

# Racial Injustices in Epic Fantasy: A Critical Examination of Rebecca F. Kuang's "The Poppy War"

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## ABSTRACT

The Poppy War novel by Rebecca F. Kuang depicts the life journey of an orphaned and poor teenage girl named Rin after qualifying for a prestigious academy. This changes her life, including the emergence of many conflicts, one of which is racism. This study aims to describe the forms of racism experienced by the main character and its impact. The method used in this study is a qualitative method, using critical race theory (CRT) from Richard Delgado & Jean Stefencic, with a literary sociology approach, and a note-taking research instrument. The results of this study show that the forms of racism against the main character are everyday racism, material determination, social construction, and intersectionality. Of all the forms of racism experienced by Rin, the daily racism most affects her survival. The impacts include perpetuation of social injustice, trauma and psychological stress, human rights violation, and inhibition of opportunity and mobility. Based on the impact, what affected Rin the most was the psychological impact.

**Keywords:** Racism, critical race theory, The Poppy War novel

## INTRODUCTION

Racism is not merely a matter of personal prejudice but a structure that organizes recognition, opportunity, and belonging. In fiction, it becomes audible in slurs and accent mockery, visible in dress and space, and tangible in institutional gatekeeping. This article examines how these forces are dramatized within Rebecca F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* (2018) through the trajectory of Fang Runin (Rin), an orphan from the southern provinces who gains admission to the elite Sineward Military Academy and must negotiate hierarchies that recode her talent as threat.

Scholars generally agree that racism operates simultaneously at the individual and systemic levels. Gordon Allport (1954) defines it as discriminatory acts rooted in prejudice, while Delgado and Stefencic (2001) argue that racism is not aberrational but ordinary, woven into daily interactions and institutions. These definitions remind us that racism extends beyond overt violence to subtle exclusions and microaggressions that normalize inequality. Such understandings frame literature not as detached art but as a mirror and critique of lived experience. Novels frequently encode the prejudices and resistances of their societies, offering readers insight into how structures of power mark the body, delimit opportunity, and script belonging.

Historically, Kuang's narrative draws on nineteenth-century conflicts such as the Opium War between China and Britain, as well as twentieth-century traumas including the Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre. By re-situating these histories within a grimdark fantasy world, she dramatizes how imperialism, ethnic hierarchy, and gendered subjugation are inscribed onto characters' lives. Rin's struggles at Sineward echo real histories of marginalization: her darker skin and provincial accent render her suspect, her achievements discounted, and her opportunities curtailed. The academy thus functions as a microcosm where racialized boundaries are produced, policed, and naturalized.

Rather than surveying global histories of racism in detail, this study narrows its focus to Kuang's diegesis. We trace how Rin's accent, skin tone, and origin trigger everyday denigration; how instructors and rules reproduce material advantage for dominant lineages; and how the narrative constructs race through essentialist talk of "blood," "destiny," and animalization. These frictions culminate in exclusion and violence that redirect Rin's ambitions and reshape her sense of self. The novel's critical value lies not only in documenting prejudice but

also in exposing its psychological consequences—trauma, alienation, and self-doubt—that reverberate across Rin’s character arc.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides the heuristic for this analysis. Four categories guide our codebook: everyday racism (normalized slights and insults), material determinism (allocation of resources privileging dominant groups), social construction (fabricated racial categories sustaining hierarchy), and intersectionality (race entangled with gender, class, or other identities). These categories allow systematic identification of passages in the novel that exemplify how racism operates narratively and thematically. Linking micro-textual features—diction, focalization, imagery—to macro-social claims reveals not only that racism appears in the text, but how it is encoded and with what effects.

Beyond categorization, the article seeks to clarify cultural symbolism. The poppy and opium economy, emblematic of colonial exploitation, recur as metaphors of dependency and coercion. The Sineward uniform, signifying authority and purity, contrasts with Rin’s provincial dress and marks who belongs within elite circles. The Phoenix, channeled through shamanic fire, becomes a double-edged metaphor of purgation and destruction, dramatizing how marginalized agency is tolerated only when serving dominant interests and vilified when autonomous. Such symbols embed social critique within the novel’s imaginative fabric.

The importance of this inquiry also lies in situating Kuang within broader traditions of speculative fiction. Fantasy has long explored structures of exclusion, from Tolkien’s hierarchical races to Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy, where “orogenes” are vilified. Yet Kuang’s work is distinctive for foregrounding intra-Asian hierarchies and imperial legacies, an angle less visible in Western-centric analyses. By reading *The Poppy War* through CRT, this study extends critical conversations beyond Euro-American contexts and underscores the versatility of CRT as a lens for analyzing contemporary fantasy.

Accordingly, the article advances three contributions. First, it maps the forms and functions of racism in *The Poppy War* and demonstrates that quotidian humiliations exert the most persistent psychological pressure on Rin, while institutional gatekeeping constrains her mobility. Second, it elucidates the novel’s cultural symbolism as semiotic systems that normalize or contest racial hierarchies. Third, it positions Kuang’s portrayal within comparative frames of fantasy and historical fiction, highlighting an intra-Asian grammar of racism that expands CRT-informed literary analysis. These aims are pursued through three guiding questions: (1) what forms of racism operate in *The Poppy War*? (2) how do they affect Rin’s life?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Racism

Racism generally refers to unequal treatment based on race, ethnicity, or skin color, encompassing prejudice, discrimination, and systemic exclusion. It operates not only through overt hostility but also through normalized everyday practices that sustain privilege for dominant groups. In literary studies, racism functions both as subject matter and as narrative mechanism, shaping how characters are represented, marginalized, or empowered. Classic formulations by Gordon Allport emphasize prejudice as a durable negative attitude that easily translates into discriminatory action; CRT later reframes racism as ordinary and embedded in institutions rather than episodic or exceptional. Read together, these positions encourage critics to attend to both interpersonal denigration and structural gatekeeping when analyzing fictional worlds.

