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Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms of Sring Venka in Response to Sexual Trauma and PTSD in *The Poppy War Series* by R.F. Kuang²

**Dysfunkcyjne mechanizmy obronne Sring Venki jako reakcja na traumę seksualną
i zespół stresu pourazowego w *Trylogii Wojen Makowych* autorstwa R.F. Kuang**

ABSTRAKT

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest uzasadnienie tezy, zgodnie z którą Sring Venka stosuje dysfunkcyjne mechanizmy obronne (znane również jako niedojrzałe mechanizmy obronne) ze względu na traumę seksualną spowodowaną gwałtem i wywołanym przez nią zespołem stresu pourazowego (PTSD). Sring Venka jest postacią z *Trylogii Wojen Makowych* autorstwa R.F. Kuang, reprezentującą gatunek fantastyki grimdark opartej na historycznych wydarzeniach z XX-wiecznych Chin. Choć trylogia jest popularnym tematem w mainstreamowych mediach, postać Venki jest często pomijana lub rażąco niezrozumiana. Mając to na uwadze, niniejszy artykuł rozpoczynam krótkim streszczeniem Trylogii i aktualnym komentarzem krytycznym na jej temat, kładąc nacisk na postać Venki. Następnie przedstawiony zostaje zarys teoretycznych aspektów potrzebnych do zrozumienia przyczyn traumy i PTSD Venki oraz wynikających z tego dysfunkcyjnych mechanizmów obronnych. W części analitycznej tekstu, przy użyciu przedstawionej teorii, omawiam, w jaki sposób trauma, PTSD i dysfunkcyjne mechanizmy obronne Venki są wykorzystane w Trylogii i jaki mają wpływ na omawianą postać. W części końcowej tekstu proponuję wnioski wynikające z analizy.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: trauma seksualna, zespół stresu pourazowego, dysfunkcyjne mechanizmy obronne, *Trylogia Wojen Makowych*, R.F. Kuang.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to substantiate the thesis that Sring Venka, a character in R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* series, suffers from a sexual trauma and associated PTSD as a result of, among other things, rape. I start the article with a brief synopsis of the series, followed by my critical commentary on the existing research on the subject. Second, I outline the theoretical aspects needed to understand Venka's trauma, PTSD, and the resulting maladaptive coping mechanisms. Drawing on the theoretical basis, the analytical section of this paper expands on how Venka's trauma, PTSD, and maladaptive coping mechanisms are presented in the series and how they affect her. Lastly, in the concluding section, I use the results of the analysis in order to discuss the underlying implications.

Synopsis of *The Poppy War* Series

Rebecca F. Kuang, in her debut grim-fantasy *The Poppy War* series (2018-2020), presents the story of Fang Runin – a peasant girl with the power of the Phoenix who becomes a dictator of the war-emaciated Nikan Empire. Interestingly, the series also offers a plethora of side characters, one of which is Sring Venka, a wealthy classmate and bully of young Rin. After the outbreak of a war with the Federation of Mugen, Venka, the object of study in this article, is assigned to the Sixth Division at Golyn Niis, where a massacre occurs as a result of the ambush into which the Federation has lured the Division. She is captured at Golyn Niis and abused in a “relaxation house” to the point of having both her arms disabled. After being rescued by Rin's Division, traumatised Venka demands her liberator to destroy the oppressors³.

In the second book, Venka struggles to prove that she can be a significant asset to the Republic's army in their war with the Empress Su Daji, who has betrayed the Nikan Empire. After being denied a position in the army, Venka joins Cike – a group of shaman assassins led by Rin. Although she maintains the façade of a strong warrior, Venka continuously struggles with her trauma, which manifests itself, among other things, in her attempt to drown a newborn from a refugee's camp. Venka decides to escape after the leader of the Republic betrays Rin in her fight with the Empress⁴.

At the beginning of the final book, Venka operates as a spy in Sineward – the capital of the Nikan Empire. However, she is forced to re-join Rin's army due to the risk of her being compromised. As they enter Rin's hometown, enraged Venka burns down the “relaxation house” and tries to muster the abused women. Finally, despite being accused of treason by Rin, Venka prevents an assassination attempt on the woman, willingly sacrificing herself⁵.

³ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy War*, (ed.19), Harper Voyager, London, 2018.

⁴ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon Republic*, (ed.11), Harper Voyager, London, 2019.

⁵ R.F. Kuang, *The Burning God*, (ed.3), Harper Voyager, London, 2020.

Critical Commentary

To date, there has been no academic study investigating the character of Venka in general or the impact the war trauma has on her and the way she lives with it. According to some cultural sources, Venka is usually marginalised and more often than not her character is left unmentioned. If mentioned, her character and trauma are acknowledged without further exploration. This is so because, on the one hand, Venka tends to be viewed very narrowly. The author herself states that Venka was supposed to appear only in the first novel. In the second and third book, Kuang speaks of Venka as a “tool” used for important conversations that impact Rin as they both suffer from trauma. Sahi follows the author in this respect and describes Venka as Rin’s counterpart and points to their mutual influence⁷. Nevertheless, I believe that, when it comes to Venka, there is more to explore than simply her interactions with the main character.

On the other hand, Mendez deems Venka a unique and interesting character because of her post-rape-trauma life in the second novel – her parents treat her like “damaged goods” no longer worthy of their high status. Surprisingly, Mendez also claims that rape is not a prevalent theme in the second novel⁸, a claim I find contradicted by specific conversations and incidents present in this story, such as Rin witnessing rape near the refugee’s camp or trauma-related overprotectiveness of Venka’s best friend⁹.

In summary, the available research concerning Venka and her war trauma is limited. Her story as a victim and survivor is often overlooked despite her being an impactful character. Since only some cultural sources mention Venka’s trauma, this study intends to fill this gap.

Methodology

It cannot be denied that sexual trauma – a consequence of a “disturbing encounter” related to sexual activity, one of which is rape – might result in the development of various psychological disorders¹⁰. Recent studies have shown that there is a correlation

⁶ Readbytiffany, *An Author Interview with R.F. Kuang (The Poppy War Trilogy) & International Giveaway*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLrT_kQgJkg (9.11.2022).

⁷ Sahi, *ARC Review: The Burning God by R.F. Kuang*, My World of Books, <https://ksahitya.wordpress.com/2020/11/20/arc-review-the-burning-god-by-r-f-kuang/> (12.11.2022).

⁸ Scribblermendez, *A Literary Analysis of The Dragon Republic by R. F. Kuang, Book 2 in The Poppy War Series*, <https://scribbler.john-mendez.com/2020/10/04/a-literary-analysis-of-the-dragon-republic-by-r-f-kuang-book-2-in-the-poppy-war-series/> (12.11.2022).

⁹ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ S. Chaudhury i. in., *Psychological Aspects of Rape and Its Consequences*, “Psychology and Behavioral Science International Journal”, 2017 no. 3, <https://juniperpublishers.com/pbsij/PBSIJ.MS.ID.555586.php>, American Psychology Association, *Sexual trauma*, w APA Dictionary of Psychology, [dictionary.apa.org, https://dictionary.apa.org/sexual-trauma](https://dictionary.apa.org/sexual-trauma) (12.11.2022).

between higher chances of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)¹¹ and traumatic dissociation if the victim receives no help from his or her milieu¹². As Ullman and Peter-Hagene argue, adverse social reaction (i.e. treating victims as if they were “damaged goods”), or even lack of thereof, may prompt one to the so-called maladaptive coping with sexual trauma¹³.

As regards maladaptive defence mechanisms, George E. Vaillant suggests a four-level hierarchy with the second level of such defences common in victims suffering from PTSD.¹⁴ It covers immature defences which can usually be found among adolescents. Examples of these strategies are: acting out, passive aggression, dissociation, and projection. Acting out denotes dealing with stressors and emotional conflicts by actions, not by reworking emotions (anger, violent behaviour, overworking)¹⁵; passive aggression is an indirect and non-violent way of expressing anger and aggression; dissociation concerns disruption of one’s memory, personality, consciousness, and perception of reality and projection denotes false attribution of one’s feelings or thoughts to others as a way of processing stressors or emotional conflicts¹⁶.

