



# Violent Becoming: Female Agency, Power, and Self-Destruction in *The Poppy War*

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**Abstract:** *This article analyzes the representation of female agency in *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang, arguing that the novel deliberately dismantles liberal and empowerment-based models of feminist agency. Centering on the protagonist Rin, the essay contends that agency in *The Poppy War* is produced through violence, bodily endurance, and trauma rather than moral autonomy, self-realization, or ethical coherence. Drawing on feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, the article situates Rin's actions within militarized and imperial power structures that both enable and circumscribe her capacity to act. The analysis demonstrates how class marginality, gendered discipline, and institutional violence shape Rin's pursuit of power, revealing education, warfare, and shamanism as conditional and exploitative routes to agency. Particular attention is paid to the female body as a site of political inscription, where pain, hunger, addiction, and rage function as narrative mechanisms through which power is accessed and exercised. Rather than positioning trauma as an obstacle to agency, the novel frames it as constitutive of political action, collapsing distinctions between resistance and self-annihilation. By refusing redemption arcs, emotional legibility, or moral resolution, *The Poppy War* subverts the "strong female protagonist" trope common to contemporary fantasy. The article concludes that Kuang's work presents female agency as contingent, destructive, and ethically unstable, thereby challenging feminist optimism and exposing the costs of power under conditions of total war and imperial domination.*

**Key Words:** *Female agency; necropolitics; postcolonial fantasy; violence; trauma.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The *Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of grimdark fantasy and postcolonial speculative fiction. Drawing explicitly on twentieth-century Chinese history—particularly the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre—the novel rejects the consolatory tendencies of high fantasy and instead foregrounds atrocity, moral collapse, and the systemic production of violence. In line with grimdark conventions, Kuang presents a world in which power is inseparable from brutality and ethical clarity is repeatedly undermined; as Rin learns, “power didn’t ask whether you were good or bad—it only asked whether you were strong enough to wield it.” Yet unlike much Western grimdark fantasy, *The Poppy War* is deeply invested in colonial histories, national trauma, and racialized warfare, situating it firmly within postcolonial speculative traditions that rework history through fantasy to interrogate empire and domination.

Despite a growing body of criticism on Kuang's engagement with war, nationalism, and historical violence, critical discussions of *The Poppy War* often frame Rin through the lens of the “strong female protagonist” or read her trajectory as a distorted empowerment narrative. Such readings risk reproducing liberal feminist assumptions that equate agency with autonomy, moral choice, or personal liberation. This article identifies a critical gap in existing scholarship by arguing that Rin's agency cannot be adequately understood through empowerment paradigms. Instead, her capacity to act emerges under extreme structural constraint—shaped by class marginality, militarized institutions, and imperial logics that render certain lives disposable. Therefore, this article advances the thesis that Rin's agency operates through necropolitical violence and bodily sacrifice, rather than self-determination or ethical mastery. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics as the exercise of power through the production of death-worlds, the analysis reads Rin as both a subject and instrument of sovereign violence. Her body becomes a site of endurance, addiction, and expendability, revealing how female agency under conditions of imperial war is contingent, destructive, and ethically compromised. In foregrounding these dynamics, *The Poppy War* exposes the limits of feminist autonomy when power itself is structured through mass death and historical trauma.



## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This article brings together feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and necropolitical analysis to conceptualize agency not as autonomy or empowerment, but as action produced within—and often deformed by—structures of domination. Such a framework is necessary to read *The Poppy War*, where power is inseparable from violence and where female action is enabled precisely through systems that demand bodily sacrifice and ethical collapse.

Feminist theory has long challenged liberal-humanist notions of agency as individual choice exercised in conditions of freedom. Thinkers such as Judith Butler argue that agency is always relational, emerging within regulatory norms that simultaneously enable and restrict action. As Butler notes, agency “does not consist in a radical act of self-creation” but in the capacity to act within “fields of power that condition and limit action” (*The Psychic Life of Power*). In this sense, agency may manifest through repetition, endurance, or even self-harm, rather than resistance or liberation. This reconceptualization is particularly relevant to Rin, whose actions are produced through institutional discipline, bodily pain, and militarized training. Her agency is neither emancipatory nor self-possessed; instead, it is forged through submission to violent systems that demand total bodily availability. Feminist critiques thus allow us to read Rin’s violence not as a failure of agency, but as a form of constrained action shaped by gendered and militarized power. Postcolonial theory further complicates agency by situating it within histories of empire, colonial trauma, and nationalist violence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern can “speak” outside the epistemic violence of imperial discourse, suggesting that agency is often articulated through the very structures that silence it. In *The Poppy War*, Rin’s rise is inseparable from nationalist ideology and imperial revenge; her empowerment depends on adopting the logic of the state that once rendered her disposable.

