

*This essay examines Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn*, exploring how class and gender work together to shape Vin's identity before she ever has the chance to define herself.*

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Oppression and Resistance Within The Final Empire

While it was once dismissed as simple escapist entertainment, fantasy fiction has undergone a profound literary rehabilitation over the last several decades, earning its place alongside the genres long preferred by serious literary critics. Yet fantasy fiction has never been frivolous; it is equally capable of showcasing the human condition by exploring themes of power, identity, oppression, and resistance with the same complexity and intentional depth as any text in the traditional literary canon. Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series is a striking embodiment of this potential. In *Mistborn*, Vin transforms from a skaa street thief to a powerful revolutionary, revealing identity as a site of double oppression shaped by class and the gender expectations of her rigid, hierarchical society. Through a Marxist and feminist lens, Sanderson demonstrates that Vin's sense of self is not inherent but is built through systems designed to contain her, and her journey toward agency represents an act of intentional resistance against the political and religious forces that defined her before she could define herself.

The Final Empire functions as more than just a political government. It functions instead as an ideological apparatus that interpellates Vin into accepting her skaa identity as natural and inevitable, constructing her sense of self through systems of religious and political domination before she develops any conscious awareness of her own subjugation. In *Mistborn*, Vin internalizes her skaa identity, thinking it natural and deserved. She tries to remain hidden from

and unseen by everyone around her, with her inner voice being that of her brother Reen, who reinforces those teachings that kept her safe throughout her life. She hears his advice throughout the story, constantly reminding her that “If you let someone get close to you, it will just hurt more when they betray you.” (Sanderson 51). The Lord Ruler enforces the ideology throughout the Final Empire that the skaa are subservient as punishment for their actions against him nearly 1000 years ago. By using his Obligators, Steel Inquisitors, and the skaa’s own religion, this ruler-god is able to make the skaa believe their position in the final empire is really a “recognition that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence.” (Althusser 121). This doctrine is taught to everyone across the world and has been so ingrained into Vin’s psyche that she truly believes herself to be worthless. So much so that she doesn’t even recognize her own abilities and use of Allomancy. Instead, she instinctively uses her “luck” to soothe others and keep herself unnoticed and out of harm’s way, and to keep herself alive after several beatings that should have killed her. She dismisses her abilities as mere chance, thinking, “Luck, such as it was, had failed her,” unable to grasp that what she’s experienced as random fortune is actually Allomancy, a power she has been conditioned not to claim as her own (Sanderson 39). The system she was raised in taught her that skaa couldn’t be important, so she didn’t believe her “luck” could be something as important and powerful as Allomancy. This is more than a simple unawareness on Vin’s part, showing instead that she has been conditioned by the Lord Ruler’s ideological system to be incapable of imagining herself as anything other than what that system made her to be. This phenomenon is known to theorists like Allahar as “false consciousness,” in which the suppressed class is unable to see beyond the system they live in and ends up “creating the conditions for their own demise” against their own self-interests (Allahar 101).

Vin's early conditioning to remain invisible, compliant, and self-minimizing also reflects the way patriarchal systems inscribe gendered expectations onto women's sense of worth. The systemic rape, violence, and murder of skaa women is deeply ingrained in society and establishes the patriarchal stakes that dominate Vin's world. These patriarchal stakes are rooted in the system's ability to maintain control over women's bodies, assuming a "biological basis of their oppression" to justify their "control of human fertility." (Firestone ch. 1). This institutionalization and normalization of the skaa's mistreatment prompts her brother Reen to try to erase her gender entirely in order to protect her while they were growing up. He encouraged her throughout her life to look meek and helpless, going so far as to cut off all her hair in an attempt to hide any resemblance to femininity. Even this attempt to protect her is a product of the patriarchal system that raised him. As she grows into a teenager and loses Reen's influence, her intense discomfort with femininity is still obvious. She feels exposed and vulnerable without the clothes that make her look like a street urchin boy, which shows the conditioning she received is physical and deeply internalized. This femininity is something that is imposed upon her, where her constructed identity views her as "a passive recipient of an inexorable cultural law" where her "destiny" as a woman is determined by the way her culture views women (Butler, ch. 1, sec. III). Even once Vin finds herself in a safer environment, she defaults to the same small and compliant version of herself, and finds intense discomfort when required to explore her femininity, often forcing herself to fight "the urge to pick at her noblewoman's dress." (Sanderson 176). This highlights how the conditioning forced upon her doesn't simply switch off because things changed; that trauma stays with her and permeates everything she does.

