

What Makes a Hero? From Past Polarities to Contemporary Ambiguities

By

Mairuna Farhin
ID: 17103045

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Mairuna Farhin

ID: 17103045

Approval

The thesis titled “What Makes a Hero? From Past Polarities to Contemporary Ambiguities” submitted by Mairuna Farhin ID: 17103045 of Spring, 2021 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts on 28-05-2021.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

Anika Saba
Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

Professor Firdous Azim
Professor and Chairperson, Department of English and
Humanities
BRAC University

Abstract

Most narratives found in literature usually have one central point in common – characters, who are at the heart of the story. Throughout literary history, characters exist often as a representation of a conflict, a reflection of society or a symbol of the message the story intends to convey, in the form of “tropes.” One of the most common character tropes to exist since the time of ancient Greeks, is that of the hero and the villain, who are a black and white representation of good and evil. However, in contemporary times we find more and more narratives exploring the grey area between these two popular tropes, in the form of morally ambiguous characters. In these narratives, there is no hero or villain; the hero comprises of various villainous characteristics and the villain possess many heroic qualities. What was previously viewed as two opposing ideologies have now merged into one single character – the morally grey character. This thesis aims to explore the notions of good and evil associated with heroes and villains, by examining morally ambiguous characters in literature from the past till present, and addresses the question of whether good and evil are represented as binary opposites. Through analysing Sabaa Tahir’s contemporary American YA fantasy fiction series *An Ember in the Ashes* from a post-structuralist lens, this research seeks to prove that good and evil are contextual, and the notions of wholly good and wholly evil do not exist, since one concept is always contaminated with its binary opposite.

Keywords: heroes and villains; tropes; morally ambiguous characters; good and evil; post-structuralism; *An Ember in the Ashes*

Dedication

Dearest Maa and Baba, you are the reason why I pursued this degree, and your motivation is what has carried me through to the end.

This is for you.

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All praises belong to Allah, The Most Gracious, Who has allowed me to complete this dissertation with much more ease than I had ever expected. I can never be grateful enough.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout the thousands of stories told in literature, whether they are grand narratives of gods and emperors or ordinary tales of ordinary people, almost all of them have one central point in common – characters, who are at the heart of the story. These characters are the vessels through which a story progresses, and they often exist as a representation of a conflict, a reflection of society or a symbol of the message the story intends to convey, in the form of “tropes.” Two of the most common character tropes in literary history, are that of the “hero” and the “villain.” Ranging from religious narratives to myths, legends and fictional narratives, the hero and villain archetypes have been a black and white representation of good and evil. These representations, since centuries of its existence, have almost always been two fundamentally opposing concepts. However, as literary narratives evolved with the passage of time, so did the various literary genres and character tropes, along with what they represent. New types of heroes emerged who strayed from the traditional archetype. Characters such as the Byronic hero and the Machiavellian hero, were no longer the pure embodiment of good, the classical knight in shining armour whose selfless courage would save the world. Rather, these “heroes” were tainted with many “villainous” characteristics. They were greedy, they sought vengeance, they killed without remorse, but they were still heroes, the protagonists of the story, because at the end of the day, they still had redeeming qualities. However, despite these characters having redeeming qualities, it was clear that the literary scene was now witnessing a new range of characters who stood somewhere between the black and white shades of good and evil – characters who stepped into moral greyness. Shakespeare’s Richard III, Milton’s Satan, Byron’s Manfred, Bronte’s Heathcliff, Wilde’s Dorian Gray, Leroux’s the Phantom, Hugo’s Frollo, and various other such characters

scattered among the literary canon had all transcended the classifications of good and evil; they had now entered the morally ambiguous territory.

In contemporary times, these morally ambiguous characters have gained much popularity in their own archetypes of the anti-hero and the anti-villain. Both these archetypes are interchangeable; the “hero” and the “villain” label only exist to highlight the difference between the protagonist and antagonist. As the names themselves suggest, an anti-hero is a protagonist who lacks the traditional purity and goodness, who achieves good not out of his selflessness but because of his selfishness (MasterClass). His counter-part, the anti-villain, is an antagonist who has noble intentions and pure goals but the means to achieve them is what puts him in the villain sub-category (MasterClass). The anti-villain is often a product of their circumstances, which makes him a sympathetic character despite his many evil deeds.

