massacre fails to register in Western narratives because it simply does not center the West's powerhouses, a fact Kuang finds appalling. Kuang likewise expresses that as a genre, fantasy has tools that provide insights into society through a "refracting prism that allows you to spotlight certain issues," insinuating that her own work intentionally works to provoke, dissect, and engage with important issues, such as the Nanjing Massacre (Kuang qtd. in Kwok). As a Chinese-American author, Kuang's work provides a perspective from the Chinese diaspora in the United States that considers the historical legacy and relationship between China, its aggressors, and the West that actively decenters Western voices. Kuang, in hoping to resist this Western historical narrative, argues:

> If narrative can be used for state agendas, it can also be used for counter-histories. I'm not sure about what a future that proceeds from atrocities looks like because I think we have so few examples of such success, but it probably includes local, community, and bottom-up stories and histories. (Adeniyi & Kuang 124)

Kuang resists the manipulation of memory and history as she writes her own fantastical counter-history of the Nanjing Massacre and surrounding war that refuses to shy away from its harrowing violence.

With Kuang's historical investments at the forefront of many of her interviews, scholars have responded in kind, cultivating a scholarly conversation centering postcolonial theory, historical legacy, and methods of violence in Kuang's *The Poppy War*. Iris Bosma elucidates the

value of studying Kuang's novel as a postcolonial text that works to engage readers with the "critical impacts of war, colonialism, and racial violence" (Bosma 16). For Bosma, Kuang's work acts as a pedagogical tool deeply needed in Western education. Relatedly, Cara Healey, seemingly responding directly to Kuang's historical inspirations, considers how Kuang utilizes a hybrid model of speculative fiction, fusing American and Chinese speculative fiction conventions to reimagine Chinese history and contest the West's control of historical narratives (Healey 38). Reading *The Poppy War* through Kuang's investment to decenter Western voices and create new historical models is certainly valuable, and worth discussing, yet I also believe we can read Kuang's text as a theoretical intervention that dissects operations of power and subjugation. With a theoretical, rather than historical, context, the novel becomes more broadly applicable to structures of power around the globe. By doing so, I am to highlight an inclusive framework we need in the face of hostile Trumpism and rising conservatism.

Other scholars have chosen to prioritize Rin's character, focusing instead on identity, autonomy, and violence in a step away from larger historical contexts. Sifani Syarifatul Jannah, Istiadah, and Noornajihan Jaafar highlight the consistent oppression Rin faces and contend that her intersectional identities compound the virulent abuse she endures (Jannah, et al. 131). Their critical attention to Rin as a human with multiple marginalized identities serves to importantly acknowledge the complexity of identity in Kuang's novel in a move I find inspirational for my own work as I explore Rin's subjugation as a nonperson with intersectional identities. Kassondra on KEEPITKASSUAL posits Rin as filling the role of anti-hero, while Caroline Hannum addresses the morally grey nature of her character (KEEPITKASSUAL; Hannum 1). These critical considerations of Rin's heroism, or lack thereof, prompts me to consider the structures that push Rin to act outside of traditional fantastical heroism. Rather than merely condemning

the un-heroic violence Rin enacts, it is necessary to consider the structures of power that encourage marginalized individuals in the novel to react, and react with violence.

In order to contribute to the current scholarly conversation surrounding Kuang's *The Poppy War*, I turn to Imani Perry's *Vexy Thing* (2018), which provides valuable insight into the power imbalances between oppressor and oppressed. While Kuang's novel takes place in a Chinese-inspired fantastical country, we can recognize structures of power in Nikan as reminiscent of Western patriarchies. Perry's text provides a useful dissection of patriarchy's moving parts in which she articulates that patriarchal structures rely on "sovereignty, property, and personhood," in order to operate (Perry 21). With a sovereign power at its head, property to own and divy up, and persons to control, patriarchal societies utilize hierarchy to sustain power. Personhood "remains more exclusive" than "the fact of being a human being," meaning not all humans are recognized as persons, and therefore can be categorized as nonpersons, or objects to be used (Perry 22). Personhood is:

> *necessary* for a person to have the capacity to exercise rights and obligations under the law. The right to own property; to enter into and be bound by, and to enforce, contracts; to participate politically; and to maintain physical integrity or self-protection are all dependent on this basic form of political recognition. (Perry 22, my emphasis)

Without legal recognition, a human cannot protect or defend themselves from oppressive control, and instead must endure suffering at the hands of sovereigns and their persons.

Placing Kuang's novel in conversation with Perry's theoretical conceptions, I contend that Rin's place in Nikara society aligns with Perry's formulation of the nonperson. As the novel progresses, Rin becomes increasingly jaded with the Nikan hierarchy of power, eventually realizing that, regardless of her efforts, she will never earn recognition, or achieve personhood within Nikara's hierarchy. Consequently, Rin chooses a path of destruction, maiming others in

the process. Rin's lifelong violent, oppressive subjugation results in an implantation of desire to dominate others. She openly strives for power and, by the end of the novel, learns to successfully mimic patriarchal violence in an act of genocide that she belives will award her newfound, uncontested power. This thesis will address the necessary building blocks, sovereignty, property, and personhood, that uphold patriarchal structures of power, and utilize them to identify the patriarchal strategies implemented by the Nikan government. The first section will explore the structures of power in Kuang's text through Perry's theoretical work regarding sovereignty and property. Building on the first section, the second movement will turn to Rin's status as a nonperson in Nikan, and her willingness to endure violence in her desire for power. The final section will contend that patriarchal structures of power instigate seemingly inescapable cycles of violence, resulting in the harrowing destruction of entire communities, and emphasizing that there "is therefore a cyclical loop to the production of patriarchy in the modern period," which is "created and ultimately maintained through violence" (Perry 41, 19). For us to move toward a future without violent cycles of power, we must recognize our own desires for power and work to separate these desires from patriarchal cycles and expectations of violence.

Structures of Power in *The Poppy War*

The patriarchal structure of Kuang's Nikara society relies on the absolute power of the sovereign, Empress Su Daji, the power of the 'persons,' seen in the Warlords and Masters, and assistance of the helpmates, such as Rin's Auntie Fang. Like Perry, I am invested in the "power of legal words–to distribute, to punish, to kill, to reward–and the clarity of the constructedness of all juridical decision making," because these decisions continuously contrive a clear distinction between persons and nonpersons (Perry 16). Nonpersonhood, or the refusal to recognize a person legally, does not exist naturally. Those in power ceaselessly "other" or alienate marginalized

communities in order to maintain their domination. This section will work through the use of violent power within Nikan's patriarchal hierarchy beginning at the top with Empress Su Daji, and landing at the bottom to examine Rin's Auntie Fang in their impoverished Rooster Province. Each of these hierarchical levels house patriarchal violence, physical and emotional, ultimately impacting the development of Rin's character and her use of violence by the end of the novel.

The government Kuang describes in *The Poppy War* relies on strict hierarchical structures of power that posit some communities as having more value than others. As mentioned previously, this hierarchical system places the Empress at the top, where she weaponizes her control over others by upholding a patriarchal system that grants Warlords and Masters as persons with legal rights with the ability to exert their own power over others. In *The Poppy War*, legal recognition and power comes with the control of land. For the Warlords, this coincides with their authority over an entire province of Nikan, while the Masters beget personhood through their control of academy spaces, determining how Nikara youth become educated and useful. Because the Empress has the "unlimited power to distribute public land to private parties," personhood becomes undeniably tied to property (Perry 42). While those with recognized personhood house a degree of power and frequently utilize it to further the goals of the Empress, they ultimately always fall subject to the Empress. As the sovereign of Nikan's patriarchy, the Empress has the unparalleled power to give and take away property, personhood, and even life, thus creating a "foundational architecture for gender domination" (Perry 9).