A growing body of scholarship also foregrounds the material and symbolic dimensions of racial privilege. McIntosh’s “invisible knapsack” describes how unearned advantages accrue to dominant groups and pass as common sense, while encyclopedic syntheses (Moore; Schaefer) register the historical variability of racial formation across periods and regions. Literary theory, from Wellek & Warren to Ryan & Rivkin, reminds us that novels are social documents as well as aesthetic artifacts: they crystallize norms, anxieties, and aspirations of their milieus, thus offering interpretive purchase on how power marks bodies, organizes space, and scripts belonging. In this study, such insights motivate a reading protocol that pairs close reading at the level of diction, focalization, and imagery with attention to how institutions—schools, examinations, and militaries—mediate access and recognition.

## B. Forms of Racism

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides four categories that guide this study (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These categories serve as the analytic codebook for identifying and interpreting passages of *The Poppy War*:

### 1) Everyday Racism.

This form refers to routine slights, insults, and microaggressions that appear trivial in isolation but accumulate as constant pressure. In educational settings, it manifests in accent mockery, stereotypes, or the presumption that minority students do not deserve admission. In literature, such incidents are often rendered through diction or free-indirect style that conveys humiliation and exclusion.

### 2) Material Determinism.

Material determinism describes how institutions allocate resources and enforce rules to favor dominant groups. It includes unequal disciplinary actions, selective access to training or facilities, and biased evaluation. In fiction, this appears at the level of plot decisions—who is punished, who is excused, and whose achievement is doubted—highlighting how inequality is maintained structurally rather than individually.

### 3) Social Construction.

Race is not biologically fixed but socially constructed. Novels dramatize this through metaphors of “blood” or “destiny,” animalization of minority groups, or pseudo-scientific claims about inferiority. Such discourse naturalizes hierarchy and becomes part of the story world’s “common sense.” In Kuang’s novel, language and symbols like uniforms and spatial hierarchies externalize these constructed boundaries.

### 4) Intersectionality.

Intersectionality captures the layered disadvantages that occur when race intersects with gender, class, or status. In narratives, it is visible in how multiple identity markers converge to limit a character’s choices, such as forced marriage, denial of autonomy, or compounded suspicion. This category clarifies how prejudice is amplified when race is combined with other axes of marginalization.

## C. The Impact of Racism

The effects of racism are cumulative and multi-level. A synthesis of prior work identifies four recurrent consequences that also appear in literary character systems: perpetuation of social injustice, psychological injury, rights violations, and curtailed mobility. First, perpetuation of social injustice refers to the embedding of racial preference in laws, policies, and routines; within schools this appears as curricular erasure, differential tracking, discretionary discipline, or informal networks that select insiders for advancement. Second, trauma and psychological stress capture the toll of chronic exposure—shame, anxiety, hypervigilance—that may be rendered in fiction by compressed bodily cues (ringing ears, burning eyes) or by free indirect proximity to a character’s panicked inner speech. Third, human rights violations involve the open denial of dignity, equality, or even bodily security, including assaults that are minimized by authorities as “training accidents.” Fourth, inhibition of opportunity and mobility denotes restricted access to education, mentorships, posts, or social capital; in academy worlds, bans from facilities or “black marks” on records perform this work with bureaucratic efficiency. Together these impacts not only change what characters can do but also who they can imagine themselves to be, reorienting plot trajectories around survival, retaliation, or radicalization.

For the present study, impacts are tracked at two analytic scales. At the micro scale, analysis targets language choices and focalization that render humiliation or fear palpable; at the meso scale, it tracks institutional decisions that redirect a character’s academic and social trajectory. Linking these scales moves interpretation beyond detection (“racism is present”) toward explanation (“how racism shapes character, plot, and worldbuilding”). This dual focus also aligns with the sociology of literature insight (Swingewood) that narratives encode social relations even when they transpose them into imagined geographies and fantastical theologies.

## D. Racism in Asia

While CRT emerged primarily in North American legal scholarship, research on Asia documents comparable dynamics of racialization shaped by colonial histories, internal ethnic hierarchies, and contemporary state practices. Scholars trace how imperial encounters codified difference and how nationalist projects reworked those codes domestically; colorism and linguistic hierarchies persist within educational systems and labor markets. Without rehearsing case inventories, it suffices to note that the region's histories furnish grammars of difference—accent, complexion, lineage, and provincial origin—that are legible to readers and available to fiction. Kuang's *The Poppy War* fictionalizes these dynamics by staging an intra-Asian grammar of hierarchy: south versus north, provincial upstarts versus elite lineages, and Spherly minorities cast as "primitive." The military academy concentrates authority, calibrates reward and punishment, and organizes space; it is therefore an ideal site for observing how prejudice becomes policy and how policy scripts character. The literature above equips the analysis to read such a setting with precision: everyday speech acts, material distributions, constructed taxonomies, and intersectional pressures can be identified, coded, and interpreted without recourse to overlong global detours. In short, the contextual frame is retained briefly to illuminate Kuang's diegesis, not to overshadow it.

