

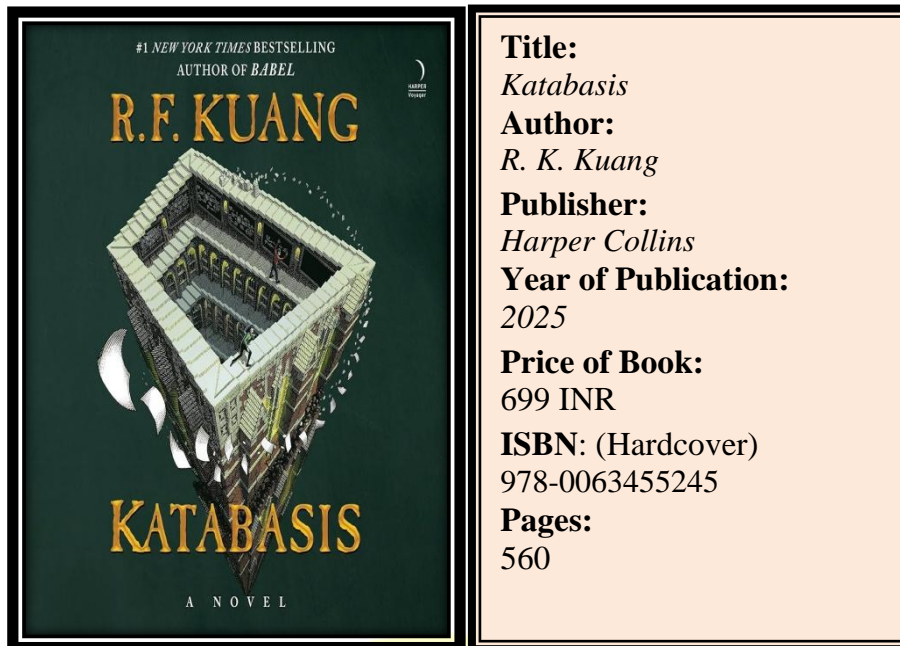
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SINS AND SENSIBILITY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION AND REVIEW OF R.F. KUANG'S KATABASIS

Srijita Talukdar

Undergraduate student, Department of English, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, WB, India

About Book:



Full Book Review

Katabasis begins, as so many academic tragedies do, with a letter of recommendation. It is almost funny, almost bleak; the promise of one glowing paragraph about their brilliance sends Alice Law and Peter Murdoch tumbling past the threshold of the underworld. *Katabasis* is a long, gripping novel, nearly 560 pages but it reads with a strange elasticity of time. There are chapters that pass in a single breath, and others that feel like you are walking barefoot across broken glass, slow and stinging and relentless. Kuang has always been a writer who plays with pace but here she conjures it into something almost psychological. Kuang's sentences often mimic cognitive dissonance, slipping between lyricism and academic dryness, enacting on the page the very fragmentation the characters try to deny.

Though the premise echoes classical katabatic myths like Orpheus descending for Eurydice, Aeneas searching for his father, Kuang's twist is quiet and cutting; no one here descends out of love. They descend out of obligation, guilt and the oft-terrible logic of academia. The allusion is inverted here; what was once a heroic rescue becomes an act of professional desperation.

The novel follows Alice Law and Peter Murdoch, two Cambridge Ph.D magicians, though the term "magician" here is closer to academic practitioner than sorcerer who descends into hell to retrieve the soul of their advisor, Jacob Grimes. A man brilliant enough to dazzle and cruel enough to ruin. A man they needed, feared, loved and may have killed. Kuang turns the classic katabatic "beloved lost figure" into an absent centre, making Jacob Grimes function less as a character and



more as a structuring absence, a Lacanian void around which Alice and Peter orbit, mistaking gravitational pull for guidance.

On the surface, the plot seems predictable: a dark academia twist on the underworld myth. But the strength of *Katabasis* isn't its premise; it's the way Kuang writes descent. It's not as a spectacular journey per se but a slow peeling-back of the human ego.

Alice and Peter do not go to hell prepared. They stumble, quarrel, misread maps, misread each other. Hell is, quite disappointingly and quite perfectly, not a place of grand revelations but of petty humiliations and bureaucratic absurdities. Peter mutters at one point, "Christ, hell is a campus," and the line settles over the novel like a fine veil. Everything in this inferno feels like a caricature of the places that moulded them: the pride libraries, the envy halls, the slothful swamps of paperwork and expectation.

It is uncomfortable because it is familiar. What Kuang does best is write interiority that feels like exposure.

Alice Law is perhaps one of Kuang's most painfully honest protagonists. Brilliant but deeply self-effacing, she carries her mind like a blade sharpened on insecurity. She does not know how to ask for help. She barely knows how to breathe without permission. Her relationship with Grimes is drawn with such delicate menace; never abusive per se but oppressive in ways academia often excuses, that reading her thoughts feels like reading the marginalia of someone who is drowning but calling it discipline.

Peter, too, is exquisitely rendered. His chronic illness is not a subplot rather it's a texture. A stubborn physicality that colours the way he moves through hell, the way he negotiates with gods and demons, the way he guards his pride with brittle hands. When the novel finally reveals the extent of his suffering, it doesn't feel like a twist. It feels like a truth we were always skirting around. Kuang's writing here is perhaps the best she has ever produced.

In *The Poppy War*, she could be brutal. In *Babel*, she was expansive. But in *Katabasis*, she is, forgive the paradox, *gentle in her cruelty*. The sentences are polished to a kind of quiet shine: lilting, brittle, occasionally humorous, often devastating. What she captures so flawlessly is the texture of denial. That subtle ache of wanting to be chosen. That fear of being ordinary in a world that demands brilliance. That longing to disappear into the Lethe out of exhaustion.

The Lethe becomes the emotional centre of the novel. A river that erases memory, yes, but also the weight of self-awareness. Alice's temptation toward it is written so softly that it almost slips past you; a whimper that something inside her is fraying. Kuang never sensationalizes her decline. She lets it unfold like a bruise.

Hell, in this novel, is simply the place where your illusions can't follow you. And that is why *Katabasis* works so well. It isn't an underworld adventure. It's a psychological unravelling. A portrait of two young scholars who have built their identities so completely around someone else's brilliance that they no longer recognize the shape of their own. Hell in *Katabasis* operates like an epistemological labyrinth, a space where knowledge distorts, revealing the dangers of an academy that teaches brilliance while hoodwinking and obscuring selfhood.

What leaves an indelible mark in the mind after the last page is not the demons or the battles rather the moments, such as Alice waking with the Lethe in her thoughts like a lullaby; Peter trying to pretend he isn't scared; the strange tenderness that forms between them in the cracks of their arrogance; the realization that grief for a mentor can exist alongside relief and resentment; the understanding that survival sometimes means remembering, and sometimes means choosing not to.

This is not a book one reads for plot. It is a book one reads for recognition. For anyone who has ever felt beholden to a mentor. For anyone who has ever mistaken achievement for



affection. For anyone who has ever looked at their own ambition and wondered whether it was lighting a path or a funeral pyre.

Katabasis is not a loud book. It murmurs. It seeps. It leaves traces—material, emotional, affective—long after you close it. And in doing so, it becomes not just a reimagining of the underworld but a mirror held up to the hells we carry within ourselves. It is, simply put, the most mature thing Kuang has written till date. The truest to the tee.

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