From Esoteric Religiosity to Ethical Inclusivity: An Investigation of the Detrimental Effects of Religious Trauma in *The Saint of Bright Doors*

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Abstract

In fantasy, the conflation of disparate familiar conventions and concurrent subverted delineation of the same often renders a reimagination of the essentialist socio-political norms. Such transgressions of recognizable circumstances by dint of fantastical elements also engender a feeling of 'hesitation', as argued by Tzvetan Todorov, which also encourages readers to eulogize the protagonists for their prowess in undertaking an arduous quest to resolve a multi-layered mystery. However, the celebration of magical environments and supernatural characters by popular imagination often surpasses the protagonists' emotional challenges and intermittent indecisiveness to acquire empowerment. Sometimes, their objective of seeking the truth is hindered by the cognitive deficiencies induced by childhood abuse, domestic violence, the necessity of achieving belongingness, and so on. In this regard, this study attempts to analyze the detrimental effect of religious trauma on the individual pursuit of redefining fantastical traits in *The Saint of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera. With the seamless unification of traditional fantasy elements such as invisible 'antigods', lethal catechism, and magic doors, with the modern socio-cultural developments in terms of ringing phones, emails, quarantines, and social distancing, the select fiction depicts the protagonist's journey into a world that is imbibed with both mundane and mystic implications. This study further seeks to investigate the consequences of indoctrinated religiosity in restraining agency hued with fantastical peculiarities.

Keywords: Religious Trauma; Agency; Indoctrinated Religiosity; Fantasy; True Self and False Self; Violence

Fantasy usually revolves around a protagonist's perpetual discomfited cognizance of inhabiting a ruptured self or milieu and the resultant tenacity to acquire a propitious wholeness. Prevailingly, the depictions in fantasy literature are often relegated to a popular form of socio-political escapism, typically due to its supernatural and magical traits. However, these narratives "can be interpreted as a way to represent and overcome our own personal fears, shortcomings, and, at times, need for escape" (Mazour 2018, 3). Sometimes, it is fantasy's unmediated association with the discourse of material exigencies that "challenges our assumptions about many important issues: the nature of the universe and man's place therein; mortality, morality, corporeal limitation, space/time limitation, physical confinement to one sex and one body" (Hume 1984, 164). The trajectory of fantasy's usual implicit allusion

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to the real-life crisis is often delineated through the ideological metamorphosis of the protagonist under the hue of supernatural peculiarities. The predominant convention of fantasy primarily foregrounds a protagonist's strenuous pursuit to uphold righteous principles against the oddities of evil forces. As a result, his or her indecisiveness and psychological hindrances to achieving agency are often disregarded as ancillary propositions by popular imagination. Focusing on the substantiality of a protagonist's intrinsic dilemmas and psychological conflicts that proclaim his or her human sensibilities and their interconnection with worldly dogmatism, this study analyzes the pernicious repercussions of religious trauma in *The Saint of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera. As a secondary-world fantasy, the select coming-of-age fiction portrays the desperate attempts of the protagonist to evade his blood-soaked childhood memories and his persistent ventures to alter his destiny. His perpetual propensity to lead a so-called normal way of life is unequivocally linked to the aftereffects of his religious trauma. This study further explicates Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic concept of Ego Distortion concerning the protagonist's perpetual desire to vindicate the qualities of his True Self or spontaneous inclinations against his mother's expectations of him to become an assassin that simultaneously encourages him to adopt a False Self or compromised identity.

Popular Imagination of Religion in Fantasy

There has been an increasing "religious fascination in contemporary society" and the "related new virtual and multi-media worlds of the supernatural provide sites for explorations of ideas, practices and meanings related to religion" (Feldt 2016, 551). The popular desire to discern religious ethos in fantasy literature is probably consequential to the increasing new religious movements and the yearning to envision its alternative teleological power structure devoid of the intricacies of conventional formulated religions. Fantasy and religion both are argued to have the essence of delighting "in symbols, in the transmutation of familiar forms, and in the elaboration of impulses and ideas beyond the confines of empirical limitations" (Cox 1969, 68). The essence of religion is believed to facilitate one to transcend the socio-political limitations and "appreciate the sublimity and mystery of existence" (Cox 1969, 68). However, when a distinct religious system is imagined in an alternative fantasy world as an allusion to the inimical effects of real-world religiosity, it probably renders a relevant scope to analyze the common practices of organized religions in society.