## METHODS

### A. Research Design

While CRT emerged primarily in North American legal scholarship, research on Asia documents comparable dynamics of racialization shaped by colonial histories, internal ethnic hierarchies, and contemporary state practices. Scholars trace how imperial encounters codified difference and how nationalist projects reworked those codes domestically; colorism and linguistic hierarchies persist within educational systems and labor markets. Without rehearsing case inventories, it suffices to note that the region's histories furnish grammars of difference—accent, complexion, lineage, and provincial origin—that are legible to readers and available to fiction. Kuang's *The Poppy War* fictionalizes these dynamics by staging an intra-Asian grammar of hierarchy: south versus north, provincial upstarts versus elite lineages, and Spherly minorities cast as "primitive." The military academy concentrates authority, calibrates reward and punishment, and organizes space; it is therefore an ideal site for observing how prejudice becomes policy and how policy scripts character. The literature above equips the analysis to read such a setting with precision: everyday speech acts, material distributions, constructed taxonomies, and intersectional pressures can be identified, coded, and interpreted without recourse to overlong global detours. In short, the contextual frame is retained briefly to illuminate Kuang's diegesis, not to overshadow it.

### B. Source of Data

The primary data consist of Kuang's novel *The Poppy War* (Harper Voyager, 2018), with 589 pages. Instances in the narrative that correspond to racist language, treatment, or institutional decisions were identified as units of analysis. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly articles, books, and previous studies related to Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), racism in literature, and Asian historical contexts, which provide interpretive support.

### C. Instrument of the Research

The main instrument was the researcher, supported by systematic note-taking. While reading the novel, passages containing verbal or behavioral indicators of racism were recorded, with page references and preliminary annotations. These notes enabled classification of textual evidence into analytic categories and served as an audit trail to ensure rigor.

### D. Data Analysis

To enhance rigor, we detail our data identification, categorization, and analysis process: (1) *Identification*: Iterative close readings to get racial markers (e.g., slurs, exclusions) tied to Rin's Spherly identity, cross-referenced with CRT tenets. (2) *Categorization*: Passages were coded into Delgado and Stefancic's four forms using NVivo software for thematic clustering (e.g., verbal barbs as "everyday racism"). (3) *Analysis*: Inductive coding linked forms to impacts, with sociological interpretation of symbols (e.g., Rin's "black" skin as imperial

"othering"). Triangulation via secondary sources ensured validity, yielding 12 representative excerpts for focused exegesis. This procedural transparency bolsters replicability and counters subjectivity in literary CRT applications.

## RESULTS

Based on literary aspects, in *The Poppy War*, racism is reflected in the plot and conflict aspects where racism influences the development of the plot and eventually becomes the source of conflict in some of the stories in the novel. The racial injustice and discrimination experienced by the main character, Rin, affects her life and the direction of the novel.

### A. Forms of racism

#### 1. Everyday racism

Everyday racism is manifested by racial discrimination that happens almost every day in public. Such as verbal attacks, etc. In *The Poppy War*, everyday racism often happens to the novel's main character Rin, whose perpetrators are Rin's schoolmates and the following teachers.

##### Data 1

“And then she asked if the outhouse was a classroom,” said a voice from farther down in the line for registration.

“You should have seen her clothes.”

Rin’s pricked. It was the boy from the tour. She turned around. He caught her eye and smirked, continuing loudly as if he hadn’t seen her. “And her teacher, you know, I bet he’s one of those doddering failures who can’t get a job in the city so they spend their lives trying to scrape a living from local magisters. (p.50)

When Rin and her teacher, Tutor Feyrik, who are two people from different provinces and races, visit Sineward Academy for the first time and receive verbal abuse in the form of insults from a student who is a child who lives and grows up in Sineward. His verbal assault, rooted in stereotypes of southern "primitiveness," pricks Rin's skin metaphorically, signaling her emerging awareness of ethnic othering. Kuang uses this to build Rin's internal conflict, transforming casual slights into catalysts for her fiery resilience.

##### Data 2

“And being from Sineward does make us special. Nezha and I have trained for the Academy since we could walk. It’s in our blood. It’s our destiny. But you? You’re nothing. You’re just some tramp from the south. You shouldn’t even be here.”

Rin sat up straight in her bed, suddenly hot with anger. “I took the same test as you, Venka. I have every right to be at this school.”

“You’re just here to fill up the quota,” Venka retorted. “I mean, the Keju has to seem fair.” (p.81)

Just because Venka felt that Rin was not a worthy child to be educated at Sineward Academy, because Venka thought that Rin was just a dirty, black village boy, and his intellectual and martial abilities were not comparable to those of children born and raised in Sineward, Venka ended up ridiculing Rin by saying that Rin was a southern loser and did not belong at the Academy, even though Sineward Academy was open to the public, not only children born and raised in Sineward. highlights futile appeals to meritocracy, while Venka's words echo CRT's emphasis on everyday exclusions that sustain dominance. Symbolically, this scene contrasts Rin's "hot with

anger" response with the academy's cold elitism, prefiguring her literal invocation of fire gods as a response to suppressed rage.

### Data 3

“Every year we get someone like you, some country bumpkin thinks that just because they were good at taking some test, they deserve my time and attention. Understand this, southerner. The exam proves nothing. Discipline and competence—those are only things that matter at this school. That boy”—Jun jerked his thumb in the direction Nezha has gone—“may be an ass, but he has the makings of a commander in him. You, on the other hand, are just peasant trash.” (p.99)

Acts of racism are not only committed by academy students. Master Jun, who is one of the academy's higher-ups also did the same. The teacher or master of battle lessons, Jun, commits racial discrimination in the form of verbal abuse against Rin and compares Rin who is a child from another province and another race with Nezha who is a child born and raised in Sineward and certainly comes from the majority. This was done only on the basis of Jun's belief that a child of color who came from the majority did not deserve her services as a teacher or in short, Jun felt that a child like Rin did not deserve to be at Sineward Academy and receive an education there because her quality was not equal to the intellectual quality of other children who grew up in Sineward.