Postcolonial readings thus illuminate how Rin internalizes imperial modes of domination, turning colonial violence outward and inward simultaneously. Her agency is aligned with national survival, yet this alignment demands the erasure of ethical limits, revealing how postcolonial subjects may gain power only by reproducing imperial forms of destruction. The central theoretical lens of this article is Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, which defines sovereignty as the power to decide who may live and who must die (Necropolitics). Mbembe argues that modern political power is increasingly exercised through the creation of “death-worlds,” where populations are rendered expendable. Within this framework, agency is not opposed to violence but is often realized through the authority to kill. Rin’s ultimate form of agency lies precisely here: in her capacity to annihilate enemies, civilians, and herself in the name of survival and vengeance. Her power is necropolitical, exercised through bodily sacrifice and mass destruction. Reading Rin through necropolitics reveals how female agency in *The Poppy War* is constituted through death rather than life, exposing the brutal conditions under which marginalized subjects are permitted to act at all.

## 3. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS: GENDER, CLASS, AND MILITARISM:

In *The Poppy War*, female agency is never exercised in a social vacuum; it is produced under intersecting constraints of gender, class, and militarized power that delimit the conditions under which Rin can act. Kuang foregrounds these constraints from the outset, presenting agency not as freedom of choice but as survival-driven negotiation within violent structures.

Rin’s orphanhood and extreme poverty position her body as a commodity long before she acquires political power. Her adoptive parents’ decision to marry her off for profit makes explicit how poor female bodies are circulated as economic resources: marriage promises “a full stomach and a roof,” but at the cost of reproductive captivity. Rin’s refusal—“She would not be bred like livestock”—is often read as an assertion of agency, yet it is crucially reactive, shaped by the absence of viable alternatives. Gendered commodification thus precedes and structures her later choices, revealing that resistance itself emerges from coercive conditions rather than autonomy.

Admission to Sinegard appears to offer a meritocratic escape from gendered poverty, rewarding intellect and discipline rather than birth. However, the academy quickly reveals itself as an institution that reproduces hierarchy under the guise of equality. Rin’s success depends on bodily self-violation—starvation, exhaustion, and pain—exposing meritocracy as an illusion sustained by unequal capacities for endurance. As Rin learns, “Talent mattered less than how much pain you could withstand,” underscoring how access to power is conditioned by one’s willingness to sacrifice the body. Education thus functions as a mechanism that legitimizes exclusion while appearing neutral. The military emerges as the primary site where Rin’s agency becomes legible, yet it is a profoundly masculinist space structured by domination, obedience, and sanctioned violence. While warfare enables Rin to command authority unavailable in civilian life, it simultaneously restricts her agency by demanding emotional suppression and ethical erasure. Power is granted only insofar as she conforms to militarized norms that valorize destruction. Kuang thus presents militarism as paradoxical: it enables female authority while ensuring that such authority is exercised through patriarchal and necropolitical logics. Rin’s agency is therefore inseparable from the systems that exploit and weaponize her, revealing empowerment as structurally compromised rather than emancipatory.



#### 4. THE BODY AS THE SITE OF AGENCY:

In *The Poppy War*, agency is not articulated through speech, choice, or ethical reasoning, but through the female body subjected to extremity. Kuang persistently locates power in corporeal suffering, rendering Rin's body the primary medium through which agency is forged, exercised, and ultimately consumed. Pain, hunger, addiction, and endurance function not as obstacles to selfhood but as techniques of self-fashioning demanded by violent institutions.

Rin's early training at Sinegard establishes bodily deprivation as a prerequisite for legitimacy. Her deliberate starvation to suppress menstruation and maintain academic competitiveness underscores how female bodies must be disciplined into masculinist norms of productivity. Rin internalizes this logic, treating pain as proof of worth: "Pain was weakness leaving the body," she tells herself, echoing militarized ideologies that equate endurance with moral strength. Hunger and exhaustion thus become tools through which she claims agency, even as they erode bodily autonomy.

This dynamic intensifies through Rin's later addiction to opium, which simultaneously grants access to divine power and corrodes her physical and psychological stability. Addiction is not framed as a personal failing but as a structural consequence of a system that demands self-destruction for power. Agency here is paradoxical: Rin chooses pain because pain is the only available route to action.

Shamanism in the novel rejects intellectual mastery in favor of visceral communion with gods that demand suffering. Knowledge is not learned but endured. Rin must "burn herself hollow" to channel the Phoenix, collapsing the boundary between cognition and corporeality. This aligns with feminist critiques of how women's knowledge is historically embodied and pathologized, while also revealing how such embodiment becomes violently extractive under war conditions. Ultimately, Rin's agency culminates in the total expendability of her body. She becomes valuable precisely because she can be consumed—physically, psychologically, and politically. Her power rests on her willingness to annihilate herself alongside others, demonstrating what Achille Mbembe describes as necropolitical subjectivity: existence justified only through proximity to death. The novel thus exposes a grim logic in which female agency under imperial war collapses into bodily sacrifice, revealing autonomy not as freedom, but as the capacity to be used up.

#### 5. VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND MORAL AMBIGUITY:

In *The Poppy War*, violence is not merely a narrative backdrop but the primary medium through which agency becomes legible. Kuang refuses ethical binaries, presenting violence as a mode of authorship and political participation that binds agency to destruction rather than moral choice. Rin's actions are consequential precisely because they are catastrophic; to act is to wound history.