These morally ambiguous characters have seen a whole new wave of popularity in contemporary American pop-culture with various television shows and movies, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *Kingsmen*, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Joker*, *Maleficent*, *The X-Men Franchise*, *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, etc. showcasing a horde of morally grey characters, many of them as the protagonists. And interestingly, many shows which portray one character as a villain, portray the same character as the hero in a spin-off show. An example of this is the character of Klaus Mikaelson, the primary villain for much of the show in *The Vampire Diaries*, who later became the main hero of the show *The Originals* in the same cinematic universe. This mixing up of heroes and villains is not only limited to shows and movies, but it has also gained a lot of popularity in contemporary American literature as well, particularly in the young adult fantasy fiction genre.

In recent years, the popularity of young adult fantasy fiction has skyrocketed globally, but particularly in America. A research published in 2020 states that in the first six months of

2018, juvenile and young adult books' unit sales in the United States had reached around 80.9 million, and within this category, the science fiction/fantasy/magic genre surpassed all other books with over a staggering 20 million unit sales (Watson). The young adult genre, otherwise known as YA, is a genre of books primarily marketed towards young adults ranging from 12 to 18 years old, starring a protagonist who usually falls under the same age range (Peterson). However, in a study published in 2012 by Bowker Market Research, it states that 55% of the readers of this genre are adults, 28% of whom belong to the age range of 30 to 44 ("New Study"). The study also reports that 78% of the time the adults purchase these books for their own personal reading, and that series such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* played a fairly significant role in the growing trend of adult YA readers ("New Study"). In another study conducted in 2015 by Nielson, about 80% of the readers of YA genre were adults, which put the entire label of YA, supposedly targeted at juveniles, into question (Johnson). Thus, an increasing adult reader base has led to YA books venturing into darker and more mature themes (Whitman). This can be seen in the growing trends within this genre, which are featuring more and more characters displaying multiple shades of moral ambiguity.

Literary trends such as subverting the classical character representations of evil, where the previously classical villain is now shown as a sympathetic, relatable character, have been gaining a steady momentum in contemporary American YA fantasy fiction. Vampires, for example, the once vile and evil creatures as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, has become the prince charming in Stephenie Meyer's the *Twilight* saga and Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* series. Paranormal romance, particularly with vampires, has become a sub-genre of its own. There has also been a rising trend of villain origin stories – retellings of classical tales from a new perspective in order to humanise and evoke sympathy for some of literature's most evil characters. Examples include Marissa Meyer's *Heartless* which tells the

backstory of the villain of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* – the Queen of Hearts. She is the central character in this novel, which narrates her downfall into the twisted character we see in the original work. Similarly, Madeline Miller's *Circe* tells the tale of the Homeric evil witch Circe, but once again, from a brand-new perspective of the goddess of magic herself, which also evokes sympathy and admiration for the character. Other books in this genre, such as Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* duology, V.E. Scwab's *Monsters of Verity* duology and Marie Lu's *The Young Elites* trilogy have exceptionally twisted characters at the centre of their novels which puts all notions of morality into question. These growing trends where the lines between good and evil keep getting blurred, makes one wonder what is it that is bringing about such trends which have become so popular among the readers, to the extent that a vast number of such books have been adapted, or are on their way of being adapted, into movies and television shows.