The defining qualities of fantasy predominantly depend on its intended vivification of distinct laws and disparate socio-cultural standards in an otherworld. The structure of fantasy usually follows the trajectory of realizing the necessity to emerge out of spatial or temporal confinement and proceeding towards an accomplishment of psychological fulfilment. In this regard, John Clute and John Grant emphasize how the desired metamorphosis of the protagonist is crucial for resolving an alarming narrative, as they opine:

> A fantasy may be described as the story of an earned passage from BONDAGE – via a central RECOGNITION of what has been revealed and of what is about to happen, and which may involve a profound METAMORPHOSIS of protagonist or world (or both) – into the EUCATASTROPHE, where marriages may occur, just governance fertilize the barren LAND, and there is a HEALING (Clute and Grant 1997, 338 – 339).

This transformative phase of metamorphosis or the disruptive ideological changes in the protagonist temporarily perplexes his or her actions, as this juncture also transports the course

of the narrative from the real-world setting to an otherworldly one. This shift through the measures of recognition confronts the protagonist with some unfolded secrets that are not controlled by his or her habitual understanding of socio-political structure, as suggested by Tzvetan Todorov:

> Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic. In a world which is indeed our world, the world we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one or two possible solutions. Either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by controlled by laws unknown to us (Todorov 1973, 25).

He also contends that this point of uncertainty and momentary puzzlement of the protagonist for the marvellous revelations around him or her engenders a sense of hesitation:

> The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (Todorov 1973, 25).

Though Todorov's explications are intended for analyzing the fantastic in literature rather than fantasy literature in general, his reasoning of hesitation is a defining moment that probably captivates both the characters and the readers. In most cases, after this period the protagonists carry forth their adventures by adapting to the emergent marvellous milieu, and the readers solidify their rational mindscape to restrain their imaginative faculty. Despite willingly suspending their disbelief, due to some implicit allusions to the existential complexities of the real-world, the readers continue to be amused by the narrative flow in fantasy.

Sometimes the metaphorical implications of real-world crisis seem to be far-fetched in fantasy. However, it is the alternative perspectives generated by fantasy's "allegorical story" that enable the readers to deal with the intricacies of real life, as mentioned by Beth Webb:

> …fantasy isn't just for children. Becoming a teenager, rights of passage, facing failure and defeat, coming to terms with betrayal and disappointment – all the stuff of emerging adult life also has to be faced and coped with. Psychoanalysis and counseling have their place, but the most important tool we as humans have to tackle reality, is the creation of metaphor, the allegorical story (Webb 2007).

Delineating the mundane predicaments in an imaginative world, fantasy mostly renders an alternative standpoint through the intentional projections of metaphoric words and images. Such metaphoric representation also negates the scope of correlating the fantasy narrative directly as an organized reference point to empirical experiences. These extended associations of words and environs probably retain the legitimacy of a fantasy:

> The discontinuity of image and pattern essential to fantasy defies the systematic representations of allegory. More strongly, the fantasist's terms should not be read wholly metaphorically, however, allusive they may be, for the function of metaphor

> is to persuade the audience that one thing can be seen as another, thereby new aspects of either term (Apter 1982, 3).

This conventional trait of fantasy fiction of providing different approaches to explain an event can also be perceived through its demarcation of various religious renderings in a narrative. Moreover, modern fantasy literature is considered to have some distinct "*content and motifs –* such as trans-empirical or supernatural events, actors, actions, and spaces" that often lead to its resemblance with "religious *genres* such as myths, stories of marvels, and epic literature" (Feldt 2016, 103). Fantasy fiction often induces psychological space to cogitate on the dictums of traditional religions through the imaginative creation of a domain where the actions are administered by supernatural entities.