With a female sovereign at the head of Nikan's patriarchal structure, we have to first consider how women support and perpetuate patriarchal ideals. In an analysis of Queen Elizabeth's role as a female sovereign of British patriarchy, Perry writes:

> Queen Elizabeth, as the sovereign in this venture, was an exception to the rules of gender. In one body she was both feminine ideal and an agent of patriarchy…And while she was expected to marry and produce an heir, she did not. A husband would have reduced her power…She became analogous to the Virgin Mary, though in deed relative to the conquered she was more like Pontius Pilate. She was a double: imperial patriarch and her helpmate in one. (Perry 15)

For Perry, Queen Elizabeth's female gender does not negate the patriarchal structure of the British Empire. Instead, she actively serves as both feminine ideal that British women aim to emulate and also supreme ruler, like Roman Emperor Pontius Pilate, with the authoritarian power to subjugate and end lives. Working against gendered expectations of reproduction, Queen Elizabeth sets herself apart from other women, allowing her to maintain her power and uphold British patriarchy. Further, bell hooks similarly contends that maternal figures often support the patriarchy by teaching their children patriarchal beliefs, affirming that women often can and do contribute to the maintenance of the patriarchy (hooks 3). Coupled, Perry and hooks provide a useful framing in which Kuang's female sovereign can be understood. The Empress, despite her gender, dominates all others with unquestioned authority, in a move that aligns with patriarchal ethos.

Empress Su Daji holds a revered status with a strong public reputation in *The Poppy War*, allowing us to consider the immense degree of power held by patriarchal sovereigns. While Kuang does not include her presence on the page very often in this first book, her power seeps through the other characters, illustrating her ability to influence the Nikara people. Consequently, Kuang's readers only understand the Empress through the public's opinion of her. She exists primarily as a symbol of power, one that Rin and the novel's audience wish to know more about, yet, despite her unknowability, love anyway. Rin first sees the Empress when she attends the Summer Festival with Kitay, where the Nikara people celebrate the country and its prominent

figures. The Summer Festival includes a parade where the Empress and the most powerful families in the city parade through the streets, illustrating the presence of Nikara patriotism that openly loves and supports the Empress. During the parade Rin notices that "the crowd around her began screaming…the Empress had arrived," a response that elucidates the Empress's celebrity-like power, a power that grips the Nikara subjects (Kuang 179). Despite growing up in the most destitute province in Nikan and experiencing harrowing poverty, drug epidemics, and racism from the Sinegardians, Rin fails to connect her troubled upbringing to the Empress's authority, instead feeling an overwhelming sense of devotion. Rin "Would have torn apart kingdoms for this woman. She would have followed her to the gates of hell and back. This was her ruler. This was whom she was meant to serve" (Kuang 180). Kuang centers Rin's adoration of the Empress serves to exemplify the Empress's undeniable charisma and the power she has cultivated in crafting herself as a national symbol of Nikan. While the Empress's influence alone does not confirm the presence of a patriarchal structure in *The Poppy War*, her immense popularity as a symbol, one that is paraded around at festivals to evoke community support, allows her to further enact goals that require uncontested submission from her subjects.

While the Empress wields efficacious power and influence over the Nikan population through her reputation as a revered symbol of the country, she likewise asserts power over others through violence directly when necessary. Her status as the supreme leader of Nikan grants her the power to delegate violent acts to those below her, yet Kuang provides her readers with a glimpse of Empress Su Daji's own violent capabilities. At the start of Part II of the novel, Kuang brings us to the only scene not following Rin's character directly. This scene follows Tyr, the leader of the Cike, a group of Shaman assassins who work for the Empress, as he comes face to face with the Empress during one of his assignments (Kuang 220). When he notices the Empress

on the schooner, Tyr's instinctually wants to act and "kill the soldiers before they could hurt the Empress," revealing his devotion to her, a devotion that parallels Rin's (Kuang 223). Shockingly, the Empress attacks her devoted subject Tyr with hypnosis, her fangs, and poison, seemingly without cause. Tyr, confused at the betrayal of his ruler, questions her motives and the following conversation ensures:

> "Prey do not question the motives of the predator," hissed the thing that was not Su Daji. "The dead do not question the living. Mortals do not challenge the gods."
> "I killed for you," Tyr said. "I would have done anything for you."
> "I know," she said, and stroked his face. She spoke with a casual sorrow, and for an instant she sounded like the Empress again. The colors dimmed. "You were fools." (Kuang 225)

This conversation between the Empress and one of her most devoted subjects reveals the immensity of the sovereign's power and why she has the ability to captivate her subjects so thoroughly. Tyr immediately notices that the actions of the Empress and her voice do not align with the Empress he knows, wondering if something has overtaken her. This scene provides the first indication that the Empress is a shaman, yet hides it effectively from others. Shamans in Kuang's novel commune with one God and are able to utilize the God's power to achieve their goals; however, the Gods are violent and cruel. The Empress literally wields the violent power of the Gods in order to maintain her untouchable power of Nikan. Importantly, the Empress intelligently chooses when to commune with her God, and does so only when necessary. Tyr, as a shaman, likewise has the power of a God, so therefore the Empress must enact her own violence in order to successfully overpower him. Tyr does not fight back against the Empress and her violent onslaught, signifying that despite the capacity of his magic, he will not take arms against his sovereign. His place in the Nikara hierarchy remains rigid, even when the Empress betrays him, emotionally and physically. As the sovereign, the Empress exists outside of legal restriction,

safeguarding her ability to violently dominate others. The Empress's willingness to kill a commander of her military in order to further her own goals affirms that patriarchy's sovereigns possess the incontestable power to declare life or death for anyone, with or without reason.

Part of the Empress's power includes her right to legally recognize and grant power to members of her nation, creating a level of hierarchy centered around personhood. Just below her on the hierarchical ladder sit the twelve Warlords and the Masters of Sinegard Academy. Despite the Empress's place as a female sovereign, she adheres to patriarchal expectations surrounding power by delegating influential roles to Nikara men through ownership of property. Expanding the definition of personhood, Perry states:

> Legal personhood was a theoretical concept that was executed in both territory and flesh. It covered vast as well as small tracts of land. The privately owned home, for instance, was a zone of private dominion, where the patriarch held authority over his family and possessions. But the public sphere, "the commons" which are often described historically as part of the "masculine realm," also provided a structure whereby those who were legal persons were set against those who were not. (Perry 26)

Perry asserts that legal personhood grants the authority to control, often through ownership of property. In these spaces given to them by the sovereign, persons have the ability to dominate anyone outside the realm of personhood. In *The Poppy War,* Nikan's Warlords and Academy Masters possess tracts of land, entire provinces for the Warlords, and academy spaces for the Masters (Kuang 17, 84). Having control of these spaces allows each Warlord and Master to dictate the happenings of the space. Meaning, the Warlords, as legally recognized provincial rulers, and the Masters, as legally recognized educators and military commanders, determine who comes, who goes, and who suffers in the process.

Master Jun, Combat Master at Sinegard Academy, intentionally abuses his power as he harshly marginalizes Rin, and purposefully alienates her from her peers. At Sinegard, Rin, as a

dark-skinned, Southern woman, faces more barriers to learning than the other students, who are primarily from the Northern Nikara provinces, have light-skin, and have prepared for the Academy their entire lives. Master Jun emphasizes the imbalance in privilege between Rin and her peers consistently, criticizing, berating, and punishing Rin more than the others. After a physical fight breaks out between Rin and Nezha in the middle of combat class, Master Jun separates the rivals and then leads Rin out to lecture her. With venom Master Jun seethes, "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," emphasizing that he believes for a 'southerner', taking and passing the Keju is simply not enough to prove her worth (Kuang 84). Because of her background and provincial origin, Rin has to do more than anyone else to prove her worth. To Master Jun, Rin is not a person to be recognized, but, instead, a stereotype to berate and antagonize. As a 'southerner' her hard work cannot make up for Master Jun's belief in her inferiority. Master Jun ensures that Rin undoubtedly knows of the fact of her inferiority, expressing that she is "peasant trash" (Kuang 84). To Master Jun, Rin holds and will never hold any value. He equates her to trash, and because of his legally recognized power, Rin cannot contest his condemnation.