The New-York Times best-selling author, V.E. Schwab, in one of her interviews, talks about her motivations behind writing a novel that is all about morally grey characters:

One of my primary goals when I sat down to write *Vicious* was to play with the idea of the superhero as social construct, and the fact that if you gave an ordinary person supernatural abilities, they probably wouldn't feel a sudden imperative to do good deeds. So I wanted to strip away these terms of hero and villain and ask the reader, in the absence of those cues, who do you root for?
(“Interview with”)

In the same interview, Schwab also talks about the growing trend of anti-heroes and anti-villains in contemporary American young adult fantasy fiction: “As far as trends, I think it works because we are in a phase—one I hope lasts—where people are less interested in the moral good and the abject evil, and far more engaged with the gray between. We like our

heroes flawed and our villains complicated” (“Interview with”). Another New York Times bestselling author, Leigh Bardugo, whose debut YA fantasy trilogy *Shadow and Bone* is now a Netflix television series, also talks about why she writes morally ambiguous characters, both as protagonists and antagonists: “I’m not interested in characters who are just one thing, who are wholly evil or wholly good. People aren’t like that. We all have our own darkness to contend with, and that isn’t necessarily a bad thing” (“Leigh Bardugo talks”). The popularity of such characters, stories and books in general, show that it is not only authors who find it fascinating to explore morally grey area as a reflection of true human nature, but consumers also enjoy such content, which contributes to the rise of such media representations. With the growing blurred lines between good and bad in modern society, particularly American society, this does not come as a surprise.

The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, which originated in 2013, is a very recent example of such blurred lines. Law enforcers, who are supposed to be civil servants ensuring justice, are ironically seen to be the ones carrying out violent injustices against the black community in America. The consecutive murders of Breonna Taylor on 13th March and George Floyd on 25th May by the police in Louisville, Kentucky, led to an enormous protest in late May 2020 that shook the entire world (Gottbrath). The protests, though, were not of the usual peaceful nature that everyone expected it to be. “Police, dressed in riot gear, fired tear gas and other projectiles. Some protesters destroyed property and set fires. Many people suffered injuries, including seven who were wounded when someone opened fire into the crowd” (Gottbrath). And yet, a significant amount of people all over the world sided with the black community, despite their questionable actions of vandalism and destruction of property. In fact, protests broke out in various parts of the world in May and June, in support of the BLM movement (Kirby). Many of the store owners whose businesses had suffered great losses during the incident also supported the black community because they sympathised with

their cause as well (Wang). One such business owner states: “Everything in my store will be replaceable, while lives are being senselessly lost, on a way too regular basis, is the way bigger issue” (Wang). In any other circumstance, such actions would have been unanimously condemned. However, in this case, the context behind the actions created a divide amongst the people and resulted in conflicting reactions, where some voiced their support while others vehemently condemned it. The morality of right and wrong convoluted into a complex concept, shedding its former garment of black and white simplicity. Such convolutions often occur during times of conflict, giving birth to moral ambiguity. And it is this moral ambiguity born from the smouldering flames of conflict which Sabaa Tahir explores in her debut YA fantasy fiction series *An Ember in the Ashes*.

Sabaa Tahir, a Pakistani-American born and brought up in the United States, used to work as a copy editor in the international department at The Washington Post before her rise to fame in 2015 as a New York Times best-selling author of *An Ember in the Ashes*. The novel tells the story of two people at two completely opposite ends of the spectrum – an elite soldier, Elias, desperate to disassociate himself from the brutal Martial Empire, and a Scholar slave girl, Laia, desperate to save her imprisoned brother from the clutches of the Empire with the help of the Resistance – and how their journeys intertwine. Set in a dystopian fantasy world where the Scholars have been taken over by the oppressive Martials and forced to become an ethnic minority who are deprived of basic rights, this series, consisting of four novels – *An Ember in the Ashes*, *A Torch Against the Night*, *A Reaper at the Gates* and *A Sky Beyond the Storm* respectively – explores the cost of war and occupation from the perspective of both the oppressed and the oppressor. As the series progresses, the cast of main characters increases as well as the first-person point of views from which the story is narrated. Apart from Laia and Elias who are the main protagonists of the first novel, in the consecutive novels not only do we get an insight into the mind and life of a soldier devoted to the Martial

Empire, Helene, but we also get chapters from the point of view of the character who is supposed to be the main villain and the ultimate embodiment of evil, The Nightbringer. Presenting the perspectives of various characters on both sides of the line dividing the concepts of good and evil, this series delves into the moral ambiguities that arise from dire situations and conflicts, showing the readers that everyone, at the end of the day, are nothing more than a prisoner and a product of their circumstances.