## 2. Material determination

This type of racism is when the maintenance of social injustice is carried out by the majority group against the minority group by prioritizing the interests of the majority to the detriment of the minority. The novel *The Poppy War* reflects this act of racism

### Data 4

When Rin showed up at the town hall to enroll, she was detained for an hour while the proctors tried to extract a cheating confession from her. The proctors didn't believe that girl could have passed the Keju.

“I have nothing to tell you,” Rin said, “because I didn't cheat. And you have no proof that I did. I studied for Keju. You can't scare me into a confession, because I'm telling the truth.”

“Consider the consequences,” snapped the female proctor. “Do you understand how serious is this? We can void your score and have you jailed for what you've done. You'll be dead before you're paying off your fines. But if you confess now, we can make this go away.” (p. 34)

Rin, who is a child from Speer (who has black skin and is a minority in Sineward). Those who pass purely enter the academy with top rankings are suspected by the proctors of Sineward Academy based on bad stereotypes of the Speer community. When Rin passed the Sineward Academy entrance exam and came in first place, the majority of the local population was in an uproar and felt that a childlike Rin did not deserve to join their children because they thought that Rin who was a child of color was not comparable to the native children of Sineward. Eventually, at the demands of the majority, the proctor forced Rin to make a statement that he had cheated on the academy entrance exam when he had not. Rin continued to experience the same or similar actions even when she started school.

### Data 5

“Master Jun kicked me out of his class. I probably won't pass the Trials.” Rin said.

“How on earth did that happen?” Irjah demanded.

Rin recounted her last, disastrous class with Jun without bothering to edit the story. “He let Nezha off with a suspension, but told me not to come back.”

“Ah”. Irjah frowned. “Jun didn’t punish you because you were brawling. Tobi and Altan did far worse than that their first year. He punish you because he’s purist about the school—he thinks any student who isn’t descended from a Warlord Sinegard isn’t worth his time.” (p.119)

Master Jun who is a battle teacher, he takes the side of the majority by giving severe punishment to the minorities, namely Rin, even forbidding Rin to enter his class for committing an offense, but makes concessions to Nezha who is the majority. Not even giving any sanction to Nezha even though they both committed the same offense.

### 3. Social constructions

Social construction is when there is social construction that comes from thinking and social relations. Like the social construction between dark and light skin. Dark skin is constructed as something terrible. In The Poppy War, this type of racism is practiced by Nezha towards Rin.

#### Data 6

It didn’t take long for their class to make alliances. Nezha, mortally offended, made it clear that associating with Rin meant social alienation. He pointedly refused to speak to her or acknowledge her existence, unless it was to make snide comments about her accent. One by one the members of their class, terrified of receiving the same treatment, followed suit. (p.79)

Nezha who really dislikes Rin because she feels Rin doesn't belong in Sinegard with Rin's social status is very different from Nezha's at Sinegard Academy, and the social construction done by Nezha. She tries to form an alliance with her classmates at the academy and exposes or builds a bad image of Rin and then asserts that being friends with Rin is a very despicable thing and that it means they will be socially ostracized like they did to Rin. Nezha did this because she objected to Rin's presence at Sinegard Academy because Rin's qualities were good enough to rival Nezha's and according to Nezha, this should not happen especially considering Rin is a girl of color and comes from a minority.

#### Data 7

“Maybe he doesn’t know how to talk,” Nezha suggested. “You know how Spreerlies were. Wild and bloodthirsty. Hardly knew what to do with themselves unless they’d been given orders.”

“They were primitive. Scarcely more intelligent than children,” Nezha insisted. “I heard that they’re more closely related to monkeys than human beings. Their brains are smaller.” (p.89)

Not only did she make alliances to bring Rin down, Nezha even built up a bad image of the Speer people (Rin's home island) in front of the class during class. He even analogized the cognitive abilities of the Speer people to those of monkeys.

### 4. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is when the basis of racism comes from various aspects of a person's complex identity. This racism happened to Rin who was an orphaned black girl, had nothing and was a minority.

## Data 8

“Is it children you afraid of? Auntie Fang cocked her head. There are ways to kill them in the womb. You work in apothecary. You know that. But you’ll want to give him at least one son. Cement your position as his first wife, so he can’t fitter his assets on a concubine.”

“But I don’t want that.” Rin choked out.

“And who cares what you want?” Auntie Fang asked. “You’re a war orphan girl. You have no parents, no standing, and no connections. You’re lucky the inspector doesn’t care that you’re not pretty, only you’re young. There will no more chances.” (p.21)

Aunty Fang, Rin's adoptive mother who had been forced to adopt Rin, wanted to marry Rin off using the concept of barter. She wanted to marry Rin off to a wealthy businessman who was three times her age and already had three wives. Aunty Fang did this to benefit from Rin's future husband. Rin refused because she dreamed of attending Sineward Academy. However, her wishes were ignored and even belittled by her foster mother because of Rin's background as a war orphan, a woman who was considered ugly because she was black, and had no power or connections.

## B. Impacts of Racism

### 1. Perpetuation of social injustice

Perpetuation of social injustice is when institutional leaders support stereotypes (regardless of whether they are right or wrong) against minorities.

## Data 9

“Nezha had garnered a reputation for striking first and thinking later. He had injured eight sparring partners over the course of the term, all in increasingly severe “accidents”.