As Master Jun reduces Rin to the menial value of her home province, he also invokes his power as Master to further revoke Rin's access to education and any potential of increasing her own personal power. In the same conversation, Master Jun admits he does not have the power to expel Rin, but that "as Combat Master [he] can do this: From now you are banned from the practice facilities" – barring her from participating in combat class with the other Sinegard students (Kuang 84). At a military academy such as Sinegard it is essential that students practice and improve upon their combat skills, and, without access to the proper training facilities, Master

Jun attempts to ensure Rin's failure at successfully assimilating into Sinegardian culture. He creates and enforces further barriers for Rin that prohibit her from pursuing her goals. The control over land, property, or area in any way subsists as a crucial element of patriarchal structures of power, and those men who can manipulate the accessibility of an area become larger and more influential (Perry 43). Much like the Warlords who control large areas of the country, the control of an area of the academy signifies a Master's power. Rin, as a student and nonperson, cannot defy Master Jun's orders, and consequently suffers unfairly.

The situation becomes even more unfair when Rin learns that Nezha had only received a "talking to" from Master Jun, and still attends combat class and practices on the training grounds, revealing the inequity of their punishments. Rin rages at this revelation. Master Jun's blatant use of power to target her forces her to face the reality of her place at Sinegard. Before coming to Sinegard she had imagined a new beginning for herself as a student with privilege and endless possibilities, but after her encounter with Master Jun, Rin realizes the innate nature of her nonpersonhood in Nikara society. Rin surmises "it was so clear why. Nezha was a Sinegardian noble, the son of a Warlord, and she was a country girl with no connections and no status," voicing the crushing and seemingly unbreaking imbalance between her and her northern peers (Kuang 86) . Master Jun's manipulation of his status at the academy overtly alienates Rin, cementing her status as a nonperson and emphasizing the impossibility of breaking down barriers to higher levels of power for those at the bottom of the Nikan hierarchy.

Kuang continues to depict the exclusivity and power of personhood as we examine the lowest level of Nikara society: rural families in the southern provinces. The Empress, the Warlords, and the Masters of Academies all have power over the Nikara citizens, regardless of which province they come from. Much like the Warlords and Masters are devoid of power in

relation to the Empress, Nikara citizens lack power and personhood in relation to the Empress, the Warlords, *and* the Masters. Much like the mid-level Nikara figures, regular citizens can embody moments of power in their family units, continuing the patriarchal system even within the private home. The patriarchy continues down to the lowest level of Nikara society, maintaining unequal structures that posit fathers or other male figures above women and children. Yet, Kuang further complicates these familial dynamics with women such as Rin's Auntie Fang who simultaneously resist and uphold patriarchy.

The Poppy War begins with Rin in Tikany with her adopted family: Uncle Fang, Auntie Fang, and her younger cousin Kesegi. The Fangs traded opium and ran a small shop in their rural Tikany town, and only adopted Rin because of a mandate instated by the Empress that required all families with less than three children to do so. With this family dynamic, Rin suffered emotional and physical abuse, and, as a young girl, did not have the ability to fight back. The Fangs controlled Rin and even worked to manipulate her future for their own benefit. The severity of this control and the true powerlessness of Rin's situation comes to light when Auntie Fang hires a matchmaker to arrange a marriage between Rin and a Tikany man. The marriage would benefit the Fangs and propel Rin into a wealthy household, yet, the man was horrifyingly "twice divorced and three times her age" (Kuang 6). Forcefully entering Rin into a marriage contract puts her into "a relation of subjection to [her] husband," promising that Rin's utter lack of agency will continue indefinitely (Perry 21). As a nonperson in the Fang household, the marriage does not require or even consider Rin's consent of the match, and instead prioritizes the desires of her foster parents, both of whom become persons within the walls of the home because of their ability to control Rin as if she were their property.

Auntie Fang, in wanting to arrange a forced marriage for Rin, upholds Nikan's patriarchy, yet she also surprisingly makes an effort to teach Rin how to enact her own small resistance to her future husband's power. Much like Rin is supposed to, Auntie Fang married young, wedding Uncle Fang at a young age in an arranged marriage. Despite also enduring an unwanted union, Auntie Fang accepts the reality of her situation as a woman, and nonperson, in Nikan. In an attempt to subdue Rin she states "Every other girl in this village will get married by her sixteenth birthday. Do you think you're so much better than them?" accentuating the normalcy of forcing young girls to marry older men (Kuang 14). In questioning if Rin thinks she's "so much better" than the other village girls, Auntie Fang also insinuates that Rin should have to suffer this rite of passage just like everyone else. Rather than questioning the tradition itself, Auntie Fang questions Rin's reluctance, and accepts, supports, and maintains the system despite her own negative experiences. However, Auntie Fang does give Rin advice on how to survive her arranged marriage and steal back some agency from her husband, providing us a look at how she earned power in the private household. She advises Rin to:

> become his mute little household slave until he trusts you. But once he does? You start plying him with opium–just a little bit at first, though I doubt he's never smoked opium before. Then you give him more and more every day…until he is fully dependent on it, and on you. Let it destroy his body and mind. You'll be more or less married to a breathing corpse, yes, but you will have his riches, his estates, and his power. (Kuang 14)

Auntie Fang reveals she gained her own power through violence. As a nonperson, Auntie Fang drugs her husband with the goal of stupefying him to the point of uselessness, ultimately providing her the space to seize power of the household, its properties, and financial assets. Auntie Fang's refusal to openly resist patriarchy's domination of her while wielding her own,

almost private, violence against her unwanted husband highlights her place as a helpmate to the patriarchy.

Perry, like hooks, considers how women often support the patriarchy, often in hopes of achieving a small degree of agency. Turning to John Locke's theories of citizenship, Perry summarizes:

> Locke's conception of the place of the (European) women was more robust than that of some of his peers. He did not consider women mere property and instead described them as shareholders with a capacity substantial enough to allow them to function as leaders in the absence of patriarchy, a sort of patriarchy by proxy. (Perry 18)

Locke asserts that women married to men with property, and therefore those recognized as persons, have the ability to act in their husband's absence. As a wife, Auntie Fang achieves increased agency for herself and authority of her household by stealing power from her husband. To gain the power normally held by her husband, Auntie Fang violently forces his mental absence through drug addiction, making him incapable of making authoritative decisions. By drugging Uncle Fang, Auntie Fang utilizes violence to dominate, much in the same way persons violently dominate nonpersons. Learning from patriarchal cycles of abuse, Auntie Fang resists total patriarchal control. While she does teach Rin how to manipulate forced marriages to her benefit, her commitment to continuing the cycle of patriarchal violence through Rin's forced marriage, affirms her status as a helpmate who gains power by proximity, rather than through personhood.