Although Tahir left her job as a journalist to pursue a full-time career as an author, her time in The Washington Post greatly inspired her to write her first ever novel. And this is what sets this series apart – its representation of real-world events through fantasy, and its characters representing the very real struggles of human beings trapped by conflicts. In an interview with The Oklahoman, Tahir mentions how her work as a journalist gave birth to her stories:

While I was working there [The Washington Post], I read stories about people who were going through the absolute worst possible things, people who were surviving jailings and child soldiers and war and occupation, all that type of stuff. I was reading this stuff every night. It ended up having a pretty big impact. (Raymond)

A Publishers Weekly article mentions all the real-life inspirations that Tahir's novels are based on:

While the first volume, *An Ember in the Ashes*, was published in 2015, it was conceptualized more than a decade ago while Tahir worked on the international desk at the *Washington Post*, copy editing heart-rending stories such as one about young Kashmiri males being taken from their families by the military and never returning home. *Ember's* sequel, *A Torch Against the*

Night (2016), was prompted by the global refugee crisis, which Tahir recalled having risen to “new levels of insanity” at the time she was writing. And the conflict between Iraq and the Kurds, as well as other wars and the Arab Spring, she says, permeated the plot of the third volume, *A Reaper at the Gates* (2018) ... Tahir disclosed that *Sky* [the fourth volume, *A Sky Beyond the Storm* (2020)] explores how “despotic governments crush populations,” and how a regime “that is seemingly fine” can become oppressive almost overnight, though the rest of the world might not know the extent of it. For instance, she said, during the 2019–2020 Jammu and Kashmir lockdown, the Indian government prevented people from entering or leaving this territory adjacent to Pakistan, a bad situation magnified by a complete news and communications blackout. (Kirch)

Tahir’s realistic characters treading on the fine line between good and evil were also carefully constructed after much research. The primary male protagonist of the series, Elias, was based on stories of Liberian child soldiers, whereas Helene, one of the female protagonists, was based on the book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* by the former U.S. army personnel Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, who later became a psychology teacher (Breznican). One of the primary antagonists, the Commandant, was also inspired by a real-life incident from Tunisian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, during the Arab Spring, about a person who did not commit atrocities but rather someone against whom atrocities were committed (Breznican). Not only are the characters inspired by the real world, but Tahir also conducted interviews with several “modern day warriors” such as West Point cadets, veteran soldiers, FBI agents and police officers in order to understand how their minds work and to depict authentic characterizations (Aguirre). For Tahir, “it was important to her to feature villains who were balanced — not all good, not all evil, and sometimes a

little bit of both” (Arreola). She comments regarding these characters she so artfully developed: “Each person has their own villain. To me, that's a reflection of our world. There's never just one villain” (Arreola).

Observing the growing trend and popularity of moral ambiguity, this thesis aims to explore the notions of good and evil associated with heroes and villains, by examining morally ambiguous characters in literature from the past till present, and addresses the question of whether good and evil are represented as binary opposites in contemporary American YA fantasy fiction. The objective of this research is to deconstruct the notions of good and evil represented by various characters in Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* series from a post-structuralist lens, and thereby prove that “good” and “evil” are contextual; the notions of wholly good and wholly evil do not exist, since one concept is always contaminated with its binary opposite.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Archetypes and Northrop Frye

Northrop Frye is one of the most academically successful advocates of applying an archetypal approach to literary analysis, even though the genesis of archetypal literary theory lies with Carl Jung (Dobson 1). Frye's work is considered as "hopelessly modernist" and his archetypal theory gained the most fame in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Dobson 2). Archetypal literary theory, according to Frye, is a mode of criticism where one work of literature, for example a poem, is not an imitation of nature but rather an imitation of other poems; it studies the conventions, genres and the recurring imagery therein which connects one literary work to another (Dobson 2). Frye's archetype is very different from that of Carl Jung's. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, archetype is defined as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole" (qtd. in Williamson 98). Jung's archetype is rooted in the collective unconscious of man's psychic constitution which is outlined by mankind's past experiences of general life situations, whereas Frye's archetype is purely literary; it is limited to the recurring symbols found in literature which unifies our collective literary experience (Williamson 99-100). The function of the archetype as a recurring image connects multiple literary works together, unifying the literary experience (Williamson 98). This conception of the archetype is thus linked to one of Frye's major concerns, which is to show literature as a "total form" (Williamson 98). Krieger highlights that Frye's literary archetypes are a "humanistic construct of common man" without any kind of metaphysical sanctions (qtd. in Williamson 100). Moreover, Frye's efforts of disassociating his archetype from that of Jung's also points