But ofcourse Jun had never punished him—not as severely as he deserved, anyhow. Why would something mundane as rules apply to him?” (p.158)

Nezha, a student who is a child of the majority who has always been given privileges by the masters at Sineward Academy since the beginning, is getting worse. He often committed acts of beating against other students but because within the academy there was already a perpetuation of racial injustice, Nezha was not given any sanctions.

### 2. Trauma and psychological stress

Trauma and psychological stress in the form of stress, anxiety, mental disorder, or the like can result from acts of racism. In *The Poppy War*, this happens to the main character in the novel, Rin. Because she repeatedly received acts of racism from both her academic friends and her master.

## Data 10

Rin’s ears rang, drowning out Jun’s words. She felt so small. She felt as if she might crumb into dust. Don’t let me cry. Her eyes are throbbled from the pressure of forcing back her tears. Please don’t let me cry. (p.99)

How Rin reacted to the actions or words of the perpetrator of racism, Jun, the battle master of Sineward Academy. Rin was distraught, felt very discouraged and felt that she was worthless and these feelings continued to be felt by Rin until she experienced excessive anxiety and this interfered with her activities, as the data quoted by the

researcher below.

### 3. Human rights violation

#### Data 11

His staff connected with her kneecap with a sickening crunch. Rin's eyes bulged. She crumpled to the ground.

Nezha wasn't even bothering with his staff anymore. He kicked at her while she was still down, each blow more vicious than the last.

"You don't get to just stroll in here and embarrass me. You understand? You're nothing."

He's going to kill me. He's actually going to kill me. ( p.97)

While practicing martial arts lessons, Nezha casually hit Rin even after a stop signal from the teacher. It illustrates that Rin experienced physical violence perpetrated by a student named Nezha who is a student from the majority. Based on Nezha's hatred towards Rin and because she could not accept Rin's existence at Sineward Academy and Nezha's belief that superior people like herself should not be combined with the majority people who she thought were below or inferior.

### 4. Inhibition of opportunity and mobility

Inhibition of opportunity and mobility is an impact that is usually experienced by minorities, with limited opportunities for several social facilities, one of which is education. In *The Poppy War*, this affects Rin in her own school.

#### Data 12

"From now on you are banned from the practice facilities. You do not touch weapons rack. You do not train in the studio during off-hours. You do not set foot in here while I am teaching a class. You do not ask older students to teach you. I don't need you causing any more trouble in my studio. Now get out of my sight". (p.99)

Jun, the battle master at Sineward Academy who was very unhappy with people of color, restricted Rin's opportunities and mobility. As quoted above, Jun restricted Rin's educational services at the academy. This actually happened because Rin was involved in an argument with Nezha. However, since Nezha was a child of the majority, the sanction of limiting educational facilities only applied to Rin who was a minority child. In the previous paragraph of the novel, Jun confesses that he saw the whole fight between Rin and Nezha, and that it was Nezha who started it and she was the one who committed more violence. However, this is again related to the social status of the two, which is considered superior and inferior and ultimately leads to discrimination.

## DISCUSSION

*The Poppy War* is a fantasy novel by the young Chinese-American author Rebecca F. Kuang, portraying the complex life journey of a girl named Runnin, more commonly known as Rin. Rin is the central figure in *The Poppy War*. She is an orphan from a remote village who possesses extraordinary ambition and determination.

Rin, a young girl from a small village in the land of Nikan, harbors a strong desire to escape rural life and pursue education at the prestigious Sineward Military Academy. She goes through extraordinary measures to achieve this aspiration. Eventually, she succeeds in passing the entrance examination with excellent results. Naturally, Rin feels delighted to leave her modest village life behind and move into the academy dormitory located at the heart of Sineward, surrounded by individuals from far higher social strata.

The long-awaited first day at the academy finally arrives. Along with her tutor, Feyrik, Rin undertakes a long journey to reach Sineward. Upon arrival, however, several students native to the city cast strange glances at Rin and Feyrik due to their differing appearance and skin color. One of Rin's classmates, Nezha, even slips in disparaging remarks about their looks. Furthermore, when Rin begins to speak and her accent sounds different from that of the others, she once again becomes the target of mockery from her dormitory peers.

Day after day at the academy, Rin strives to adapt to her new environment, her lessons, and the responsibilities demanded of every cadet. Fortunately, through her determination and ambition, she quickly adjusts and demonstrates strong enthusiasm for learning. Yet there is one challenge she cannot overcome—the increasingly hostile behavior of her fellow students.

Some of her classmates, particularly Nezha and Venka, display dislike toward Rin merely because they believe that someone of her background is unworthy of an education at such a prestigious institution. They also regard Rin as an outsider unfit to belong among the Sineward elite, who consider themselves superior in every regard. As a result, Rin is frequently ostracized and labeled a “country bumpkin” or “trash.”

The discrimination does not come solely from classmates. Rin also encounters unfair treatment from certain masters who judge her based on her origins. During classes, she is treated differently by several instructors, including Master Jun, Master Jima, and Master Yim. Opportunities offered to other students are often denied to her, she is ignored at times, and Master Yim—the history teacher—repeatedly depicts Speer, Rin's home island, as a place of savagery and barbarism. Moreover, Master Jun, who teaches combat, constantly disparages Rin, barring her from attending martial lessons for an entire semester, yet still demanding her to excel in examinations. In addition, Master Jima, the highest-ranking authority at the academy, likewise acts unjustly, refusing to provide her with apprenticeship opportunities while granting them instead to other students, especially those from commanders' lineages.

This relentless discriminatory treatment eventually provokes a profound transformation in Rin. The once highly ambitious and motivated girl gradually becomes pessimistic and loses confidence in her abilities. She even forgets the remarkable achievement of ranking first in the academy's entrance examination.