With this exploration of the hierarchical levels of power in Nikan, I want to highlight that power is fluid in this novel, meaning personhood is as well. While all of these characters, besides the Empress, lose or gain power depending on their situation, they each have the ability to wield some sort of power. The Empress, as sovereign, has the uncontested power to let live or let die in

an undeniable ownership of the fates of all Nikara people. The Warlords and Masters control public and private spaces in Nikan, employing their personhood to subjugate others and further the sovereign's goals. Even Auntie Fang in the poor Rooster Province has power by proxy, and willingly wields it against Rin. Nonpersons in Nikan do not share any of this power, leaving them completely subject to the whims, desires, and needs of their leaders. The structures of power exhibited in Kuang's novel serve to accentuate the deep levels of inequality present in patriarchal societies, elucidating the presence of nonpersons, such as Rin.

Nonpersonhood

Kuang's patriarchal system present in *The Poppy War* undeniably consists of a hierarchy of power which consists of the sovereign, persons, and helpmates of the patriarchy, but her system likewise contains a clear presence of nonpersonhood, as seen in Rin's character. With the novel's progression, Rin's unshakeable nonpersonhood becomes increasingly frustrating, even delusional at times, primarily because she continuously works to elevate her status in Nikan's society. As a successful scholar of the Keju exam, a student at the prestigious Sinegard Academy, and as a magically powerful Shaman working alongside Nikan's national military, Rin enters new spaces, meets new people, and ultimately believes she can earn recognition as a person – one with unquestionable value. Yet, Kuang disappoints both Rin and her reader when Rin continuously fails to garner legitimate respect from her superiors. Examining Rin's character and her status as a nonperson provides a glimpse into the inner workings of patriarchal dominance in private settings and relationships, illustrating a fuller understanding of patriarchy, personhood, and violence in Kuang's text that uncovers the harrowingly personal subjugation required to maintain patriarchal structures of power.

While most scholarly investment in *The Poppy War* focuses on the novel's historical rewriting of 20th century Chinese history, there have been a few scholars and interviewers who have expressed interest in Rin's character and her place in Nikan. In a Master's Thesis written by Caroline Hannum, Rin's status at Sinegard Academy and as a shaman has warranted attention. Hannum focuses on the barriers Rin faces as a young woman in a male dominated school, and additionally considers the sacrifices Rin must make in order to progress through her goals. The sacrifices Rin must make that Hannum points out, including having a hysterectomy as a teenager, showcase the many ways in which Rin attempts to gain more power in her position of little agency (Hannum 16). While Hannum's focus is important and related to my investments in Rin's nonpersonhood, I want to complicate these ideas by considering more specifically how others wield violence against Rin as a means of cementing her powerlessness. Correspondingly, in an interview with Ifeoluwa Adeniyi, Kuang has articulated the importance of Rin's status in Nikan, emphasizing "She's told from the beginning of *The Poppy War* that harmony is achieved when everything fulfills its proper role–that orphan child brides should be content with being orphan child brides" (Adeniyi & Kuang 122). Kuang's emphasis on how Rin "should" act to contribute to a harmonious Nikara society aligns with how patriarchal subjects "should" obey their patriarchal leaders. Rin, as a nonperson of the patriarchy, gets told how to act and what to accept, and I am invested in these conversations between Rin and her superiors. How does Rin's nonpersonhood become cemented in private spaces? As a character at the bottom of the social order, how does Rin move through Nikan society? Through an exploration of Rin's subjugation we find that, often, those closest to her, such as her military commander Altan, oppress her the most directly. The insistence of her nonpersonhood becomes personal in private spaces, stimulating an emotional reaction from Rin unseen after her subjugation in public spaces. This

emotional response impacts Rin's desires, goals, and simmering resentment, influencing her movement in the novel, a development I aim to accentuate in this section.

As mentioned in the previous section of this thesis, each level of the Nikan hierarchy, including the Empress, the Academy Masters, and even Auntie Fang, has power over Rin. As a dark-skinned, orphan from the south, Rin comes to Sinegard at the very margins of society, yet her status only worsens as the novel progresses. During a battle with the Mugenese at the capital, Rin publicly uses her shamanistic powers for the first time, revealing her Speerly heritage to her superiors. Even though the Federation of Mugen had completely wiped Speer off the map in a genocidal act during the Second War, their negative reputation remained in Nikan. Worried for her future and judgement from those around her, Rin is only relieved when Master Irjah comes to talk to her about the battle. Rin thinks "If Irjah knew what Altan was like, what Speerlies were capable of, then surely he could vouch for her, persuade the Militia that she wasn't dangerous," hoping Master Irjah might have the ability to mitigate potential negative judgement towards her (Kuang 261). This fear of hers comes from the way the Nikara viewed the Speerly when they fought together in the second war. The Nikara had viewed Rin's ancestors as "barbaric oddities" and earned no respect from their allies (Kuang 263). Even with Master Irjah's more accepting understanding of the Speerlies, he confirms her worries, stating "The Nikara have never been good at dealing with what they don't understand, and Speer has always made the Nikara uncomfortable" (Kuang 263). Unable to promise Rin a return to normalcy with the revelation of her background, Master Irjah's comment accentuates the unwillingness of the Nikara people to accept those that are different from them. An important aspect of Speerly culture lies in their connection to the Phoenix, the God who Rin communes with and receives her fire powers from.

This connection, deemed dangerous by Nikan, prohibited the Nikara people from accepting the Speerlies, adding another level to Rin's alienation.

With the knowledge of her Speerly heritage, Master Irjah has to strategically place Rin in the Militia, both hoping to protect her from abuse and utilize her shamanistic abilities productively; however, his decision immediately upsets Rin and further alienates her. He places her in the Cike, the division of assassins personally staffed by the Empress. Rin responds in horror, questioning "The Cike? The infamous thirteenth division, the Empress's squad of assassin's? The killers with no honor, no reputation, and no glory? The fighting force so vile, so nefarious, that the Militia preferred to pretend it didn't exist?" with a disgust that reveals her own biases (Kuang 262). Without any lived-knowledge of the Cike, Rin assumes the members are a part of a "freak show" and refers to their nickname, "The Bizarre Children" (Kaung 262). With her ingrained judgments, she supports the Nikan patriarchal system that others, alienates, and abuses those it does not respect.

With the Nikara patriarchal society believing that certain groups of people, such as the Speerlies, should not earn recognition as respectable people, we can turn to Perry's consideration of fundamental non-normativity. In her analyses of queerness in the late nineteenth century, Perry asserts:

> Non-normativity was fully recognized. What also existed, however, was a belief in the fundamental non-normativity of some groups. Deviant sexuality became definitive of group "otherness." … At the same time, some were not capable of deviating or *becoming* deviants because they were already essentially so. (Perry 70)

For Perry, patriarchal societies in the Western world believed that entire groups of people existed outside of normative, or acceptable, identity. Their status as abnormal and therefore alien, was simply fact. In her explanation of non-normativity in patriarchy, she observes that while some

individuals could become deviant through actions, such as engaging in queer sexual acts, others embodied non-normativity from birth, rendering them unable to escape oppression based on a crucial element of their identity. Through Perry's analysis it becomes clear that the Nikara sternly believe that groups such as the Cike and the Speerlies embody fundamental non-normativity, and therefore deserve to endure alienation. The Nikara, including Rin, only see the label of a person. This reduction extends to Rin who, as a Speerly, automatically cannot inhabit normalcy in Nikan. Despite enduring the taunting leers and insults from her peers, adoptive parents, and superiors for her entire life, Rin does not recognize the systemic pattern that others Speerlies and members of the Cike as being the same systemic structure that has othered her, and because of her naivete, she supports the very system that abuses her. Believing in the fundamental difference of the Cike, Rin obeys the system and instinctively alienates her future peers.