towards his concern regarding literary criticism to be free of any kind of extra “determinisms” such as psychology, etc. (Williamson 100).

2.2 The Hero and Villain Archetypes

I. Cultural Significance in Constructing the Hero and Villain Archetypes

Our history and society are littered with tales of the heroic and the villainous, conjured from our imaginations as well as from the living, breathing people around us. The eternal struggle between good and evil embodied within these two archetypes of the hero and the villain relay a symbolic significance. Joseph Campbell suggests that “heroes and villains can present us with the challenge to transformation, possibly enabling us to see ourselves and others in a new light. The heroes and villains continually thrown up by human imagination can be seen as powerful prototypes representing the extremes of human response to boundary situations” (qtd. in Alsford 10). A more contemporary analysis of these archetypes unveils its symbolic significance rooted in cultural values; what is considered heroic and villainous in a culture, gives an insight to that culture’s underlying values (Alsford 2). The traditional hero story, echoed throughout various modes of representation across different media, asserts superiority of Western cultural values (Hourihan 3). Likewise, Thorslev states that “the hero gives one the broader and often the deeper perspective of the spirit of the age which he represents” (Thorslev 20).

II. Who is a Hero and a Villain?

The notions associated with heroism and villainy is not merely a fictional conjecture for entertainment purposes, but something that we also see everywhere around us. As Alsford puts it, “History is full of instances of heroism and villainy in every field of human endeavour” (8). What is it, then, that elevates one to the level of a hero, and degrades one to the level of a villain? In the simplest of terms, the hero “is a good man trying to accomplish

some good end” and the villain “is a bad man who, from hatred or for personal advancement, uses unjust means to block the hero’s purpose” (Boyer 4). The hero and the villain are also two sides of the same coin: “the hero and the villain may be seen as aspects of the same tragic character, one who encounters a crisis of some sort or another and chooses to respond in a particular way. It is in the nature of the response to circumstances *in extremis* that we see the heroic and villainous personas manifest themselves” (Alsford 124). These archetypes are also “examples of our highest ideals and darkest fears for human existence” (Alsford 138).

A question thus arises, regarding the scale against which the goodness of the hero and the evil of the villain are measured. Who sets these definitions? According to Campbell, the hero is someone who represents “a single ideal, a monomyth, which has manifested itself through the world’s literature and religions for thousands of years” including historical and religious figures such as Moses, Gautama Buddha and Jesus (qtd. in Alsford 33). Hourihan suggests that hero stories reinstate what is considered good and evil in a cultural context, specifically the Western cultural context, and acts as “agents of cultural transmission” (4). The definitions of good and evil against which the hero and the villain are measured, thus, are moral values rooted in Western culture, ethics and religion:

[The hero story] inscribes the set of related concepts, the fundamental dualisms, which have shaped Western thought and values. Plato and Aristotle articulated the basic dualisms when they asserted the superiority of humans to animals, free men to slaves, men to women, reason to passion and soul (or mind) to body. Christian thought largely mirrors these values, and links them to the concepts of good and evil. The hero always embodies the superior terms of these dualisms... (Hourihan 2)

Various literary and media representations display these dualities, for example *Robinson Crusoe* which portrays the dualism of white against black skinned people, and the James Bond movies where democracy is put against communism (Hourihan 2). In such portrayals, the values which the hero possesses embody good, and the qualities of his supposed enemies, the villains, who are considered as the “others”, equate to evil (Hourihan 2). Furthermore, the ideology behind hero stories can be unveiled by examining the binary opposites around which they revolve, and these qualities reveal much about what is valued and what is considered inferior in Western culture (Hourihan 4).