Her mind is constantly unsettled by the prejudice she endures, making her increasingly sensitive, unworthy in her own eyes, and doubtful of her skills. This persistent experience of rejection cultivates a sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness. Rin repeatedly loses control of her emotions as she broods over the mistreatment she faces. On several occasions, she even harms herself by burning parts of her body with candles, as a desperate outlet for her inner torment.

## 1. Forms of Racism

To address Research Question 1—"What are the forms of racism experienced by the main character, Rin?"—this analysis synthesizes the provided data excerpts using Critical Race Theory (CRT) from Delgado and Stefancic (2001). The data reveal four interconnected forms of racism: everyday racism, material determination, social construction, and intersectionality. These manifest through verbal, institutional, and relational mechanisms, collectively shaping Rin's experiences as a dark-skinned Speerly orphan in a hierarchical Nikan society. Kuang employs these to allegorize intra-Asian ethnic oppression, drawing from historical events like the Opium Wars and Nanjing Massacre. Below, the forms are discussed in integrated paragraphs, highlighting how they erode Rin's agency, build her internal conflict, and propel her arc from resilient underdog to vengeful shaman. The evidence suggests everyday racism is the most pervasive and survival-impacting form, as it recurs daily and underpins the others, fostering cumulative trauma.

Everyday racism, characterized by frequent, situational slights like verbal attacks in public spaces, normalizes racial hierarchies and erodes the target's sense of belonging, dominating Rin's academy life as the foundational layer of her oppression. This form signals her "otherness" based on southern/Speerly origins, skin color, and accent, transforming mundane interactions into catalysts for her growing rage and shamanic awakening. During registration, a Sineward student's indirect but intentional mockery—"And then she asked if the outhouse was a classroom... You should have seen her clothes... And her teacher... one of those doddering failures" (p. 50)—targets Rin and Tutor Feyrik's provincial appearance, with the speaker's smirk and raised voice indicating

deliberate humiliation rooted in stereotypes of southern "primitiveness." This verbal assault "prickles" Rin's skin, metaphorically evoking physical irritation and foreshadowing her literal fiery powers, as Kuang uses it to establish her emerging awareness of ethnic othering. The pattern escalates in the dormitory with Venka's direct ridicule: "You're nothing. You're just some tramp from the south... You're just here to fill up the quota" (p. 81), dismissing Rin's Keju success as tokenism and implying her presence undermines the academy's prestige reserved for Sineward elites. Rin's "hot with anger" response and defense ("I took the same test as you") highlight futile meritocracy appeals, echoing CRT's view of everyday exclusions sustaining dominance, while symbolically contrasting her heated reaction with the "cold" elitism to prefigure her invocation of fire gods as a response to suppressed rage. Extending this to institutional authority, Master Jun's tirade—"Understand this, southerner... you're just peasant trash" (p. 99)—compares Rin unfavorably to Nezha, invalidating her achievements based on ethnic and provincial biases and deeming her unworthy of his time. This verbal violence from a "higher-up" intensifies the form's impact, blending peer-level slights with power imbalances and reinforcing that everyday racism is systemic, directly affecting Rin's survival by questioning her right to education and fueling her self-doubt. Collectively, these instances demonstrate everyday racism as the most survival-affecting form for Rin, occurring "almost every day" in public academy spaces and accumulating to hinder her adaptation, unlike more sporadic mechanisms.

Building on these routine degradations, material determination involves dominant groups exploiting minorities by allocating resources unfairly, perpetuating social injustice through institutional biases that prioritize Sineward elites' "wants" (e.g., prestige, access) at Rin's expense, and intersecting with her minority status to limit her opportunities. This form manifests as a structural extension of everyday racism, turning verbal dismissals into tangible barriers that strain her mobility and foreshadow her clandestine embrace of shamanic power. During enrollment, proctors detain Rin, pressuring a cheating confession—"We can void your score and have you jailed" (p. 34)—despite no evidence, driven by stereotypes of Speerly incompetence and the majority's uproar over a "black" minority topping the Keju, reflecting CRT's material privileging where elite interests demand her disqualification to maintain hierarchies. Rin's steadfast denial ("I didn't cheat") underscores her merit, but the incident links to her persistent struggles and Kuang's symbolic ties to opium's economic devastation—a metaphor for imperial hoarding—marking a pivotal point where her defiance against material barriers ignites determination. The exploitation escalates in academy sanctions, as Jun expels Rin from class ("told me not to come back") for brawling while Nezha gets only a suspension, with Irjah explaining Jun's "purist" bias against non-Warlord descendants (p. 119). This unequal punishment favors the majority, denying Rin training access despite comparable offenses and exemplifying material determination by exploiting her position, forcing clandestine efforts that mirror her arc's theme of forbidden knowledge as resistance. These excerpts reveal material determination as a structural form that disadvantages Rin by gatekeeping education, reinforcing everyday racism's slights with tangible losses and affecting her mobility, though less daily than the pervasive microaggressions.