Unable to protest against Master Irjah's placement of her into the Cike, Rin joins up and happily discovers that the only other living Speerly, Altan Trengsin, is her commander. I bring us to Rin and Altan's relationship because he constitutes the closest thing to Rin–he is Speerly, dark-skinned, a successful shaman, and suffers the abuse of the Nikara because of these characteristics, much in the same way Rin does. However, even Altan inhabits a more privileged place in Nikan society than Rin. The two have one fundamental difference in their upbringing. While the Fangs raised Rin in the poor, southern Tikany province, a province flooded with opium addiction, child brides, and immense struggle, Master Irjah raised Altan (Kuang 261). As a powerful figure with influential military connections, Master Irjah provided Altan with a financially stable childhood and the ability to train for military success from early on in life. Altan, as a young Speerly shaman, does not hold his own property which would normally bar

him from personhood, yet, through his relationship with Master Irjah, accesses power over others.

Perry acknowledges the complicated relationship between property, poverty, and personhood when analyzing the unique status of those who patrolled the enslaved in the nineteenth century. Analyzing the patrollers as persons without property, Perry details:

> Free men who were recognized as such had some rights over others, even when they were dominated otherwise. Stated another way, nonpersonhood is deeply connected to poverty, but as a legal status it cannot be collapsed into socioeconomic class, either past or present. (Perry 52)

Here, Perry emphasizes that those who are recognized as free persons do not always have to own property in order to obtain power over others. Through other means, such as employment, persons can still dominate nonpersons. So, while nonpersonhood indicates a being devoid of any power, privilege, or legal recognition, personhood does not always indicate that an individual controls their own personal property, but rather, merely means that someone has power over another. Through this articulation, we can see that Altan, much like slave patrollers in nineteenth century Western history, earns legal recognition through other means of authority. Although Altan's Speerly heritage and lack of property would normally prevent those in power, such as the Empress or the Academy Masters, from recognizing Altan as a person, his privileged upbringing and authority rank in the military circumvent these barriers. Altan exists as a person in Nikan, so while Rin clings to her and Altan's shared heritage and the potential kinship that comes along with this, a power imbalance exists between them, one that will further highlight Rin as the epitome of nonpersonhood.

Entering the Cike with Altan as her leader, Rin finds herself far more enthusiastic than she originally anticipated. Their ancestral connection negates the dread of joining another

alienated group for Rin, and she finds herself working hard to please Altan. Similarly to Rin's immediate devotion to the Empress upon seeing her for the first time in the Sinegard parade, Rin dedicates herself to Altan's cause because "With Altan she felt as if she *belonged*–not just to the same division or army, but to something deeper and older. She felt situated within an ancient web of lineage. She had a place" (Kuang 270). While Rin's loyalty to the Empress stems from her awe-inspiring, divine nature and beauty, her loyalty to Altan comes from Rin's desire to truly belong. Rin has always felt othered by those around her, and has always felt the divide between her and her peers, regardless if they developed a friendship or not. Finally, with Altan, Rin truly imagines herself as included, as connected, as *person*. Joined with Altan and his trusted gang of shamans and misfits, Rin eases into their lifestyle, gaining confidence and comfortability along the way. Crucially, Rin feels this connection to Altan immediately, without needing to get to know him first, and Altan seems to reciprocate her feelings. When Altan first sees her after learning about her Speerly heritage he asks her "How do you exist?" and then promises her "I know what it's like. I'm going to help you," in a moment that confirms his wonder at her existence and reassures her of a mutual loyalty (Kuang 264, 265). Altan, awe-stuck at discovering he is no longer alone, forges a connection with Rin that, she believes, provides her newfound agency and power.

Not long after joining the Cike, Rin and Altan's power imbalance comes to light, bringing physical violence and emotional abuse along with it, serving to dismantle the imagined personhood Rin feels. While Rin believes their connection as kin trumps all other dynamics, Altan unfalteringly acts as her superior, punishing her when he feels appropriate. As a member of the Cike, Rin's sole purpose is to commune with the Phoenix, call the fire, and harm their enemies; however, after the trauma she experiences at the Battle of Sinegard, Rin finds her

connection with the Phoenix blocked. This blockage makes her utterly useless as a member of the Cike, enraging Altan. He berates her for her failures as a military weapon, calling her an embarrassment to Speer and effectively destroying the pride she felt in their shared ancestry. In addition to Altan's verbal abuse and anger he "crossed the room toward her, grasped her shoulders, and shook so hard that she gasped out loud," violently putting his hands on her to scare her (Kuang 350). After the altercation Rin knew she "would soon have two bruises left by Altan's thumbs, perfectly formed dents like teardrops," illustrating how hard Altan had to have gripped her (Kuang 351). While the level of physical violence seems minimal, Altan leaves Rin hurting physically and emotionally, and shatters Rin's sense of personhood. Although Rin's magical abilities as a shaman, her member of a military division, and her connection to Altan create an illusion of personhood and power for Rin, this power does not actually exist. Altan's abuse confirms this and aligns with Perry's explanation that for nonpersons "the more brutal forms of sovereign power continued in both public rituals and private expressions of violence" (Perry 35). Altan, devoted to the Empress, works for her goals, fights her wars, and controls a portion of her subjects, including Rin. As we have seen before, Rin suffers abuse because of "public rituals," as seen with Master Jun and his rejection of her as a southern country girl and Auntie Fang's attempt at an arranged marriage. Here, we also see Rin suffer in private. With no one around to see, Rin endures physical abuse from Altan, again solidifying her status as a nonperson.

Suffering this private abuse from Altan, Rin reaches a new low, believing herself useless and inferior when previously she had always fought against discriminatory opinions of her. I contend that Altan's abuse impacts Rin more heavily than the other instances we have seen in the novel because she had finally allowed herself to imagine herself as equal to someone. In the

other circumstances, Rin already knew her place lie below the others, so their confirmation of her inferiority did not surprise or hurt her, but, with Altan, she let herself imagine a trusted kinship. His abuse breaks this facade. As the pair clash, Rin wonders:

> How was it that he could make her feel so small? She felt more useless than she had at Sinegard when Jun had humiliated her before everyone. This was worse. This was a thousand times worse, because unlike Jun, Altan mattered to her. Altan was a Speerly, Altan was her *commander*. She needed his approval like she needed air. (Kuang 350).

Rin latches onto Altan and their connection, emphasizing her need for his approval and her desire to please him even when he abuses her. Powerless in the situation, Rin leans into her hurt while still placing Altan on a pedestal. She continues to admire him and gives no indication of distrust or anger despite his abuse of power against her. With continued devotion, Rin renews her faith in Altan, accepting his abuse of her as necessary and his power as absolute.

The reality of Rin's powerlessness mounts as Altan again wields physical violence against her in response to her sustained failure to commune with the Phoenix and Rin's increasing missteps. In a meeting with other military leaders, Rin protests the necessity of one of Altan's orders during a battle. Rin, angry because Altan forced Rin to leave Nezha behind to die, voices her opinion in front of other leaders, including Master Jun, discounting Altan's power as commander in the process in an effort that resists her lack of agency as a nonperson. Once the two are in private Altan immediately puts Rin back in her place. He dictates "You do not contradict me…You will answer to me as a soldier to her commander," illustrating the indisputable nature of their power imbalance (Kuang 385). Yet, in her remaining rage, Rin continues to defy Altan's command. Seeing how his words fail to affect Rin, Altan turns once again to physical abuse. This time "His blow was so powerful that her head snapped to the side. The sudden impact made her knees buckle, jerked her to the ground," punching her so forcefully

she had no other choice but to kneel in front of him (Kuang 386). When his words fail to enforce his superiority over Rin, he resorts to physical abuse that propels Rin's body to obey him when her words do not. If Rin will not kneel before him in a recognition of his authority over her, he will, and has the right, to force her to do so. As Rin bleeds and kneels before him, Altan further hammers Rin back into a place of obedience. He brutally asserts:

> How *dare* you…You misunderstand the nature of our relationship. I am not your friend. I am not your brother, though kin we may be. I am your commander. You do not argue with my orders. You follow them without question. You obey me, or you leave this militia. (Kuang 386)

Altan, as Rin's superior, completely destroys any semblance of equality between the two. No longer can Rin imagine a companionship where she and Altan confide in each other, relate to one another, or work together. Altan has shattered any potential for Rin to gain agency while alongside him, further emphasizing Rin's status as a nonperson in Nikan.