In what follows, I would like to propose the thesis that Sring Venka uses such maladaptive coping mechanisms as a result of her rape trauma and PTSD. This paper aims to discuss Venka’s selected maladaptive coping mechanisms as they surface on the pages of the *Poppy War* series by R.F. Kuang. In the first analytical section of this article, I delve briefly into the causes of Venka’s sexual trauma and the factors that contribute to her PTSD. In the second section, I elaborate on the maladaptive coping mechanisms, namely acting out, passive aggression, dissociation, and projection, that are visible in Venka’s behaviour throughout *The Poppy War* series.

¹¹ According to *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, PTSD is a disorder caused by secondary or personal experience of events thought of as harmful or threatening to the body or mind. During such an experience, the feeling of helplessness, dread, and fear occur. American Psychology Association, *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*, w APA Dictionary of Psychology, dictionary.apa.org, <https://dictionary.apa.org/posttraumatic-stress-disorder> (13.11.2022).

¹² J. Nöthlin g i in., *Traumatic Dissociation as a Predictor of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in South African Female Rape Survivors*, *Medicine*, 2015 no. 16, e744, https://journals.lww.com/md-journal/Fulltext/2015/04040/Traumatic_Dissociation_as_a_Predictor_of.15.aspx, S. Chaudhury i in., *Psychological Aspects...*, *op.cit.*

¹³ S.E. Ullman, L. Peter-Hagene, *Social Reactions to Sexual Assault Disclosure, Coping, Perceived Control, and PTSD Symptoms in Sexual Assault Victims*, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2014 no. 4, 495–508. DOI: 10.1002/jcop.21624.

¹⁴ I have decided to choose the second level of defences because Venka – the object of this study – not only fits it age-wise (she is a teenager) but also uses all the provided strategies when compared to the remaining three levels, even though the first level (the psychotic defences) can be found in PTSD sufferers. Nevertheless, strategies presented in the first level are not visible in Venka’s coping mechanisms, therefore they are not included in the analysis.

¹⁵ In parenthesis I have provided examples of strategies of negative coping mechanisms found in those who suffer from PTSD and which could be linked to provided immature defences. Veterans Affairs., *Negative Coping and PTSD - PTSD: National Center for PTSD*, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/negative_coping.asp (13.11.2022)

¹⁶ G.E. Vaillant, *Involuntary Coping Mechanisms: A Psychodynamic Perspective*, “Trauma, Brain Injury, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, 2011 no. 3, 367–68. DOI: 10.31887/DCNS.2011.13.2/gvaillant, American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR*, 4th ed., American Psychiatric Association, Washington, DC 2000, 811–12. It should also be noted that, although the presented mechanisms appear to be “pathological” in their nature, they indeed serve their purpose of providing a coping effect on the victim.

Trauma Causes and PTSD Factors

Sexual trauma is a critical element which contributes to understanding the character of Sring Venka. Undoubtedly, she suffers from that distress as a consequence of the monstrous acts that she was subjected to during what is known in the series as the massacre at Golyn Niis¹⁷. At the time, she was raped multiple times, and forced to watch other women being raped and murdered. She was also forced to “clean up” the dead bodies of children and women¹⁸. Additionally, Venka also suffered from multiple injuries, one of which nearly paralysed her left hand¹⁹. It can be argued that cruelty Venka witnessed attests that she is more than likely to suffer from a trauma which, without support, leads to PTSD.