The compulsive distrust, hypervigilance, and refusal to believe she deserves safety are not personal failings in Vin, but manifestations of her internalized class trauma. It takes a lot of

time for Vin to outgrow the compulsive habits that kept her alive, and she even goes so far as to use her Allomancy reflexively on Kelsier in fear that he will hurt her as he notes, “It was so subtle he almost missed it... The girl was obviously trying to make herself invisible against the corner of the wall... had made an art of making herself seem harmless.” (Sanderson 174). During this interaction, Vin truly didn’t realize she had used her power, telling him, “I didn’t mean it... it’s just habit,” highlighting how deeply she has internalized her smallness (Sanderson 174). She misinterprets most acts of kindness and becomes incredibly suspicious of Kelsier’s crew and their compassion toward her. She consistently interprets their help and generosity as manipulation because, in her world, it always was, and Reen made sure to reinforce this thinking. As Allahar argues, the oppressed classes are conditioned to accept and reproduce the very thinking that keeps them subjugated in the first place, and they cannot be expected to “automatically develop a critical class understanding of their difficult life circumstances” (Allahar 103). Later, this same conditioning surfaces when Vin breaks down, demanding that Kelsier tell her when he, too, plans to abandon her, just as everyone else has. By this point, Kelsier represents a life of safety, but Vin still isn’t able to see herself as someone who deserves that safety, let alone see the belief he has in her. While reflecting on everyone who has hurt her, Vin comes to the realization that love doesn’t have to end with betrayal, and she turns to Kelsier, demanding, “When are you going to go? When will you leave me?” (Sanderson 431). This is also reflected in her view of her brother’s abandonment of her. Throughout *Mistborn*, Reen’s voice is her own inner monologue, and reminds her that betrayal is inevitable. Even upon Kelsier’s death, Reen’s voice seeps through anyway to reinforce it again, “I told you he would leave you. I warned you. I promised you...” (Sanderson 476). Instead of seeing Reen’s disappearance as a loss, she frames his leaving as intentional, inevitable, and deserved, showing

just how deeply she believes herself unworthy of loyalty and love in any form. This internalized trauma isn't something she can disregard, and it creeps into her life when she least expects it, preventing her from seeing a world where people who are supposed to care for her, actually choose her.

In *Mistborn*, Vin's street-thief identity appears as her default self, but even this was constructed by survival and conditioned into her by Reen rather than chosen. Vin's ability to discover and navigate all three of her different identities, from street thief to Valette to Mistborn, exposes identity itself as a performative act rather than something inherent, revealing the narrowly surveilled roles available to women within the Final Empire's intersecting systems of class and gender control. Valette Renoux is the most obvious performance, beginning with her training at Lord Renoux's mansion, where Sazed teaches her how to be a noblewoman and exist beneath the patriarchal expectations of nobility. Even though Sazed acknowledges Vin's remarkable intelligence and adaptability, he's still unsure if she has the "poise to imitate a noblewoman... She seems skilled at it all, in a controlled situation... we won't really be able to tell if she can do this until we put her alone in a party full of aristocrats." (Sanderson 150). Butler argues that gender is not something one is but something one does, a repeated performance that is shaped by social expectation and constant social surveillance alongside the threat of punishment in order to keep up the illusion that this difference in gender is natural and deserved (Butler, ch. 3, sec. IV). Everything Vin says and does at the aristocratic parties is an act based on who she was taught to be in order to survive the nobility. Reflecting later on her time as Valette she says, "she'd never really made a very good noblewoman. It was time for her to go back to being what she was good at. A thing of shadows," showing how these systems that helped shape her different identities were always designed to completely contain her, not to express her, and

therefore could never truly stick (Sanderson 534). The identities imposed and assigned to her by the system were never capable of fully containing Vin herself.