The reference to fantastic literature can be potently traced back to the depiction of epic machinery by Aristotle. However, its popularity as a critical area of discussion is argued to have started in the eighteenth century, partly due to "an increasing disbelief in but continued fascination with the supernatural, partly as a negative by-product of arguments for the realistic novel and, perhaps most importantly, as a vital component of the emergent discourse of the sublime" (Sandner 2004, 6). This popular desire to explore the discourse of the sublime can be considered a contributing factor to the creation of modern fantasy fiction that usually revolves around an imaginative world with distinct operations of emergent religious sentiments. Concurrently, the "world's mythological heritage" is considered to be one of the main impetuses for the application of "religious themes and motifs" in fantasy literature (Laszkiewicz 2013, 26). In this context, J.R.R. Tolkien's popular fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* is analyzed as "an unquestionable repository of Christian morality" in which "good and evil are clearly separated by their natures" (Laszkiewicz 2013, 25). The unification of religious allusions in fantasy is also ascribed to

> The growing readership of fantasy and its recognition among academics can be treated as a sign that modern people, who have surrounded themselves with high-tech devices, still want to read about good winning over evil, still want to experience the marvelous and other-worldly, and still want to find spiritual sustenance (the forgotten or dismissed *sacrum*) (Laszkiewicz 2013, 27).

It is through the formation of "secondary religions on elements borrowed from existing religions and turned them into a more or less significant part of the narrative" in order to "make comments about the primary world and real religions; in some cases, the religious comment is one of the most explicit messages of the fantasy story (31 – 32). However, the rampant tendency to reduce the denotative meaning in fantasy also jeopardizes the very essence of the genre, as Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara mention:

> If one mistake in approaching fantasy is to reject it altogether because of the presence of enchantment, another is to reject it as untrue and devoid of meaning, and yet another error is to try too hard to force an allegorical meaning onto a particular work of fantasy (Dickerson and O'Hara 2006, 57).

This imaginative oscillation exists in the explication of every sphere of literature but probably in a more extensive manner in fantasy. It can also be argued that in this ubiquitous ingenuity lies the uniqueness of fantasy. As a prevailing socio-cultural discourse, organized religions are believed to provide psychological security and emotional dependency. As a consequence, a

fantasy author's fabrication of secondary religions does not necessarily intend to reject the conventional religions but prevent and modify the common malpractices in the name of religion.

Esoteric Indoctrination and Religious Trauma in *The Saint of Bright Doors*

A secondary-world fantasy as a "particular kind of otherworld" can be interpreted as:

> …an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality (as are many of the domains common to SUPERNATURAL FICTION), which is impossible according to common sense and which is self-coherent as a venue for STORY (i.e., the rules by which its REALITY is defined can be learned by living them, and are not arbitrary like those of a WONDERWORLD can be) (Clute and Grant 1997, 847).

This internal consistency of worldbuilding in secondary-world fantasy usually becomes effective in sustaining the readers' ingenious assimilation with the narrated events. J.R.R. Tolkien equates the efficacious skills and proficiency of a story-maker with the accomplishments of a sub-creator in his analysis of secondary-world fantasy. It is through this mastery a story-maker can encourage readers and audiences to experience the phase of "willing suspension of disbelief":

> Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief*, but when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of the world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed (Tolkien 2008, 52).

Though Tolkien's argument defies the coexistence of the customary belief of the real world and the exploratory cognizance of the secondary-world fantasy, the worldbuilding "must also contain certain elements, such as characters, settings, and themes, which are so easily recognizable that readers can navigate in the unfamiliar world" (Pu 2012, 1978). These elements often rely on the "universal principles of reason and logic in order to ensure a consistent, coherent, and credible reality" (Pu, 2012, 1978). Such confluences of diverse components in worldbuilding also appear to be effectual measures to comment on or criticize the primary world by depicting the traumatic experiences of the characters. In this regard, religious trauma is not an exception.