As Altan verbally and physically enforces his authority over Rin, he likewise establishes his ownership of her. Perry continues to develop the importance of property for persons in patriarchal structures when she analyzes the status of enslaved people in Western history. Perry conveys:

> There was a tripartite structure of domination that hinged on the stratification of legal persons, with their attendant and ancillary women and children, and those outside of personhood who could not engage in any exchange. For the nonpersons there was not possession, no right of authority, and therefore no personhood. There was only being possessed. (Perry 48-49)

In this analysis, Perry acknowledges the hierarchy of personhood, and how this hierarchy maintains a system fueled by the subjugation and exploitation of nonpersons. Nonpersons, like Rin, have an utter lack of agency, leaving them unable to possess anything, even themselves. For

Altan, a person in Nikan without property, he achieves and upholds his authority status through the domination of Rin, who he believes is fundamentally beneath him. Through physical violence, verbal abuse, and his power as her military commander, Altan ultimately proves that he owns both Rin and her shamanistic powers. This altercation sparks so much rage in Rin that she finally calls the fire once more, allowing Altan to manipulate her rage for his own gain, further cementing Rin's status as a nonperson object. As a weapon of violence owned by Altan, Rin cannot act in her own interest, and must instead work to achieve the nation's militaristic goals.

Despite Altan's apparent interest in Rin as a Speerly and as a person initially, we discover that his investment actually lies in Rin's ability to commune with the Phoenix and brandish fire against their enemies. He had always seen Rin as a weapon, and emotionally manipulated her into trusting him and becoming a willing subject. Rin, in believing in a mutual loyalty between herself and Altan, foolishly assumed she had gained power and agency through her ancestral ties. She again devotes herself to the cause put force by the Empress because Altan demands her to do so. Instead of recognizing and pushing back against a system that continuously others her, Rin strongly desires to gain personhood in this very system. She determines to endure the abuse from all others to eventually earn a higher status, yet, as a nonperson, she exists merely as a weapon to be used. As we move toward the last section of this thesis, I contend that Rin internalizes the violence wielded against her, simmering in her rage until she bursts. She reaches her breaking point when the Empress betrays her and Altan, selling them to the Federation of Mugen, who aim to experiment on them. This betrayal leads to Altan's death, which sets Rin into violent, unstoppable vengeance.

Violence & Vengeance

The hierarchy of personhood in Kuang's *The Poppy War* works from the top down to alienate and oppress nonpersons like Rin, requiring harrowing, dehumanizing acts of violence to establish dominant authority. We have examined how personhood operates in the novel as public structures maintained in Nikan, such as the provincial, military, and academic divisions, and also explored violent patriarchal dominance in private environments with Rin and Altan. Recognizing the fluidity of power among the Nikara people allows us to confidently establish Rin as a nonperson, living without agency, power, or respect. This final section will consider how the patriarchal system upheld by the Empress cultivates a society dependent on cycles of violence, that even nonpersons learn and contribute to, despite their lack of autonomy. As the novel progresses, Rin becomes angrier and angrier with the scope of violence she, Altan, and their ancestors endured, and chooses to manipulate the violence she learned from her oppressors to enact her own vengeful act against the Federation of Mugen. In doing this, I assert that Rin never aims to break the patriarchal system that abuses her, but, rather, mimics it in her own quest for power. This quest and her manipulation of violence leads her to utterly destroy innocent people, including other nonpersons, marking a continuation in the cycle of patriarchal violence.

Before I bring us to Rin's use of violence, I want to contemplate how we might understand Rin's purpose in the novel. As the protagonist of a fantasy series, we might feel inclined to categorize her as a sort of hero, yet her inability, or even her unwillingness, to attack an oppressive system accentuates the complexity of her character. Canonically, most hero figures in literature are men. Kristian Frisk considers the history of heroism, highlighting that male characters typically become heroes, and any female character who attempts to perform heroic acts "have been constrained by conventional gender stereotypes with few opportunities to excel"

(Frisk 97). For Frisk, women in literature cannot act as heroes because they cannot act in general. With no room to grow, gain authority, or make choices, they do not have the ability to utilize power to save others. The barriers to classic heroism for female characters applies to Rin, who undergoes a hysterectomy to prevent her body from interfering in her military training and must plot to escape an arranged marriage as a child, while her male peers have the space to pursue a future of their own choosing. Nezha, Kitay, and Altan, while having their own struggles to attain power, do not share the familial and reproductive responsibilities that Rin circumnavigates. Rin faces systemic barriers because of her gender, making it even harder for her to pursue greatness.

Even further, Rin's character is not wholly good or wholly evil. She has good intentions, remaining loyal to an Empress she loves for what she believes will help the common good. Yet, her violent tendencies, selfish desire to climb the social ladder, and enactment of genocide likewise make it impossible to categorize her as a good person. Lori Campbell points out that in recent years there have been strides to include more female heroes in speculative fiction novels, as well as a push to complicate the hero-villian dichotomy generally. She explains "more complex portrayals of villainy, which eschew good and evil as moral absolutes, have provided us with characters–both male and female–whose wrongdoing is not so always so easy to wholly condemn," confirming that characters like Rin have become more commonplace in recent literature (Campbell 11). The concern now lies less in their status as a hero or villain character as we focus more on the dichotomy between power and powerlessness (Campbell 12). This shift aligns well with my concerns for Rin's character, and I want to utilize this model to truly contemplate when Rin is powerful and when she is powerless. By the end of the novel, it seems that she only has genuine power when she contributes to violent cycles of oppression where she

deliberately and guiltlessly murders a community she deems non-human. Replicating the same system of patriarchal violence that oppressed her, she oppresses others.

As Rin's character develops, she learns to lean into vengeful violence, mimicking the methods of domination utilized against her by the Federation of Mugen and Altan. When Rin learns of her Speerly heritage, she realizes that the massacre of Speer is also a trauma of her own. Committed by the Federation of Mugen in an act of war against Nikan, Mugen completely wipes out the population of Speer, murdering all of Rin and Altan's family, effectively preventing Rin from ever having a connection with her biological family, ancestors, or culture. While Altan remembers this formative and immense trauma, and simmers in rage through his entire life because of it, Rin has to learn how to feel this rage. Perry confirms that "repetitive violence mark[s] the status of the nonperson and [does] not operate simply to control," meaning nonpersonhood is inextricably linked to violence (Perry 35). While the sovereign and persons use violence to control their nonperson subjects, they also wield violence to simply assert their authority. From birth, Rin is marked as a nonperson and must endure consistent, albeit varying, violence throughout her life. Altan, imbued with rage, acts as a mentor of violence for Rin, showing her how to unlock her rage and strive for vengeance. We see Altan physically and verbally abuse Rin, and push her to reveal her goals. She eventually explains, "I am concerned with how to destroy," choosing to follow Altan's rage and utilize the physically violent skills the Masters at Sinegard taught her (Kuang 273). Instead of rejecting the very violence that marks her as a nonperson, she ultimately chooses to embrace it.