Navigating her Mistborn identity becomes just as difficult; even though this identity is one that feels most natural to Vin, it remains fraught because it is an identity the system of the Final Empire never intended for her to have. A skaa woman should never have been able to become Mistborn under the Lord Ruler's reign. Butler insists that "it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible," but that repetition and intention to change need time to override and reverse the system (Butler, ch. 3). This idea is ingrained so deeply within her being that she frequently dismisses her own abilities. Upon defeating a fully trained Mistborn, Shan Elariel, a clear surprise to Kelsier, Vin dismisses the moment completely, "By luck... I tricked her," defaulting back to that original and completely dismissive term for her power because even in her most powerful moment, the system's conditioning runs so deep that she can't escape the feeling that she doesn't deserve better (Sanderson 433). Vin's inability to claim her own victory over Shan is not a personal failing on her part but rather a reflection of how deeply the system's conditioning has become intertwined with her sense of self-worth, controlling her perception of her own power even as she burns her metals.

Even the most well-intentioned members of society are not immune to patriarchal conditioning, revealing how those who are most aware of systemic injustice can still unknowingly perpetuate what that system needs to survive. Elend Venture is one of these men. He is intelligent, questions the status quo, and reads banned texts. Yet, with all his in-depth knowledge of how toxic the Lord Ruler's empire is, he questions whether the philosophers he's read are right in that skaa have the same intelligence as any nobleman, questioning Vin directly,

“Did they sound like ordinary people... Are they intelligent?” pressing further when Vin agrees skaa are intelligent, “But not like you and me, right?” not even realizing that Vin as Valette is herself skaa and proving their collective intelligence for him (Sanderson 243). Elend finds himself deeply intrigued by the many ways Valette is different from other noblewomen, while simultaneously undermining her and brushing her off. He even goes as far as to decide she must leave the city for her own safety, and instead of discussing his concerns, he turns to cruelty to try to turn her away, using her differences as an excuse to police her actions. In many instances, this policing of gender roles has no malicious intent, but, as Butler describes, “this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject,” showing that this behavior is perpetuated through society's conditioning (Butler, ch. 3 sec. IV). Elend is a “good man” who wants to do the right thing and fight the injustices he sees within the Final Empire, but is still a victim of the patriarchy itself. Once he accepts that Valette is actually skaa, he's shocked at her level of competence, even though he's believed for a while that skaa are not intellectually different from noblemen, highlighting how his societal conditioning runs deeper than his conscious beliefs and surfaces when he least expects it to. Even once he breaks into the palace to rescue her and discovers how capable she is as a Mistborn, there is resistance in him when she declares she is going to try to take on the Lord Ruler. He defaults to the patriarchal ideals he's been conditioned under, in complete disbelief that she would try to stop an immortal God, and tries to deny her, “No, Valette... I have to get you to safety.” (Sanderson 513). Elend's conditioning reinforces that patriarchal systems do not require malicious intent to survive; they simply require the unconscious compliance of even their most progressive members.