Sri Lankan author Vajra Chandrasekera's debut novel, *The Saint of Bright Doors*, published in 2023, captures the traumatic experiences of the protagonist named Fetter in his journey from a child assassin to a perplexed youth. From the very beginning, the attributions of worldbuilding are vividly palpable in the novel, as Fetter is trained and guided by his semi-immortal mother, Mother-of-Glory, to kill his father, The Perfect and Kind, a man with some supernatural powers. If quest and violence are two recurring patterns of fantasy, this select fiction unambiguously portrays both traits from its first line: "The moment Fetter is born, Mother-of-Glory pins his shadow to the earth with a large brass nail and tears it from him.

This is his first memory, the seed of many hours of therapy to come" (Chandrasekera, 2023, 1). Fetter's subsequent discoveries that his body does not cast a shadow, his potentiality to remain unaffected by fire, and his competence to see the devils around him or his adeptness to walk among the anti-gods can be considered as the preliminaries to the first phase of Joseph Campbell's formulation of the monomyth, i.e., separation. Campbell divides the standard pattern of a hero's journey into three stages such as separation, initiation, and return, which he illustrates further:

> A hero ventures from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell 1949, 30).

The trajectory of this phase of separation in Fetter's life is profoundly reinforced by his mother's esoteric indoctrination. For the first twelve years of his life, Fetter is persuaded by his mother to embrace a distinct goal that he fails to comprehend initially like many other popular fantasy protagonists. The predominance of Mother-of-Glory's operation as his teacher also stimulates Fetter to get entangled in his mother's ardent desire to seek vengeance:

> …Mother-of-Glory gradually takes over his education. One by one other tutors fall away. Mother-of-Glory teaches him the core curriculum of a classical education: gramarye, dialectics, revanche, deferral, and murder. There are lessons in theory, and there are practice drills, what she calls his *exercises* (5).

Her rigorous impartation of determined education which resembles a lethal catechism eventually enables Fetter to become accustomed to violence. It also restrains his wish to master the ordinary human actions. The omnipresence of her mother's teachings somehow represses his ability to make a decision:

> Mother-of-Glory tells him the invisible laws and powers used to come when called, to possess a human body and speak with a human voice, to prophesy, to teach, to leave when evicted. Everything is different now, she says. She does not explain why. He does his best to conceal that he can see them all the time, whether his mother is attempting to summon them or not (6).

This perpetual process of injecting her desirous ideologies into Fetter is not "based on shared knowledge and research but are matters of personal opinion and feelings" (Chazan 2022, 37). This sort of dedicated precepts can be aligned with the core principles of an indoctrinated education. Indoctrination literally means "to teach a doctrine, and since parents impart moral education of some sort to their children, and any principled moral teaching is in some weak sense a doctrine, indoctrination would seem to be an unavoidable feature of child-rearing" (Khawaja 2010, 27). However, some guided indoctrinations through the methods of "under-cut autonomy, like brainwashing and coercion" (Khawaja, 2010, 27), can result in pernicious repercussions.

Mother-of-Glory's esoteric inculcation confirms the future course of Fetter's life. Her domineering commands do not give space for Fetter's reluctance, which is often a recurrent trait of a protagonist in fantasy:

> "The Five Unforgivables are the major crimes as defined by your father's ideological apparatus," Mother-of-Glory says…The Five Unforgivables are, in order to severity, matricide; heresy leading to factionalism; the sancticide of votaries who have reached the fourth level of awakening; patricide; and the assassination of the Perfect and Kind…Your mission is to commit them all. Your father abandoned us. We were unchosen, out of his eschatology. We are going to destroy your father's cult and salt the earth where it falls. Now you say it. (8)