As established in the previous section of this article, there is a correlation between developing PTSD and suffering from sexual trauma, mainly if the victim develops traumatic dissociation and faces adverse social reactions. In Sring Venka’s case, both of those factors are present. Dissociation denotes alterations in one’s personality, perception of reality, memory, and consciousness. The girl’s dissociation is visible both in her demeanour and appearance. Rin, who last saw Venka at the Sinegard Academy, notes the jarring differences between the former, vibrant, perhaps even cocky Venka and the unrecognisable person she is after the massacre. Her eyes were dull and she “hardly stirred when Rin entered the room. Only when Rin closed the door did she flinch”²⁰. This short passage shows how Venka functions; she lives in her own mind, sheltering herself from reality. The sound of closing doors affects her; perhaps she associates it with the past-negative experience. Once Venka starts talking about what was happening in the “relaxation house”, she cannot stop and acts as if she was reliving those memories. She remembers what was happening to other girls and women in detail. However, when it comes to her suffering, her memories become foggy: “I blacked out over and over but every time I awoke they were still going, a different man would be on top of me, or maybe the same man... they were all the same after a while”²¹. On the basis of her words, it can be deduced that she developed dissociative disorders as a result of rape. Subconsciously, she alters her own memories and her current perception of reality is blurred as if she was in a haze. Lastly, towards the end of her monologue, she becomes hyperconscious of her surroundings, for example, she notices, among other things, that both of her wrists

¹⁷ This massacre has been based on a historical event during the Second Sin-Japanese War – the Rape of Nanjing. readbytiffany, *Everything You Need to Know Before You Read The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang. <https://readbytiffany.com/2020/11/15/everything-you-need-to-know-before-you-read-the-poppy-war-by-r-f-kuang/> (14.11.2022), Conway S., *Revealing Another Kind of History: R.F.Kuang’s The Poppy War*, <https://www.thecowl.com/arts-entertainment/revealing-another-kind-of-history-r-f-kuangs-the-poppy-war> (14.11.2022).

¹⁸ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

¹⁹ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²⁰ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

²¹ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

are broken and that Rin is someone who could avenge her²². As might be observed, almost everything is different about her.

The second cause that may prompt PTSD is the adverse social reaction or lack of reaction to the suffering of a trauma victim. In case of Venka, there are two important people in her life that she would be able to depend on and receive support from – her father and Yin Nezha, with whom she grew up and treats like a brother. *In The Dragon Republic*, after the massacre at Golyn Niis, Venka appears to be wholly mistreated by both her father and Nezha. Her father, someone who should be thoughtful and caring, only sees her as “damaged goods”. His behaviour distresses Venka to the point that she explodes during a conversation with him: “What I was supposed to do? Hung myself like the women of Liu? Bet you’d like that. [...] The women of Liu preserved their dignity. [...] And who put my dignity in my cunt?”²³. Her father is almost disappointed that she is alive, and he cannot look at her. Furthermore, he does not see her as his child but as a “soiled” heir who lost her value. He almost disowns her on this account. His lack of help and his adverse reaction to Venka might thus be treated as triggers for her to develop PTSD. Additionally, her father collaborates with Yin Vaisra – the leader of the Republic, whose wife is known to be a religious extremist. To avoid condemnation, Venka has to abort the child conceived as a result of rape without anyone knowing about it. Since she does not receive any help to end a pregnancy, Venka has to “get creative” because Lady Yin does not allow abortions as such practice is against her beliefs²⁴.

Nezha tries to understand and protect Venka from “the evil”, but he fails since he acts in a very patronising manner. Right before the first important mission, when Venka tries to board a ship, Nezha starts to argue with her about her safety:

You are not a soldier.
[...] Because of Golyn Niis? Venka barked out a laugh. You think once you’re raped you can’t be a soldier?
[...] This is not what I said.
Yes it is. [...] You think that because they raped me, I’m never going back to normal.
[...] Meimei. Come on.
Meimei. Little sister. [...] Venka grabbed the crossbow back from Rin and pointed it at Nezha. [...] You missed, said Nezha calmly.
Venka tossed the crossbow on the pier and spat at Nezha’s feet. I never miss²⁵.

For Nezha, Venka has become a damaged person who is incapable of fighting. All he sees in her now is a little sister he needs to protect, and does not realize her desire to fight. It does pain him to act in this cruel manner but, in his eyes, keeping the girl away from war is the only thing he can do to protect her. He even uses his status of general to “put her in place”. On the surface level, this situation seems to be

²² *Ibidem*, p. 425.

²³ *Ibidem*, p.196.

