

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

For a long time, the concept of the hero has been a major part of literature. It usually shown that heroes as people to look up to because of their courage and good qualities. This goes back to Greek mythology, with figures like Achilles, Odysseus, Heracles, Perseus, and many more. Throughout the time and eras, this concept of what a hero is has gotten more complicated, because not every hero stays put with their good intentions. Some specification has applied for some heroes who the righteousness has been twisted in doing something fatal for their people that flawed their virtue at the very beginning. These characteristics were applied to the heroes who failed to holding onto their morals that their set at the very first place to gain something even more important that leading to a catastrophe which evoke pity for the readers, this type of hero known as Tragic Hero.

Aristotle was one of the first people to really try to define what makes a tragic hero work. In the book entitled *Poetics*, a tragedy is not just about a bad person doing bad things was a statement he made. Instead, he claimed that a tragedy presents the fortune shift from a person who neither perfectly evil nor perfectly virtuous. (Aristotle, trans. 1996). This kind of person is usually someone who bare the high stature that because of some flaw or mistake leads to the downfall of them, this flaw is known for *hamartia*. The purpose of this kind of narrative is for *catharsis* — to made the readers or audiences feel pity and fear just to be cleansed of those emotions after (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Aristotle really cared about the plot structure because he believes that the

downfall of the character is inescapable, analogically like a chain reaction that structurally leads one event to another.

While these rules were set by Aristotle thousand years ago, critics later on have shown that set of those rules are actually flexible. Frye (1957) stated that to have tragedy, one does not need to be king, gods, and noble — the right structure is all it needed— in which also been agreed and supported by Golden (1968). Modern understanding of term “tragic hero” is that define by the flaw that caused by the choice that leads to inescapable disaster, for the downfall that they had to face are not merely a bad luck instead it is a set up to built who they truly are.

If there are any reason that might break the righteousness of these heroes consistently, then one of the answers to address such a question might be power. In the trail of literature, power has always been shown as double-edged sword that could bring both justice and destruction, depending on whose hands yielded it. Power with its complexities not only made external conflict such as; wars or battles, instead the character was forced to questioning about the human nature that were resulted morality and ambition. Those kind of wandered are always being the peak point of a battle between authority and personal intention that has always been shown in both ancient and nowadays stories.

The intersection of psychological realism and classical tragedy in contemporary fantasy provides a compelling field for literary analysis. R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* (2018) serves as a prime subject for this inquiry because it challenges traditional heroic archetypes by placing a war orphan within a classical tragic structure. The novel offers a unique opportunity to examine how ancient concepts of *hamartia* and downfall manifest in a modern, psychologically complex character. This research is necessary to bridge the gap between classical literary theory and modern

psychological frameworks, specifically analysing how the corruption of the psyche drives the narrative structure.

This is when the paradoxical of power start to matter. A social psychologist named Dacher Keltner wrote a book about psychological influence in the use of power. In his book entitled *The Power Paradox* (2016), Keltner argues that the perception of people about power is not quite right, while others thought it was something you had, he instead saying that power is a state of mind. He wrote that he often found people gain power with the emphatic strategy, such as being nice, cooperative and supportive. But the “paradox” stands for the irony behind it, because once they actually yielded the power, they lose the exact qualities they had from the start. The empathy become less as the power grow increasing and the more impulsive their response — doing bad things justified by them easily (Keltner, 2016).

This research uses the psychological theories developed by Keltner and the literary theory developed by Aristotle. It places the both sides of the same coin together as a way to analyse how a contemporary character deconstructs through both psychological and literary lens. Characters like this are very common in many forms of contemporary fantasy especially the dark forms referred to as "grimdark" (Campfire Writing, 2024). Unlike their predecessors the knights in shining armor they are complex moral beings. These characters receive an abundance of politically, militarily or magically based power, but ultimately destroy themselves.