Rin's turn to mass violence functions as a form of authorship—an inscription upon the political world that cannot be ignored. When conventional avenues of speech, representation, or reform are foreclosed, violence becomes the only language that registers. Rin understands this logic early: mercy yields invisibility, while devastation compels recognition. Her annihilative acts write her into national history, transforming her from expendable subject into sovereign agent. Yet this authorship is ethically unstable; it produces meaning by erasing lives, revealing agency as inseparable from atrocity under conditions of total war.

Kuang frames Rin's rage not as psychological excess or moral failure but as historically produced affect. It emerges from repeated exposure to gendered humiliation, class violence, and imperial annihilation. Female rage here is political memory embodied—an affective archive of collective trauma. By situating rage within structural histories rather than individual pathology, the novel rejects misogynistic tropes of female irrationality and instead exposes rage as a rational response to systemic extermination. Rin's fury is neither redemptive nor curable; it is the emotional register of survival in a death-saturated world.

Crucially, *The Poppy War* does not treat trauma as a wound to be healed before agency can be reclaimed. Trauma is the condition of possibility for action. Rin's decisions are shaped by what cannot be undone; her agency is forged through the persistence of pain rather than its resolution. This reframing challenges liberal models that equate agency with psychological wholeness. Kuang instead presents a bleak truth: under necropolitical regimes, to act at all is to act from within trauma. Agency, here, is not the opposite of damage—it is what damage makes possible.

#### 6. Subverting the "Strong Female Protagonist"

*The Poppy War* offers a sustained critique of the contemporary fantasy trope of the "strong female protagonist," a figure typically defined by resilience, moral clarity, and eventual redemption. Kuang deliberately dismantles this paradigm by refusing to render Rin's strength legible through empathy, ethical coherence, or narrative closure. Instead, Rin's power is excessive, destructive, and profoundly alienating, challenging readerly expectations of likability and moral growth. Unlike conventional heroines, Rin is not offered a redemptive arc that reinscribes moral order. Her choices do not culminate in ethical reconciliation or emotional healing; rather, each act of violence compounds her isolation and culpability. Kuang resists framing Rin's suffering as justification or excuse, forcing readers to confront



the discomfort of a female character whose agency cannot be redeemed by good intentions. Empathy is not the narrative endpoint but a casualty of power, underscoring how agency under war conditions demands the abandonment of moral legibility.

Rin's gradual transformation into a figure of monstrosity operates as a feminist narrative strategy that exposes the gendered limits of acceptable power. Historically, women who exceed prescribed boundaries of violence and ambition are rendered monstrous; Kuang embraces this designation rather than correcting it. Rin's excess—her rage, her destructiveness, her refusal of restraint—marks a deliberate refusal of containment. Monstrosity here is not a failure of feminism but a critique of its normative constraints, revealing how female power becomes intolerable once it mirrors the scale of masculine violence. Through Rin, Kuang critiques liberal feminist narratives that equate empowerment with visibility, individual success, or access to existing power structures. Rin gains access to power, but only by embracing systems that depend on annihilation and disposability. Her "empowerment" is thus hollow, exposing the fallacy of inclusion without transformation. The *Poppy War* ultimately suggests that feminist triumph within imperial and militarized frameworks is indistinguishable from complicity. By refusing to make Rin a symbol of progress, Kuang interrogates the costs of empowerment when power itself is necropolitical.

## 7. CONCLUSION:

The *Poppy War* ultimately offers a stark reconfiguration of female agency by refusing the ethical reassurance and narrative consolation that often accompany representations of powerful women in contemporary fantasy. Through Rin, R. F. Kuang exposes agency as a form of action produced within regimes of imperial war, where power is inseparable from violence, bodily sacrifice, and mass death. Rather than presenting agency as autonomy or self-realization, the novel insists on its contingency, revealing how marginalized subjects are permitted to act only by becoming instruments of destruction. By synthesizing feminist critiques of constrained agency, postcolonial analyses of empire and nationalism, and Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, this article has argued that Rin's power emerges through her capacity to kill, to endure, and ultimately to render herself expendable. Her trajectory demonstrates that agency under necropolitical conditions does not oppose domination but often reproduces it in intensified form. Trauma, rage, and monstrosity are not narrative aberrations to be corrected; they are the very mechanisms through which political action becomes possible in a death-saturated world. In subverting the "strong female protagonist" trope, *The Poppy War* challenges liberal feminist optimism that equates empowerment with access to existing structures of power. Kuang's refusal of redemption, moral coherence, or emotional legibility compels readers to confront the costs of agency exercised within militarized and imperial systems. Female agency, the novel suggests, cannot be disentangled from the historical and political conditions that make violence the primary language of power. Ultimately, *The Poppy War* demands a rethinking of feminist agency in speculative fiction, urging critics to move beyond celebratory narratives of strength and toward an ethics that accounts for destruction, complicity, and the limits of autonomy under conditions of total war.

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