²⁴ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 249-250.

almost laughable. That is to say, if Venka is capable of fighting as a soldier despite her disability, as she proves it by “shooting” at Nezha, it can be clearly seen that rape has not left her completely broken and in need of nothing but protection. This situation however, if scrutinised for a long moment, proves that the girl is distressed and tries to find an ounce of normalcy in her life. Perhaps, she expects Nezha to grant her this unsaid wish, but all he does is set boundaries that will eventually push Venka to succumb to PTSD²⁶.

Both dissociation and adverse social reaction are crucial in developing PTSD, which, as presented above, surface in Venka’s story. Therefore, it can be concluded that the sexual trauma she suffers from – when combined with the two analysed factors – translates into her PTSD. Because the war has not ended, the girl is unable to seek help and treatment for PTSD. As a result, as shown in the next section, she develops maladaptive coping mechanisms which, as it were, “lock” her in her trauma and PTSD.

Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms of Sring Venka

As noted, it is almost impossible for Venka to develop healthy coping mechanisms to work through her sexual trauma and the resulting PTSD condition. Thus, she resorts to maladaptive coping mechanisms, more specifically, immature defences, which include acting out, passive aggression, dissociation, and projection.

Acting out

Acting out denotes actions, such as violent behaviour or overworking, that are meant to protect one against stressors and emotional conflicts. In case of Venka, this pathological in its nature mechanism seems to be the most efficient one. She uses the ongoing war as a grotesque playfield to close her mind and do what she wants – to be a soldier and kill enemies without thinking²⁷. The following extract illustrates this type of Venka’s behaviour: “The first time two soldiers were caught cornering a young woman alone at midnight, she and Venka had castrated the soldiers and left them to bleed out in the dirt with their cocks shoved in their mouths”²⁸. As might be deduced, Venka’s behaviour is not so much violence for the sake of violence but rather her acting out anger she felt in the similar situation at Golyn Niis. We can only surmise what Venka wished for when she was being raped, probably castrating and leaving her tormentors to die.

That act of cruelty mentioned above is Venka’s revenge for what had happened to her. Rin sees it and uses the girl to her benefit²⁹. Venka happily agrees to serve as

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 250,530-531; R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 57, 275-277.

²⁸ R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

²⁹ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 530-531

Rin's soldier and, unsurprisingly, starts to overwork herself. Rin notices a change in Venka's appearance after returning from a difficult mission: "She looked terrible. She'd lost a startling amount of weight. She was wrung out, rangier, sharp cheekbones jutting beneath hollow, purple-ringed eyes"³⁰. This passage proves how damaging Venka's lifestyle is. Even though she is not the one to command the troops when Rin is gone, Venka continues to work almost without sleep or food. Violence becomes the only language Venka communicates, whether directed towards herself or others. It becomes her fuel she cannot extinguish because it would mean the end of her. However, towards the end of the third novel, it can be noticed that fewer and fewer instances of Venka using violence as a coping mechanism are present. Therefore, it can be deduced that, even though pathological and in a way harmful, this coping mechanism proves to be a great help in Venka's case. Although it cannot be entirely denied that, at the moment of her death, she continues to struggle with her trauma and PTSD, it is possible that she is on a path to recovery.

Passive Aggression

Passive aggression takes the form of non-violent and indirect anger and aggression. Before becoming a victim, Venka used passive aggression not as a coping mechanism but as a mere tool for bullying and abusing others, for instance, at the Sineward Academy³¹. Nevertheless, after the massacre at Golyn Niis, Venka's passive aggression takes on a new form. As mentioned, Venka is a deeply wounded person who tries to prove that she is strong and shows no weaknesses. She poses as someone who could never be hurt while using her own words as weapons to hurt and crush others. Even though Venka probably knows that Nezha was also kept hostage in the "pleasure house" like her, she decides to hurt him: "And when you ever protected me? [...] *I really thought someone was coming for me.* And where the fuck were you? Nowhere. So fuck you Nezha"³². Wounded, she retreats to words that are meant to solve all her problems. With words, she also pressures people into action: "*Don't pity me!* [...] Swear on your blood you will *burn them.* [...] Swear it on your life. Swear it. Swear it for me"³³. Venka is also cynical and sharp: "Oh, I'm so sorry. Next time my father disowns me, I'll keep it down"³⁴.