One need looks no further than R.F. Kuang’s novel *The Poppy War* (2018) to find an example. Taking place in an imaginary nation reminiscent of twentieth-century China called Nikan, *The Poppy War* follows Fang Runin, popularly called Rin. Rin began her life as a war orphan on society’s lowest rung. She clawed her way into the premiere military academy, Sinegard

through her utter determination and morally suspect brilliance. And from there, she learned that she possesses shamanic abilities that bond her to the Phoenix, a wrathful fire deity with massive destruction effect. The book follows Rin from talented student to battle commander capable of unthinkable brutality.

When Rin chose to destroy the island nation of Mugen, it is less a plot development and more of a complete fracturing of her character. She changes who she is and alters the geopolitics of the entire world (Kuang, 2018). Examining Rin's character arc is interesting because she perfectly demonstrates what the Power Paradox says will happen: as Rin obtains more power, her sense of humanity is gradually stripped from her. This thesis functions that Rin is a tragic hero for modern times. Her destruction comes not from the rigors of war breaking her, but from her power itself warping her psychology. By combining Keltner and Aristotle, the researcher can prove that Rin's tragedy is both structurally and psychologically sound.

1.2 Identification of the Problems

Literature has persistently explored the theme of power, specifically how it corrupts individuals from within. Characters granted great power often possess pre-existing flaws or vulnerabilities that allow power to take control. In traditional tragedies, the hero suffers from a singular tragic flaw, such as hubris or ambition. However, contemporary tragic heroes are far more complex, navigating a mix of internal and external pressures. To understand this clearly, we must define the key terms in the title. Power Paradox refers to Keltner's (2016) theory that gaining power requires empathy but losing power's grip requires losing that empathy. Aristotelian Downfall refers to the structural collapse of the hero (Peripeteia) caused by a specific error (Hamartia).

The flaw Rin faces is often viewed as a mixture of trauma, identity crisis, and oppression. However, this thesis argues that these factors are distinct from the mechanism of power. Trauma creates Rin's rage. War gives her justification. Oppression shapes her ambition. But power transforms these pressures into catastrophic action. This distinction is crucial because while trauma motivates her, power is the tool that enables her destruction. Rin shifts from a powerless peasant to a near god-emperor like, blurring the line between good and evil. She fights with genuine intentions to defend her people, yet her actions become increasingly devastating. This leads to the problem: How can a character with good intentions become a perpetrator of genocide? This thesis addresses the problem of how external pressures (trauma, war, oppression) interact with the internal psychological mechanism of power to produce a tragic hero.

1.3 The Review of Previous Studies

R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* released in 2018 gotten quite attention from scholars, because it mostly combination of Chinese history and its mythology that narrated into a fantasy-like story that reflects the Second Sino-Japanese War. Lin (2021) highlights that Kuang uses this story to reshape collective trauma by using military structure and mythology elements to process the historical violence. This book got a bit controversial because the description of war violence was portrayed graphicly. Lewis (2024) looks from the side of the reader, he argues that the how this book is wrongly put in young adult genre, because the book consist of the explicit description about the horror of war, the grotesque explanation of how war crime had done. Which is true, because the researcher rather finds it rather amusing since very few who talk about this book and then it being controversial because it was put in the wrong section of genre, Lewis argues that this book supposed to be along with Grimdark genre with got a supportive response in the comment section.

While Sidhu (2022) looks the intrinsic part of novel, morality. Rin's cruelty not as something she was born with, but as a way she adapted to survive the systemic violence and colonial oppression she was facing. Looking at the novel from a political standpoint, Teo (2020) applies a postcolonial framework. Teo argues that Kuang portrays power as something cyclical. When oppressed groups finally gain control, they may unintentionally reproduce the same forms of violence that were once inflicted upon them. This interpretation suggests that power does not automatically lead to justice but can instead continue patterns of domination.

While these studies provide valuable insights into trauma, morality, and political dynamics within the novel, they tend to overlook one important aspect. Specifically, they do not closely examine the structure of Rin's transformation through a defined psychological theory. In addition, there is little attempt to frame her character arc using a formal tragic model drawn from classical literature.