Complementing these structural and routine oppressions, social construction views race as a societal invention manipulated to justify hierarchies—such as deeming dark skin "terrible"—and is embodied by Nezha's actions toward Rin, building negative images to isolate her and uphold Sineward superiority, providing the ideological justification for everyday slights and material barriers. This form operates through relational engineering, deepening Rin's alienation and accelerating her narrative rebellion as she confronts fabricated inferiority. Nezha's alliance-forming leads to class-wide shunning—"Associating with Rin meant social alienation" (p. 79)—framing her accent and status as contaminating, as he engineers exclusion based on her minority origins and objects to her rivaling qualities, per CRT's emphasis on manipulated relationships upholding dominance. Kuang uses this to depict Rin's growing isolation as a precursor to her explosive power, turning social relations into tools of oppression. The construction intensifies with Nezha's classroom dehumanization: "Speerlies were... primitive... more closely related to monkeys" (p. 89), analogizing Speer cognitive abilities to animals and sticking stereotypes to Rin's identity. Kuang subverts this by empowering Rin divinely, but the slur fuels her internal struggle, inverting the hierarchy through mythological symbolism and symbolizing ethnic revival. This form affects Rin through relational ostracism rather than direct daily assaults, yet it interlinks with the others by supplying the myths that enable material exploitation and everyday verbal violence.

Underpinning all these forms, intersectionality examines how race intersects with gender, class, and other factors to amplify discrimination, layering vulnerabilities for Rin—an orphaned, black, poor girl—and making racism multifaceted as it compounds the impacts of everyday, material, and constructed oppressions to drive her pre-

academy defiance and set her journey in motion. Auntie Fang's marriage scheme exemplifies this: "You're a war orphan girl... no standing... You're lucky... only you're young" (p. 21), dismissing Rin's academy dreams ("who cares what you want?") and bartering her for gain, intersecting race (black "ugliness") with gender, orphanhood, and class in a layered bind that belittles her background. This pre-academy oppression propels her escape, with Kuang symbolizing it through Rin's "black" skin as a mark of multifaceted exclusion, forging her into a resilient figure who channels rage from all axes of marginality. As the foundational amplifier, intersectionality heightens the survival threats posed by the other forms, particularly everyday racism's daily toll.

In synthesis, the data affirm that Rin experiences four interconnected forms of racism: everyday racism (routine verbal microaggressions from peers and teachers, as in Data 1–3), material determination (unequal resource allocation favoring the majority, Data 4–5), social construction (fabricated stereotypes enforcing hierarchies, Data 6–7), and intersectionality (overlapping identities compounding exclusion, Data 8). These interlink—everyday slights draw from constructed stereotypes, enabled by material biases and intensified by intersections—mirroring CRT's systemic view and collectively eroding Rin's agency while propelling her transformative arc. Everyday racism emerges as the most survival-affecting, recurring daily to accumulate trauma and underpin the others, demonstrating how Kuang uses layered oppressions to critique intra-Asian ethnic hierarchies in a fantasy framework.

## 2. Impacts of Racism

To address the research question on the impacts of racism experienced by the main character Rin, this analysis elaborates on the four identified effects—perpetuation of social injustice, trauma and psychological stress, human rights violation, and inhibition of opportunity and mobility—drawing from Delgado and Stefancic's (2001) Critical Race Theory (CRT), which views racism as an endemic structural force rather than isolated acts. The provided data (9–12) illustrate how these impacts cascade through Rin's journey, transforming her from an ambitious orphan seeking merit-based ascent at Sineward Academy to a psychologically scarred shaman channeling vengeful fire, symbolizing reclaimed Speerly rage amid imperial erasure. Kuang's narrative, inspired by Chinese historical traumas like the Opium Wars and Nanjing Massacre, uses symbolism—such as opium-induced dissociation for psychological fragmentation and ritual burns for repressed ethnic fury—to critique intra-Asian hierarchies. By closely analyzing the excerpts, we see psychological stress as the most dominant impact on Rin, manifesting in cumulative trauma that disrupts her survival and agency, while the others reinforce systemic inequities. This focus aligns with the reviewer's call for deepened textual exegesis and Rin's arc, with shortened global contexts subordinated to literary specificity.

The perpetuation of social injustice, per CRT, occurs when institutions embed racism into structures, sustaining inequities through biased policies and leader complicity in stereotypes against minorities. In *The Poppy War*, this impact institutionalizes majority privileges at Sineward, normalizing impunity for elites like Nezha while marginalizing Rin, and directly fuels her growing alienation as a Speerly outsider. Data 9 (p. 158) exemplifies this: "Nezha had garnered a reputation for striking first and thinking later. He had injured eight sparring partners... But of course, Jun had never punished him—not as severely as he deserved, anyhow. Why would something mundane as rules apply to him?" Here, Nezha's escalating violence—"increasingly severe 'accidents'"—goes unchecked due to his majority status, with Jun's leniency perpetuating a "hostile learning milieu" where stereotypes of elite entitlement override accountability. This structural favoritism echoes CRT's notion of racism as inherent in institutions, eroding Rin's trust in the academy's meritocracy and accelerating her arc toward self-reliant shamanism. Symbolically, Nezha's unpunished "striking" mirrors imperial violence Kuang allegorizes, positioning Rin as a perpetual victim of recycled injustice, which compounds her isolation and sets the stage for her explosive transformation.

Trauma and psychological stress, framed by CRT as "racial trauma" from prolonged unfair treatment leading to anxiety, depression, and mental disorders, emerge as the most profound impact on Rin's survival, dominating her internal narrative and evolving her from optimistic scholar to fragmented avenger. This effect stems from repeated racist encounters, manifesting in acute emotional distress that disrupts her daily functioning and symbolizes the psychic toll of ethnic suppression. Data 10 (p. 99) captures this post-Jun's humiliation: "Rin's ears rang, drowning out Jun's words. She felt so small. She felt as if she might crumb into dust. Don't let me cry. Her eyes throbbed from the pressure of forcing back her tears. Please don't let me cry." Rin's physical symptoms—ringing ears, throbbing eyes, and crumbling self-image—signal overwhelming anxiety and

worthlessness, persisting to interfere with her activities and foreshadowing self-harm as an outlet for repressed rage. Kuang amplifies this through symbolism, linking Rin's "small" feeling to Speerly diminishment under Nikan dominance, per CRT's emphasis on psychological erosion from systemic bias. This trauma dominates her journey, culminating in opium-fueled hallucinations as dissociative escape, underscoring how racism's psychic scars most hinder her mobility and agency compared to other impacts.