Venka's behaviour shifts and changes during the events in the final novel. As she becomes more open and vulnerable, she continues to use words, now perhaps less as a weapon to hurt others but to shield herself³⁵. As mentioned above, passive aggression belongs to the immature defences, pathological in their nature because of how they

³⁰ R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

³¹ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47, 68-69, 92, 146.

³² R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

³³ R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

³⁴ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

³⁵ R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 116, 176, 315.

affect the victim and the people she surrounds herself with. Even though passive aggression can be difficult to deal with, it helps Venka to sustain a small part of herself – a bold and cheeky girl she used to be before Golyn Niis experience. These traits of her character remain unchanged. It might be argued that she tries to rebuild her trauma-battered self by capitalising on what is left, namely her passive aggression. Combined with other mechanisms, passive aggression seems to help Venka overcome her trauma and the resulting PTSD condition. Towards the end of the third and the final instalment, there are almost no instances of Venka using this particular coping mechanism, which might be a sign of her mental health improvement.

Dissociation

Dissociation, as previously mentioned, is the general disruption of one's personality, memory, perception of reality, and consciousness. While discussing PTSD factors, it has been mentioned that Venka started suffering from dissociation during her time as a hostage in the "relaxation house". From that time on, her memories are foggy, and she shields herself from painful, perhaps destructive events that happened to her³⁶. During their first conversation at Golyn Niis, Rin mentions that Venka acts differently and her personality has changed³⁷. Even after some more time, Venka still cannot sleep because she keeps reliving these traumatic moments of her life in her dreams: "They're never gone. Do you understand? They still come for you in your sleep. Only this time they're dream-wraiths, not real, and there's no escape from them because they're living in your own mind"³⁸. Because of the ongoing war, she physically cannot escape from witnessing events that echo her trauma. For instance, seeing a sick infant who reminds her of the unwanted pregnancy from rape triggers her:

It's dead look. [...]. She held it over the river as if to throw it back in.

The infant started to whimper.

An ugly expression twisted across Venka's face. She looked so suddenly, so murderously hateful that Rin was sure she was about to hurl the infant headfirst into the harbour. [...]

You knew it was alive, Rin said finally. [...] And you were going to kill it.

[...] I was doing it a favour³⁹.

Suddenly, she is more brisk, ready to lie and throw the child into the water to get rid of it. For her, it is an act of kindness. In other words, Venka prefers to kill the child now rather than let it die during the war. She is also angry that the child dares to survive. If the child did not whimper, she would let it drown. While confronted by others about her outbursts and aggressive behaviour, she shuts down, becoming a shell of herself, unwilling to face the consequences. When she takes care of the women saved from a pleasure house in one of the provinces, she becomes completely detached from herself

³⁶ R.F. Kuang, *ThePoppy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 424-425.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p.425.

³⁸ R.F. Kuang, *TheBurning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁹ R.F. Kuang, *TheDragon...*, *op. cit.*, p. 481-482.

and works as if in a haze: “Venka didn’t resist; rather, she stumbled along willingly as if in a daze. She wasn’t angry, Rin realized. If anything, Venka seemed about to collapse”⁴⁰. This quote emphasises that dissociation Venka uses to cope with trauma affects her as it disrupts her perception of reality and even her consciousness – she behaves as if she was in a trance or sleepwalking.

It becomes her purpose to help these girls and to force them to survive; nevertheless, her behaviour is odd to others, almost too brutal. When she is denied being in charge of the girls, she shuts down as if she lost the most crucial battle in her life. As previously mentioned, dissociation belongs to immature defences, which damage one resorting to them. Despite these negative effects, it can be noted that, in Venka’s story, these defences help her, and, towards the end of the final novel, she barely uses dissociation in order to cope with her trauma.

Projection

The process of projection helps one to cope with stressors and emotional conflicts via falsely attributing one’s feelings and thoughts to others. Although in Venka’s behaviour projection is not the most prominent type of coping mechanism, when it surfaces, it appears to be a direct reaction to trigger factors tightly connected with the source of her trauma – rape. Even if minimal, the first projection sign surfaces in the scene in which Venka wants to drown a baby. She was the one who had to remove unborn children that she saw being torn out of their dead mothers’ wombs and tossed around like useless toys. As she also saw children being tortured and raped, she most likely projected herself and her memories onto that child and, that is why, she wanted it dead. As it might be deduced, it was not only her rape story but also her traumatic memories of Golyn Niis that encouraged her to spare this child the possibility of being in the same situation as children at Golyn Niis⁴¹.