In the field of psychology, Keltner (2016) established hypothesis that the change of behaviour is related to the power that one yield. He argues in his book entitled *The Power Paradox* that people tend to gain power through sharing socially good impressions by gaining empathy yet tend to lose that very characters once they having power over the others. From that, it causes the empathy decreased, increasing impulsivity, and moral disengagement (Keltner, 2016). This is were back up by the studies by Fiske (2010) and Kraus et al. (2011) that supported it by implying power could evolves people on how they thinking which leads them to careless decision about others.

The problem that can be seen is that even with all these psychology studies and analyses that we have on literature, nobody has brought them together to look at Rin. People acknowledge that Rin becomes morally worse (Sidhu, 2022; Teo, 2020). However, they do not explain how can

it happens using Keltner's framework. There is, therefore, a gap yet to be filled between the science of power and the story of power in the novel of *The Poppy War*.

On the other hands, from the view of literary, the foundation theory was still applied in this field by Aristotle in his book entitled *Poetics*. He defines tragedy as a *mimesis*—an imitation of a serious and complete action which had four essential elements; *hamartia* (error), *peripeteia* (reversal), and *anagnorisis* (recognition), and *catharsis* (pity and fear) (Aristotle, trans. Butcher, 1902). He insisted that the downfall that the hero had to face is not because of the villain yet it was the cause of the human limitation that were flawed them.

Critics from theoretical side, such as Golden (1973), emphasize that for Aristotle, the plot must make sense logically. According to Bradley (1904), the tragic hero is great enough to fall greatly. Their suffering produces a kind of insight. We still use Aristotle to look at stories about the conflict between what we intend and what actually happens (Abrams and Harpham 2012). Please note that phrases which are common in parts seem less relevant. Oates (2019) indeed sees Rin's moral decay as strikingly reminiscent of a classical tragedy since she learns the truth only after ruining everything.

Frye (1957) takes this a step further, putting tragedy into a bigger mythic structure. Bajorek (2020) notes that modern fantasy likes to mix epic myths with realistic psychological problems. This made a hero not only to be huge and powerful but also deeply human and flawed. This shift is exactly what allows the researcher to mix Keltner's modern psychology with Aristotle's old rules. Even though there is a lot of scholarship on this book, there is no study that systematically uses the Power Paradox and Aristotelian tragedy together to explain how the main character, Rin can be seen as tragic hero because the phsycological effect of power paradox that affect her. This

study offers a new perspective to see how classical theory can be used in the contemporary works with combination of psychological view to fill the gap.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does Rin's use of power psychologically transform her character as explained through Dacher Keltner's Power Paradox in *The Poppy War*?
2. How does Rin's psychological transformation produce a tragic narrative structure according to Aristotelian tragedy?
3. How does Rin fulfilled the characteristics of a modern tragic hero within a Neo-Aristotelian framework?

1.5 The Scope of the Research

The research focuses on the elements of thematic analysis that will limits several areas. This study looks more on into the first book of the trilogy, *The Poppy War* (2018), which means it will not discussing broader transformation of her in the continuation of the second and third book, *The Dragon Republic* and *The Burning God*. The scope is limited for the narrative that only looked at the events that leading the transformation of the main character being tragic hero and applying these characteristics to Rin.

On the other hands, for the theoretical framework, this research will implement theories of Power Paradox by Keltner that outlines the psychological concepts, Aristotelian tragedy structural concepts to prove she being the tragic hero, and Neo-Aristotelian to prove a nowadays character can still fit within the classical theory by adapting as Modern Tragic Hero. This research does not

include broader historical and political theories, rather it focuses on how power affect morality through thematically analysis. It does not include a comprehensive analysis on trilogy novels nor real geopolitical implications on the book.

1.6 The Objective of the Research

1. To examine Rin's psychological transformation through her use of power in *The Poppy War* by applying Dacher Keltner's Power Paradox.
2. To identify how Rin's psychological transformation produces a tragic narrative structure based on Aristotelian theory of tragedy.
3. To analyse Rin's position as a modern tragic hero through a Neo-Aristotelian literary framework.