At the very outset, Mother-of-Glory's intended manipulation of Fetter's life probably obfuscates her long-endured suffering and anguish which can also be analyzed as an allusion to the heartbreak and torment of Lord Buddha's wife, Princess Yashodara (Roberts 2023). The afflictions of Mother-of-Glory can also be examined as a modern reimagination of the Sri Lankan legend of Queen Kuveni who was deserted by her South Indian husband, Prince Vijaya (Roberts 2023). Though there can be several emotional responses that strive to justify Mother-of-Glory's aggression towards her husband, the Perfect and Kind, her rigid determinism incites in Fetter a lifelong sense of depression and anxiety. Varied aspects of Fetter's disoriented transformation can be discerned after a long passage of time in the narrative when he, in his early twenties, comes to an island called Luriat.

Due to some unknown transformation in Fetter's life, he attempts to lead his life in a new way in Luriat. He endeavours to abandon his learned killing instincts induced through his mother's resolute indoctrination. His struggles to find an emotional conduit in his love for a young man named Hej become more inconvenient as queer love is not permissible in Luriat. With all the required mechanisms for a secondary-world fantasy, Luriat often fails Fetter to comprehend its power dynamics wholly. He seeks the momentary pleasures of an unblemished life by serving in a support group "for children of gods who have been unchosen for their sacred destinies" (Ruttan 2023). In this newly discovered territory, Fetter strives to lead a humane life but the frequent remembrances of his mother's inculcated aim to kill his father and the memories of his blood-soaked childhood prevent him from acquiring an agency. Fetter's perpetual feelings of regret, uneasiness, and indecisive nature can be analyzed as the aftereffects of his religious trauma. Religious trauma can be defined as "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences…. this type of damage can occur in various faith traditions" (Stone 2013, 324). Though Fetter's traumatic experiences are not manoeuvered by the precepts of any organized religion, it is primarily the discrete religiosity practiced by his mother in his native place, Acusdab. His prolonged exposure to his mother's teachings fails him often to motivate his inquisitive mind to focus on the functioning of the energy forces in Luriat. He mostly remains absorbed in his thoughts and he frequently asks himself "*Why am I the way I am*" (39).

Alyson M. Stone poignantly identifies the detrimental effects of family beliefs in the formative years can be foremost reasons for engendering religious trauma in the later phase of life:

> Unlike many forms of trauma that occur through acute incidents, religious trauma generally accrues gradually through long-term exposure to messages that undermine mental health. Many individuals are born into belief systems in their families and religious communities, and it is these early groups where they are steeped in messages that affect their ideas about themselves and the world (Stone 2013, 325).

In this context, it can be added that the effects of exasperation can increase if the indoctrinated beliefs and ideologies reemerge, as it happens with Fetter with his mother's phone calls. With the scattered elements of urban fantasy, select fiction incorporates some prevalent elements and ideas from contemporary times, such as the internet, phones, quarantines, and social distancing. His mother's unwanted phone calls perplex his agitation further. His frustration reaches its ultimate point when he replies to his mother's reminder of his indoctrinated mission:

> "I'm not anybody's weapon," Fetter snaps. It's almost automatic. He's spent so long unlearning that childhood fanaticism that even with all the affection he feels for his mother now, it grates against his heart when she speaks like this (115).

The distinctive characteristic of Fetter that differentiates him from several popular fantasy heroes is his desire to be satiated with a secondary role rather than acquiring the identity of a hero in its true sense. This approach can be explicated through association with the support group which he deliberately considers as a way to create his destiny by negating the destiny that has been thrust upon him. Religious trauma is argued to be "tied to a lived experience of a given religion, whether or not this experience also includes abuse or violence" (Downie 2022, 2). Aligning with this characteristic of religious trauma, Fetter experiences abuse by his mother's authoritarian indoctrination and realizes psychological violence when he becomes perplexed to choose the discourse of his life, according to his desire.