Another instance of Venka resorting to projection occurs when she decides to “take care of” other rape victims. With great brutality and harsh words, she forces them into doing what she would do – and did in their position⁴². We might deduce that she does that by means of projecting herself onto the rape victims. When she is stopped from hurting one of the victims, she offers arguments which clearly show that this indeed is the case:

„Do you know that after Golyn Niis, the other two survivors from that pleasure house drank lye? Do you want to guess how many of these girls are going to hang themselves? They have no space to be weak, Rin. They don’t have time to be in shock. That can’t be an option. That’s how they die. I understand that, Rin said. But you can’t take your shit out on them”⁴³.

⁴⁰ R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op.cit.*, p. 131-133.

⁴¹ R.F. Kuang, *The Dragon...*, *op.cit.*, p. 481-482.

⁴² R.F. Kuang, *The Burning...*, *op.cit.*, p. 129-130.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 131-132.

Drawing on her own experiences, Venka is aware that if these victims are left alone, some might commit suicide. This is a source of her fear as she does not wish to relive the events that happened at Golyn Niis. Hence, to her, forcing these women to behave like her, to work so hard so that they will not be able to succumb to their trauma is a means of protecting herself from the painful past, present that reopens this wound, and uncertain future that may bring death to those she wishes to protect.

Conclusions

To conclude, firstly, this article presents how adverse social reactions and dissociation impact a victim of a sexual trauma, and promote the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. Secondly, it delineates how Venka deals with her trauma and PTSD when choosing maladaptive coping mechanisms (acting out, passive aggression, dissociation, and projection). As it is further noted, Venka dies, and therefore it is difficult to conclude whether this form of coping helps her in the long run. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier in the article, there are certain signals that indicate recovery, like changes in her behaviour towards the end of the final novel.

As such, this article offers a significant contribution to the discourse of abuse developed in works of fiction. In the critical commentary section it has been observed that Venka's rape and trauma are often drastically misinterpreted. Rape and trauma are undoubtedly terribly harmful and the presented analysis shows it more than clearly. Yet, it seems that the topic of sexual violence and rape trauma has been overlooked by the readers as evident in opinions such as "I want to be like her [A.M. – Rin and Venka]" expressed in several reviews, and some even argue that the prevalent theme of rape is of minor importance in Kuang's Trilogy.

The purpose of this article is to act as a reminder that works of fiction also serve as lessons and events presented there, sometimes under the wraps of magic and fantasy, touch on real-life problems, such as rape, war and trauma-related issues. Readers who romanticise traumatic events and, at best, morally grey characters of this particular story not only strip the story of its humanity, overlook and misunderstand characters, such as Venka, but also suggest that they might treat real-life victims of abuse in a similar fashion.

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Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms of Sring Venka in Response to Sexual Trauma and PTSD in *The Poppy War* Series by R.F. Kuang

Summary

The purpose of this article is to validate the thesis that Sring Venka, a character of Rebecca F. Kuang's *The Poppy War*, a grim-fantasy series based on historical events of the 20th century China, uses maladaptive coping mechanisms (also known as immature defences) due to suffering from sexual trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after rape. Nevertheless, although the series is popular in the mainstream media, the character of Venka is often overlooked or grossly misunderstood. This article opens with a brief synopsis of the series and current critical commentary with the emphasis on Venka. Second, I outline the theoretical aspects in order to understand the reasoning behind Venka's trauma, PTSD, and, resulting from both, maladaptive coping mechanisms. In what follows, I expand on how Venka's trauma, PTSD, and maladaptive coping mechanisms are presented in the series and how they affect her. Lastly, I utilise the results of the analysis in the concluding section in order to explore several of its implications.

Keywords: sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), maladaptive coping mechanism, *The Poppy War* series, R.F. Kuang