III. The Hero and Villain Dualisms

Dualism, therefore, is an integral part of defining the hero and villain, for it is always the hero versus the villain, one invariably measured in contrast to the values and characteristics of the other. In order to understand dualisms which are related to binary oppositions, and thus understand the hero story in general and the roles of heroes and villains in specific, it is important to recognize the conception of its roots in the literary theory of structuralism (Hourihan 4).

The linguist, Saussure's, description of language as a system of differences (de Saussure [1915] 1974:111–21) has enabled the perception that, in any particular text, the meanings of the signifiers are functions of their relationships to each other within that text. That is, the text is a system which constructs a pattern of meaning, more or less consistent within itself, but only problematically related to external reality... The meanings of hero stories depend upon these related pairs of signifiers which express the dualistic structure inherent in Western thought, a pattern of values which naturalizes the

dominance of the European patriarchal elite and the subordination of other cultural groups, other social classes, women and nature. (Hourihan 16)

Moreover, dualisms are not mere dichotomies, “for in a dualism one of the two contrasting terms is constructed as superior and the other is inherently inferior in relation to it” (Hourihan 16). Dualistic thinking, therefore, naturalizes domination since this now becomes a part of the identities of both dominant and subordinate groups (Hourihan 17). The construction of dualisms also contributes to stereotyping, or homogenization, according to Val Plumwood (qtd. in Hourihan 130). These dualisms have evolved along with time “as the patterns of thought developed, with the hero and his opponents mutating to fit the changing conceptual and political environment but always demonstrating the ‘natural’ superiority of the Western patriarchy” (Hourihan 21).

Of all these dualisms, the most simplistic one which is the most implicit in popular hero stories is the good and evil opposition, where the hero is good by default and his opponents are necessarily evil simply because they are his opponents (Hourihan 32). Many adventure stories such as *Treasure Island* depict this, which are “simply images of the commonplace values of their time in action,” where “almost no moral analysis of the hero’s actions or those of his opponents is provided” (Hourihan 32). Some common depictions of good and evil dualism in hero stories include the opposition between civilisation and wilderness, upper class and lower class, reason and emotion, rationality and imagination among others (Hourihan 24, 34, 87).

IV. The Binary Opposite Traits of Heroes and Villains

One of the characteristic features of heroes are their “transcendental status” which simultaneously makes them a part of the world while also separating them from that very world (Alsford 23). It is this paradox of the “transcendentally resourced power of the hero”

which often “marks them out as tragic and lonely figures” (Alsford 25). This transcendent status is true for both the hero and the villain, but what differentiates them is how they overcome their ‘otherness’ with the society at large (Alsford 7, 25). While the hero “confronts the otherness of the world and seeks to overcome it,” the villain, on the contrary, “revels in the power to control, to manipulate and ultimately to create a world in their own image” (Alsford 39). “The villain coerces, imposes and seeks to destroy anything that it cannot bend to its will. The hero takes the more dangerous path, the one that always runs the risk of self-destruction as a consequence of self-sacrifice and abandonment to the world” (Alsford 40).

Self-sacrifice, often in the face of overwhelming opposition and lack of hope, is a hallmark characteristic of the hero (Alsford 128). Heroes are always prepared to be a resource for the other, even if strangers, at the expense of their own selves and their own benefit (Alsford 129). They are constantly engaged in “rescuing, defending, seeking and overcoming” (Alsford 66). The hero is someone who wields power – “the ability to effect change, to be able to manipulate – for good or ill” – and deploys his powers in service of the other irrespective of personal safety or reward, of success or failure (Alsford 63-64, 132). Furthermore, the hero “fights for those who cannot fight for themselves, fights even against all reason when there is no obvious way to win” (Alsford 71).