Vin's relationships with Kelsier and the crew become transformative in this story, functioning as both emotional bonds and the conditions necessary for her to develop critical consciousness, demonstrating that resisting the double oppression she's grown up under requires collective solidarity rather than individual will. Before meeting Kelsier, Vin has the lowest views of herself, and he can see it, noting how "Wherever she is, she tries to be as small and unnoticeable as possible." (Sanderson 128). Without realizing it, he's acknowledging what the system has done to her. In discussing Freire, McLaren notes how "dialectical inquiry should be at the heart of 'the act of knowledge,' which is fundamentally an act of transformation," reinforcing the idea that there must be talk about oppression in order to rebel against oppression (McLaren 31). The crew is equally instrumental in fighting back against the conditioning of the Final Empire. Each member of Kelsier's crew accepts Vin unconditionally for who she is, which is something she has never experienced before. They each take turns training her, and by proxy, instilling pieces of wisdom that quietly combat the identity the system constructed to keep her contained. McLaren reinforces the idea that "an important task for critical educators is to grasp, comprehend, and generalize forms of resistance to oppression on the part of the oppressed," to give those people the tools to challenge the ideologies and systems that oppress them (McLaren 32). Kelsier has always been able to see her capabilities from the moment she first tried to push off his soothing. He sees that she dismisses her Mistborn prowess after she killed Shan, notices she's still at a point where she is unable to fully claim that power for herself, and pushes back against the false beliefs she holds of herself saying, "you're... Stronger than you have any right to be... you're still too self-effacing. You're good at this... If there's anything I can teach you, it's how to be self-confident." (Sanderson 434). This collective belief and genuine support from

people who care about her become the necessary conditions for Vin to begin to see herself outside of what the system made her be and to start crafting an identity of her own.

Vin's destruction of the Lord Ruler begins a Marxist act of class revolt and a feminist refusal of assigned identity. Vin, as a skaa woman, the lowest of the low, should never have had power in this system and would have been an unseen force targeting the Final Empire, dismantling it from its very source. This was an intentional maneuver by Sanderson, and in discussing the Lord Ruler, he notes that it's "another good metaphoric scene, where he has been cast down by the people he sought to oppress." (Sanderson "Annotation Mistborn Chapter Thirty-Eight Part Four"). This makes the Lord Ruler's destruction much deeper than his physical death. Vin, by just being herself, destroys the ideological apparatus that kept the skaa people subjugated for a thousand years, taking a revolution that all thought to be impossible, and making it inevitable. Vin beats the Lord Ruler through her intuitive use of Allomancy as well as through her deep intelligence, both of which the system told her she could never possess. In the middle of her fight against the Lord Ruler, she makes an important new connection about Allomancy and Feruchemy, realizing that the Lord Ruler has a secret no one knows, that he, like Sazed, is a Feruchemist. Vin realizes her strength in this moment, that she and the Lord Ruler are in fact similar and that "If he could affect metals inside a person's body, then she could as well." (Sanderson 522). Once she makes this shift and accepts herself as powerful, she is able to immediately adapt that new discovery to her advantage. That's not the luck she's been citing through her journey, but clearly the adept mind of a woman the system tried to convince was worthless, and here she proves that system to be catastrophically wrong. Butler argues that this "deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated," and only by breaking free of the identity

she was assigned could she truly push for change within the system (Butler, ch.3). This is more than a class and feminist victory, it's also a personal one. Vin was molded by a system that wanted to box her in and keep her small, a system that thrived on her and especially women like her, believing they have no worth. Sanderson mentions in his annotations how he bookends the story with the treatment of skaa women by the noblemen within the Final Empire, adding a full circle symmetry with Vin's father's death after the clear rape that led to Vin's birth in the first place (Sanderson "Annotation Mistborn Chapter Thirty-Six Part Three"). Even still, she pushes past all of that, drawing on everything she's learned about herself and about love, thinking "He killed Kelsier!" to give herself the strength needed to rip the Lord Ruler's bracelets free, becoming the very thing the system tried to deny and snuff out: fully and completely herself, a Mistborn.

Throughout this story, we see Vin navigate the different identities she has been assigned by the ideological system she was raised in, and her journey toward agency shows intentional resistance to the forces that have tried to define her sense of self her entire life. In examining her journey through the Marxist and feminist frameworks, we see how she comes to terms with her conditioning and ultimately overcomes it to dismantle the Final Empire at its source. Vin's story mirrors real-world struggles, showing that those who face class and gender oppression within these systems are capable of recognizing their own power just as she did. The people of an oppressed class can change the narrative and break free from the identity mold society has unfairly forced upon them. Sanderson demonstrates just how impactful fantasy fiction can be by taking real-world struggles of power and oppression and presenting them in a form that invites connection, understanding, and ultimately, hope.

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