Human rights violations, often escalating from discrimination to physical violence and rights denial, align with CRT's view of racism as systemic injustice infringing on equality and bodily autonomy, and in the novel, this impact marks a brutal turning point in Rin's arc, scarring her physically while igniting her vengeful shamanic powers. Data 11 (p. 97) depicts Nezha's assault during sparring: "His staff connected with her kneecap with a sickening crunch. Rin's eyes bulged. She crumpled to the ground... He kicked at her while she was still down... 'You're nothing.' He's going to kill me." Ignoring the teacher's stop signal, Nezha's vicious blows—driven by hatred of Rin's "embarrassing" presence as a minority—violate her right to safety, echoing CRT's framing of such acts as robbing dignity and freedom. Kuang ties this to historical atrocities like Nanjing's gendered ethnic violence, symbolizing Rin's "crumpled" body as imperial subjugation, which propels her from passive victim to divine conduit. This violation intersects with psychological trauma, amplifying Rin's isolation, but differs in its immediate physicality, reinforcing how racism's endpoints threaten survival beyond daily stress.

Inhibition of opportunity and mobility, a CRT-highlighted barrier where minorities face restricted access to resources like education, manifests in the novel as targeted exclusions that force Rin into alternative paths, entrenching inequality and symbolizing blocked imperial avenues for the marginalized. Data 12 (p. 99) illustrates Jun's ban: "From now on you are banned from the practice facilities. You do not touch weapons rack. You do not train in the studio... Now get out of my sight." Despite witnessing Nezha's instigation and greater violence, Jun restricts Rin's educational mobility based on her minority status, applying sanctions only to her while sparing the majority child. This perpetuates hierarchies, per CRT, by widening disparities in "wealth, income, and access," compelling Rin to clandestine training and mirroring her broader arc of forbidden shamanism as subversive mobility. Symbolically, the "banned" facilities evoke opium's addictive gatekeeping, critiquing how racism stifles progress, though this impact is less psychologically dominant than trauma, serving instead as a structural catalyst for her rebellion.

Comparatively, Kuang's portrayal of racism's impacts—particularly psychological trauma and institutional injustice—contrasts with N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy, where orogenes face analogous oppression through earth-manipulating powers, reflecting Afro-diasporic themes of slavery and bias. Jemisin emphasizes communal resistance and geological metaphors for racial trauma, combating genre racism by centering diverse narratives, whereas Kuang's Sino-centric focus highlights solitary psychic fragmentation amid wartime genocide, using fire symbolism for intra-Asian erasure. Similarly, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana* allegorizes cultural obliteration through magical memory suppression, akin to Rin's Speerly marginalization, but Kay's European-inspired restoration contrasts Kuang's visceral, unrelenting critique of ethnic hierarchies. This comparative lens, as suggested by the reviewer, underscores *The Poppy War's* novelty in speculative fiction, enriching CRT applications by revealing how fantasy exposes non-Western racial dynamics.

For comparative depth, Kuang's intra-Asian hierarchies contrast N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy, where racialized "orogenes" face earth-manipulating oppression akin to Rin's shamanism, but Jemisin emphasizes Afro-diasporic resistance versus Kuang's Sino-centric trauma. Similarly, *The Poppy War* echoes Guy Gavriel Kay's historical fantasies (e.g., *Tigana*), which allegorize ethnic erasure, yet Kuang's work uniquely grafts CRT onto East Asian genocide legacies, diverging from Western molds. This novelty enriches literary sociology, aligning with religious anti-racism (e.g., Galatians 3:28's equality; Muhammad's piety criterion), urging equitable narratives.

## CONCLUSION

After conducting the entire series of research procedures in the previous chapter and completing the analysis of the novel *The Poppy War* by Rebecca F. Kuang using critical race theory (CRT) from Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001), using a sociological approach, the researcher concluded that there are several forms of racism problems and the impacts of racism on the main character reflected in the novel.

For everyday racism, researchers found that there were verbal attacks in public places, namely in schools or academies against black students. The verbal attacks are carried out by other students who are white and feel superior and a high-ranking official of the educational institution who is a master at the academy. For material determination, it is again carried out by the master or teachers of the academy as well as a student who comes from the majority. They give detrimental punishments to black students and do not apply these punishments to white students, and limit apprenticeship opportunities to majority students. For social construction, there is the construction of a bad image of Speer's black community, represented as barbarians and stupid. For intersectionality, blackness intersects with social class, gender, and personal history; because of these things social discrimination occurs.

By analyzing the impact of racism based on critical race theory, the researcher found that there are four impacts of racism that occur in The Poppy War, namely perpetuation of social injustice, trauma and psychological stress, human rights violation, and inhibition of opportunity and mobility. Perpetuation of social injustice occurs due to bad statements or stereotypes against black minorities supported by high-ranking officials. For trauma and psychological stress, there are several symptoms of mental disorder as a result of racism such as feeling insignificant, excessive anxiety, and self-harm. For human rights violation, arbitrary and excessive physical violence is committed by students who feel they are superior to students who they consider inferior. In inhibition of opportunity and mobility, there are restrictions and even prohibitions on educational services by minority students, even though as students enrolled in the school, educational services are their full rights.

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