In contrast to these heroic qualities of preferring the other over the self, the villain lacks empathy and views the world and its people merely as resources to be used for their own gains (Alsford 120). Villains seek to be a law unto themselves and their primary goal is usually to gain power over others, world domination, control of entire universe and in some overly ambitious instances, godhood (Alsford 96). They are not content with the social construct of reality; they seek to simplify the world and recast it into a single image where their individual autonomous will is the only legitimate law (Alsford 96). They do not play by

the rules; they refuse to submit to the social contract and wilfully attempt to exploit the fact that the rest of the society does (Alsford 106). The villain is someone who is “disengaged, autonomous, rapacious and concerned only with the power to dominate and control” (Alsford 117).

V. Blurred Lines

Even though the hero and the villain contain characteristics which are considered binary opposites of each other, there is a very thin line dividing them. And every so often these lines overlap and many instances occur where it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the line dividing the two.

Action is central to the characteristic of the hero, and it is in action that his nature is expressed – being skilled, courageous, dominant and determined (Hourihan 95). However, the hero’s commitment to action has a dark side, which is the “naturalization of violence” (Hourihan 97). Cawelti notes that “the hero’s violence is primarily an expression of his capacity for individual moral judgment and action, a capacity that separates him from society as much as it makes him a part of it” (qtd. in Stein 44). Coercive power and the use of force are very much a part of the heroic make up; “[i]t is not just the villain who is seen to indulge in violence to achieve goals, many heroes are certainly not averse to fighting fire with fire” (Alsford 67). The heroes of Troy are all formidable in battle, and in medieval romances the ability of a knight to slay his enemies is a proof of his eminence (Hourihan 97-98).

Since the hero tales are told from the perspective of the hero, and because the hero is the focal point of the story, “the reader is invited to share his values and admire his actions” (Hourihan 39). For example, in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, “The anonymous narrator focuses attention upon Odysseus’s concern for his honour which is always of paramount importance to him, and these bloody deeds are presented as required by honour and thus as heroic”

(Hourihan 40). Likewise, in high fantasy tales like *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, violence is implied as “necessary and justified against enemies who are inherently evil” where the violence “is not seen as problematic in any way because it is directed at ‘the enemy’... and violence is made compatible with virtue by demonizing the victims” (Hourihan 102-3).

This brings to light the hypocrisies of the hero myth and the association of “good” with heroes by default, because heroes, too, can be tainted with villainous darkness. An easy fall to the dark side “through the embracing of tainted tools and powers” is a constant threat to the hero (Alsford 68). “The transition from hero to villain due to the inappropriate use of power and dubious methods is,” Alsford states, “usually a gradual process and one that is not generally noticed until it is too late” (71).

2.3 Morally Ambiguous Characters Throughout Literary Canon

The hero and the villain are common symbols of the social constructions of right and wrong. For Aristotle, one of the most important characteristics of a hero is that he must be good, and “the character will be good if the [moral] purpose is good” (qtd. in Boyer 5). The hero may not be perfect, but not someone bad either (Boyer 5). According to Aristotle, what differentiates a hero from an absolute villain is that he does not possess vice nor depravity, vice being considered as “a matter of habit in doing that which is low and degrading,” but rather, the misfortunes of a hero, a tragic hero to be more specific, is due to an error or frailty, where frailty “may amount to a grand passion such as Othello’s jealousy” (qtd. in Boyer 5). However, there are instances when a character falls somewhere between a villain’s vice and a hero’s grand passion: “a man may be a villain without being low and degraded. Crime may make him a villain, but crime is not necessarily degrading. And yet crime, wilful crime, cannot be called an error or frailty” (Boyer 5).

I. Tragic Heroes

Tragic heroes are a classic example of morally ambiguous characters by the very token of their definition. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero is superior to the average man, but he is “not eminently good and just” and his downfall occurs due to a significant fault or error (qtd. in McCollom 52-53). The hero’s flaw, which brings about his downfall, is “intimately connected with his excellence. His wrongdoing is not something added to his nature or cut into it; the wrong pervades him; it is his” (McCollom 54). Even though he is guilty of wrongdoing, “his guilt is difficult or impossible for him to avoid if he is to pursue the values he treasures” (McCollom 55). In John Webster’s terms, these heroes are “wretched, eminent things” (qtd. in McCollom 51).