Kuang confirms that Rin's main goal concerns power as she works to become valuable to the Nikan Empire in a way that the Empress, the Warlords, and the Masters cannot miss. Through Rin's viscous character development, Kuang questions "how do people from the outside

seize the right moments to work their way into the machineries of power? How do they go from nobodies to leaders of armies and rulers of nations? Is it cunning? Charisma? Ruthlessness? Chance? Fate?" (Adeniyi & Kuang 122). With Kuang's investments in mind, we can consider how patriarchal hierarchies push nonpersons to ruthlessly harm innocent communities. Rin's character serves as a study on what can happen when those without power buy into patriarchal structures of violence in hopes of successfully achieving their own desire for power.

During Rin's time with the Cike under Altan's command, she encounters a mental block that prohibits her from calling the Phoenix and wielding its fire for the Nikara military. As we saw earlier, Altan criticizes Rin for her uselessness as a weapon, both humiliating and angering her in the process. Altan's consistent verbal and physical abuse drives Rin towards rage and resentment, hating the way he reduces her worth to her skills. Rin likewise notices that Altan never struggles to contact the Phoenix, realizing "Maybe that was the kind of anger it took to call the Phoenix easily and regularly…Not just rage, not just fear, but a deep, burning resentment, fanned by a particularly cruel kind of abuse," affirming that accessing power requires violent abuse (Kuang 368). Altan, after suffering the loss of Speer, grows up to be a weapon of the Empress's to fight the Federation of Mugen. His rage at the Mugenese for murdering his people never leaves him, urging him into the cycle of violence. Chaghan, Altan's second in command, confirms Rin's suspicions about the relationship between Altan's rage and his power. Chaghan explains to Rin, "Altan is so powerful because he hates so deeply and so thoroughly that it constitutes every part of his being. Your Phoenix is the god of fire, but it is also the god of rage. Of vengeance," furthering her understanding that in order for her to access the violent power offered to her through the Phoenix, Rin must give in to her hate, to her rage (Kuang 437). With Rin's new understanding of the link between rage and violence, Rin realizes that she can access

power through rage fueled violence. Altan serves as a model for the type of rage she must cultivate to gain a higher, more revered status and finally escape nonpersonhood.

While Rin slowly realizes that her quest for power requires the acceptance of her rage and a nurturing of her desire for vengeance through observing Altan's behavior, Altan himself shows Rin how he fuels his fire. After Rin embarrasses Altan in front of the other military leaders and Altan strikes her across the face, Rin's rage finally overcomes her desire to obey Altan. She reaches for the Phoenix's power and flames pour out of her towards Altan. He responds in kind, battling her flames with his own. This is the first time that Rin successfully accesses the Phoenix's fire since becoming a member of the Cike, and the emotional requirement, again, terrifies her. While facing Altan, Rin "felt her fire begin to burn her. Rin's fire was an incendiary flash, an impulsive flare of anger," juxtaposing Altan's never ending source of hatred that fueled his flames (Kuang 387). Encountering Altan's flames as the victim for the first time she "could almost taste it, the venomous intent, the ancient misery, and it horrified her" (Kuang 387). Altan's fuel, a multiplied version of her own, repulses and terrifies Rin. This initial rejection of the level of hatred required to access the power Altan wields accentuates that hate, to the level of murderous intent, is unnatural, and if Rin wants to access this power she would have to learn how to hate, and do so thoroughly. The difference between Altan and Rin's willingness to violently hate illustrates that patriarchal structures of violence and the accessibility of power force nonpersons to give in to, cultivate, and then utilize their rage in order to gain power in a patriarchal system.

Once Altan overpowers Rin's flames in another display of his power over her, Rin instinctively worries about how Altan will punish her. Because she had just suffered a humiliating degradation from Altan after openly challenging his authority verbally, she believes

any display of resistance will result in violent consequences. In accessing the power of the Phoenix in her rage towards Altan, she again pushes back against Altan's authority, but this time physically. Rin thinks to herself "*I've crossed the line. This is the end*" after Altan douses her flames; however, Altan surprises her (Kuang 387). He does not continue to berate her or physically abuse her, "No–he looked *pleased*," revealing Altan's desire for Rin to deploy her rage, even if she does so against him (Kuang 387). As a nonperson, Rin knows that her life lies in Altan's hands, and that, as her superior, he has the power to legitimately end her life. She tragically expects this for her retaliation in the face of his abuse, yet Altan prizes Rin's rage. In accessing the fire from the Phoenix, Rin proves her usefulness to Altan, and therefore establishes her value to him as a weapon. Instead of chastising Rin for her disobedience, he chooses instead to encourage her violent behavior, perpetuating the importance of violence in patriarchal societies. Rin, understanding that Altan's violent power comes from his bottomless rage, learns that she can both please her superior, Altan, and access physical power by mimicking Altan's rage.

By the end of the novel, the Empress turns on Altan and Rin, selling out their location to the Federation of Mugen, in an effort that affirms her ability as the sovereign to determine any (non)person's fate. This betrayal strips Altan of personhood as he becomes an object used for study, which results in Altan and Rin's use of immense violence to escape medical and psychological torture. Held in the Mugenese's possession, the pair are alienated and brought to a medical research lab where a Mugenese scientist, Shiro, will use them as research subjects (Kuang 472-473). Rin, horrified by Shiro's use of Altan's body, demands to know why Shiro and the Mugenese want to experiment on them, to which he explains "I can answer every question I've ever had about the human body! I can devise ways to prevent death!" (Kuang 476). The

abuse of Rin and Altan for the advancement of medical techniques mirrors the inhumanity of the abuse their Speer ancestors faced during Mugen's genocidal attack. The Mugenese did not consider the Speer valuable or worth saving then, and they do not consider Rin or Altan worth saving now. Rin and Altan merely serve as bodies to manipulate, mutilate, and learn from before Shiro tosses them away.

Perry's *Vexy Thing* also explores how powerful persons conduct inhumane medical experiments on nonpersons in Western culture, highlighting that knowledge production is often a result of patriarchal violence. Much like Kuang's Shiro, J. Marion Sims conducted nonconsensual experiments on Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy, enslaved women in the United States. In search of knowledge of the female reproductive system, he penetrated the women and explored their bodies with "71 tools" of his creation (Perry 53). Through this example, which mirrors the scene where Shiro experiments on Rina and Altan, Perry asserts "We like to think of knowledge as virtuous, but its production can be violent," recognizing that persons in power not only abuse nonpersons as weapons, but also as objects to learn from. This mode of knowledge production relies on non-consensual invasion of the human body, dissecting those seen as disposable in an effort to gain increased power with which to dominate others. The abuse of power and complete disavowal of a nonperson's bodily autonomy cements the centrality of violence to the maintenance and evolution of a patriarchal hierarchy, such as the one we see in Kuang's *The Poppy War*.

I take the time to bring us to the medical experimentation on Altan and Rin because it leads Rin to her final and most destructive act of violence in the novel. This shared traumatic event serves to increase her rage and need for vengeance against the Federation of Mugen. In order to escape Shiro and his lab, Altan brutally murders him while Rin watches, and learns.

> Altan grabbed his tormentor by the face. And squeezed. Flames poured from his hands…First Altan's hands left fingerprints of black against Shiro's temples, and then the heat burned through bone and Altan's fingers bored holes through Shiro's skull. Shiro's eyes bulged…Altan pressed Shiro's skull between his hands. Shiro's head split open with a wet crack (Kuang 489).