Interrelation of the True Self and the False Self with Religious Trauma

As manipulated religious indoctrination causes traumatic experiences, the resultant trauma stimulates the individual disposition to decipher religious beliefs with the tint of cognitive deficiencies. It also alters the typical functioning of an authentic self. Referring to Fetter's perpetual psychological oscillation between the desire to succumb to his spontaneous wishes and the controlled refashioning of the same as a defence mechanism against societal pressures, this study investigates Donald Winnicott's concept of the True Self and the False Self. Winnicott defines the True Self as

> "…the theoretical position from which cone the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea…The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing. It is closely linked to the idea of the Primary Process, and is, at the beginning, essentially not reactive to external stimuli, but primary (Winnicott 1965, 148).

The authentic perceptions in the early years foment the True Self. A caring and protective mother who provides a nurturing environment for the child is an ideal model for the formation of this self. This self is more vulnerable than the False Self which Winnicott refers to as a "defensive function…to hide and protect the True Self" (Winnicott 1965, 142). It is the False Self that counterfeits the natural impulses and complies with societal demands. In the select fiction, Fetter's disconcerted mental state also encourages him to behave by a False Self, which is characterized by his submissive and timid attitude towards the members of his support group in Luriat. He assumes his false identity to safeguard his blood-soaked past:

> Fetter guards his secrets through all this because he is not at all tempted to speak of them. He does not allow them to rise to the surface of his mind, where they might become transmissible. It is handy to be found interesting in himself, not as the

abandoned spawn of a messianic figure or as someone with a grand violent destiny. He has put away those childish things, he reminds himself, and so it is not a lie to omit them. Maybe some day (34).

Defining the interrelation between trauma and captivity, Judith Herman contends that a prolonged phase of trauma is caused by the presence of the victim for an extended period, and while giving examples she mentions "prisons, concentration camps, and slave labor camps…religious cults, in brothels and other institutions of organized sexual exploitation, and in families" (Herman 1992, 74). In Fetter's life, the pervasive influence of his mother's secretive cults induces the erosion of his identity. To protect his true self explores new phases of life to uphold the typical features of any common human being such as compassion, cohabitation, and endearment. His attempts to seek belongingness in Luriat's caste system or his eagerness to study the bright doors in the city encapsulate his penchant for a new identity. The bright doors in Luriat are magical doors through which the devils can enter into the city. If an ordinary door remains closed and untouched for a longer time, it can be converted into a magical bright door. Fetter's desperation to transcend his excruciating existence can be perceived through his earnest desire to study these bright doors, as these doors open to the otherworlds. His varied attempts to acquire agency correspond to his impulse to protect the unsolicited nature of his true self. It can also be argued that in Fetter's demeanour, the true self is complemented by his false self.

Religious trauma attains a severe form when ethical precepts are assimilated with the attitude to exploit an individual's physical and emotional potential. Children are more vulnerable to such exploitations and ill-treatments and they may "develop symptoms of depression, including suicidal ideation, phobias, social withdrawal, aggression, psychoticism, and dissociative disorders" (Thomas 2022, 30). The perpetual sense of isolation can also be a detrimental effect of this trauma as it curbs the spontaneous formation of new relationships with peer group members. Fetter's constant dealing with internal conflicts to get rid of his distressing past and inability to share the harsh experiences with others thwarts the fundamental idea of his selfhood. As one of the consequences of this jeopardized state, his intention to develop a romantic bond with his lover Hej also ends in vain. Despite attaching different identities of the false self, he remains dissatisfied.

Conclusion

Religion serves as a primordial source of solace when angst, torment, and frustration perplex the mind. However, when the inclusive precepts of religions are manipulated to induce some distinct ideological results, the integrity of religious beliefs gets deviated. Moreover, some vulnerable minds, especially in their formative years, are affected severely due to these exploitative actions. Through the analysis of Vajra Chandrasekera's secondary world fantasy, *The Saint of Bright Doors*, this study addresses how calculative teachings combined with distinct religious sentiments in the formative years engender psychological hindrances in an individual which eventually prevents him or her from achieving agency. This study also investigates how the resultant religious trauma in this context impends an individual's perpetual desire to seek psychological stability, social belongingness, and cultural cohesiveness.

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