Kuang's description of Altan's use of violence against Shiro refuses to shy away from his rage. Altan could have easily killed Shiro quickly, yet, instead, chooses a path of vengeance that forces Shiro to suffer, and while his suffering does not equal that of Altan or Rin's, it suffices for Altan to enact his revenge. Now, discarded by the Nikara sovereign and subjugated by the Mugenese, Altan experiences nonpersonhood himself, forming yet another connection to Rin. While Rin had never abandoned her devotion to Altan, born in part from his military power and in part from their shared heritage, Altan had rejected Rin as equal at every step; however, in their final moments Altan recognizes Rin as worth saving. After murdering Shiro, Altan sacrifices himself to save Rin, urging her to leave him behind so she can make it to the desolated island of Speer. Along with Altan's death Rin truly loses Speer, and feels the endless raging grief that Altan had felt his entire life, finally opening her fully to the Phoenix's power.

Rin, on the Island of Speer after Altan's death, gives in to the weight of her grief, rage, and deep desire to feel powerful and valuable. Her emotional surrender leads her to commit genocide, completely wiping out the entire Federation of Mugen, including countless innocent lives. On Speer, Rin locates a temple underground dedicated to the Phoenix where she accesses the shaman world and comes face to face with the entire weight of Speer's trauma. She encounters a wall of grief, pouring out of the spirits of her ancestors, and this experience further fuels her sorrow and rage. She screams out "How is death and slavery *peace*?...I have lost my friends and my country, I have lost everything I care about. I don't want peace, I want revenge,"

admitting her violent intentions to seek revenge against the Mugenese and their termination of the Speerly people (Kuang 500). Through Altan's violent mentorship, Rin has learned that seething in her rage will allow her to freely access the Phoenix's power and wield it for her own purposes. She practices this learned behavior in her quest for revenge. Rin rejects the idea of peace over revenge because peace never benefited her or her people. In order for Nikan and the Federation of Mugen to make peace in the Second Poppy War, they destroyed Speer. Knowing that a future promising peace will only serve those in power, Rin instead opts to enact violence and gain her own personal power. In addition to the endless rage Rin succumbs to, she also forfeits her humanity. Thinking of her vengeance, "Rin forced the last parts of what was human out of her soul and gave way to her hatred," embodying her full potential as the weapon she was manipulated to become (Kuang 501). In surrendering to her hatred, Rin forfeits her humanity, signifying the inhumanity of patriarchal violence and oppression. In order to enact genocide, murdering millions of unknown Mugenese people, Rin must embody the very patriarchal ethos that deemed her worthless. Rin intimately knows how to enact violence and how to feel hatred because her superiors abused her with violence and hatred her entire life. For her final act in the novel, Rin chooses to mimic these behaviors, knowing they will grant her power.

With Rin's desire for revenge against the Mugenese fully acknowledged through rage and hatred, she appeals to the Phoenix, telling him what she needs to do. The Phoenix, a cruel deity who feeds on rage, refuses to let Rin believe her vengeance is necessary. He emphasizes:

> At every critical juncture you were given an option; you were given a way out. Yet you picked precisely the roads that led you here…And you know that should you give your command, I will call something terrible. I will wreak a disaster to destroy the island of Mugen completely, as thoroughly as Speer was destroyed. By your choice, many will die. (Kuang 502)

The Phoenix communicates that Rin's use of violence is a cognizant choice, and, while it may seem like she has no other option, she does. Rin does not have to murder innocent people because of the grief she feels, yet, in her grief, her powerlessness feels complete. In an effort to finally break free of her nonpersonhood and gain unretractable power, Rin executes Altan's lessons on rage. Violence is all Rin knows, and what Rin instinctively turns to. Refusing to acknowledge the cruel brutality of her desire, Rin responds to the Phoenix, coldly stating "They aren't people…They're animals. I want you to make them burn. Every last one," committing to the upcoming genocide (Kuang 502). Rin's embodiment of Nikara's patriarchal ethos even extends to her view of the Mugenese people. She views them as literally non-human and uses this categorization to justify her brutal extermination of their people. Importantly, Rin aims to do an even better job than the Mugenese had done with Speer, not allowing even one person to survive. With the massacre of Mugen, Rin imagines there will be no grief-stricken, rage-filled girl to continue the cycle of violence, therefore confirming her successful domination of others in her quest to achieve authority.

Rin, afterwards, stands by her decision, continuing to insist on the necessity of the violence. She closes herself off to any guilt she might feel so that she can instead move forward in her pursuit of power. She reassures herself by insisting that "Those weren't lives. They were numbers. They were a necessary subtraction," reducing the thousands of lives snuffed out to a mere statistic (Kuang 505). The horror of the genocide does not feel pressing to Rin if she insists that the Mugenese lives are mere numbers needed to win a war that puts Rin on top. Learning from the Empress and the Nikara patriarchal hierarchy, Rin weaponizes the same violence that both the Mugenese and the Nikara wielded against her to commit genocide. Her desire to feel superior to an entire group of people pushes her to dehumanize another group the same way she

had been continuously dehumanized. The only way Rin can feel powerful, feel personhood, after suffering so much loss is to continue the cycle of violence.

Kuang's powerful anti-hero Rin does not serve as a model for liberation, or as a guide for surviving the violence of patriarchal oppression. Instead, she provides us a glimpse into the horrors of patriarchal domination and the marginalization of people based on socially constructed ideas of value and superiority. Here, I again turn to Perry, who asserts that "To break the machine was in a sense to break the conversion of oneself into a machine for the accumulating wealth of another," meaning that to deconstruct the power of patriarchy, one must fracture their use as an object (Perry 45). The patriarchal cycle cannot continue without weapons to be wielded or objects to be worked. Rin does not break the cycle, and, crucially, does not refuse to act as a weapon for the Empress or even for herself. While she acts in her own interests when committing the genocide of Mugen, she maintains her position as a weapon. Her value and power still relies on her ability to enact violence. Rin ultimately replicates the system of patriarchal violence when she dehumanizes and decides to murder thousands of innocent people whose lives have no value to her. She replicates the sovereign and begins the cycle again.

Conclusions: Break the Machine

Through the exploration of Nikan's patriarchal hierarchy, Rin's nonpersonhood, and the cycles of violence present in the novel, I have aimed to emphasize that Rin's vengeful quest for power, while abhorrent and initially alien, actually portrays a way of thinking seen in many Americans across the United States at the opening of the second Trump administration. *The Poppy War*, in conversation with Imani Perry's conceptualizations of patriarchy and personhood, unlocks understandings of the sustained gravity of historical colonial violence and connects these understandings to the continued practice of white supremecist, patriarchal violence in modern

day American political groups. Here again, I utilize Perry's work as an inspiration for my own as she contends that "it is essential to seek deep understanding to pursue gender liberation. This requires both the past and the present," a perspective which aligns with the historical context of *The Poppy War* and my commitment to applying Kuang's values from the novel to our current political state (Perry 9). We can and should read Kuang's novel as a cautionary tale that exposes the real potential for future genocidal catastrophes born from the continued subjugation of minority communities, such as women, people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and the financially disadvantaged. We live in a tumultuous and unprecedented period, where, in the second Trump administration, the American government has ordered the termination of DEI programs, stripped the rights of trans folks across the country, proposed that the United States should take over the Gaza Strip, ordered mass deportation of immigrants, among so much more (Yourish, et al.). Commonly, Trump supporters ignore or even celebrate the continued use of violence by the current U.S. government, while some Americans remain apathetic, and others vehemently oppose the recent government actions. Communities in the United States and globally are affected by the violence of the Trump administration, and all Americans are at risk of replicating these cycles of violences regardless of their political views. I believe that Kuang's novel helps to expose the real potential for *anyone* to fall into violent cycles, all of which result in the continued harm and likely domination of others. By examining the failure of violence in *The Poppy War* we can recognize that we must break the machine, and resist the utilization of people as weapons for patriarchal dominance. To do so, we must acknowledge our own personal desires for increased power, and separate these aspirations from patriarchal violence and domination. By breaking these patterns, we can work towards and even achieve a safer, happier, more equitable future.

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