The downfall of the tragic hero is a fundamental part of his makeup. In Sophoclean tragedies like *Oedipus The King*, the hero falls “not because of his own fault but through fate or external evil” (McCollom 53). In tragedies such as *Antigone* and *Hamlet*, although the chief catastrophe primarily occurs due to fate or some external evil, “the hero’s central action or failure to act” ultimately contributes to the final devastation (McCollom 53). What brings about the moral ambiguities in tragic heroes is the nature of their actions, which are “guilty from one point of view and innocent from another” (McCollom 53). “Witnessing the ordeal of a hero such as the *Orestes* of Aeschylus, the audience perceives that its own evil-doing is fundamentally connected with the human condition” (McCollom 55).

II. Moral Laws and Nietzsche’s Superman

Moral laws play a big role in defining good and evil, and in turn putting stereotypical labels on individuals as good or evil depending on how they conform to such laws. However, in many cases, a central character comes into conflict with these laws, but that does not necessarily make them an evil character (Boyer 6). There are also instances when the very

notions of morality are brought into question and “the protagonist defies what by common consent is regarded as the moral law, but what he refuses to acknowledge as the moral law” (Boyer 6). Such a character would be considered as a Nietzschean “Superman,” a philosophy which teaches that:

[T]here is no divine law or absolute moral standard; that the strongest instinct in man is the "Will to Power"; that he who has this instinct in the highest degree is most fit to rule; that whatever such a man thinks is right is right because he thinks it, i.e. such a man is his own maker of values; that the so-called moral law is simply a code contrived by the weak to protect them from the strong, and that it has no divine authority whatsoever behind it. (Boyer 6-7)

Although “Nietzsche sees this freedom from conventional values and a radical disengagement from the other as being at the heart of his heroic Superman,” Alsford suggests that, “this flies in the face of most other notions of the heroic and conforms rather more to the image of the villain” (39). On the other hand, Boyer argues, “a Superman is not necessarily a villain. Whether he is or not depends upon our recognition of the sanction of the moral law which he breaks, and his reason for breaking it” (7).

Christopher Marlowe created such characters who display the traits of the Superman, like Barabas, Tamburlaine and Faustus, “who, in the consciousness of their own superabundant power, override the barriers of human and divine restraint” (Boyer 9). They are characters who lie somewhere between a traditional hero and a traditional villain. Marlowe’s heroes “are Supermen whose “Will to Power” triumphs over every other consideration, and justifies them to themselves. Their wickedness is their strength: without it they are nothing” (Boyer 9). The hero in George Bernard Shaw’s drama *The Devil’s Disciple* is another example.

III. Shakespearean Characters

The plays of William Shakespeare brought on to the literary scene a plethora of characters who display multiple levels of moral ambiguity. Shakespearean characters are not the usual, predictable good heroes and bad villains, but rather, “Shakespeare’s characters exhibit internal conflict in the form of faulty self-knowledge, incontinence, self-deception, and other modes of subjective irrationality” (Bristol 4). These characters “inhabit a contingent world where they are faced with novel, unpredictable, and unprecedented situations that require evaluation and judgment” (Bristol 5). However, Shakespearean plays do not preach on how to live correctly nor give instructions on how to live a good life; his plays, instead, are “a salutary imagining of the pathos of our moral existence, presented in a way that absolutely refuses the complacencies of ideology and the distractions of wishful thinking” (Bristol 6). According to Grady, moral choices in Shakespeare are always contextual (17). Plays like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* contain “politically unsuccessful heroes with complex interior lives who have strong audience and readerly appeal” who are bound by circumstances not of their own choosing, wherein they are posed with various moral decisions (Grady 18). Moreover, Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are not perpetrators, but victims “of ideology or of cultural mechanisms of social control” (Knapp 34).

Moral ambiguity in Shakespeare stems from “the way moral conviction wells up in his characters against established moral principles and in tension with the calm domain of moral reasoning” (Knapp 33). The moral failures of his characters are particularly catastrophic “because they are often supported by misguided moral conviction” (Knapp 34). Grady also reaffirms the notion of “assessing the morality of our actions as our intentions” being an important part of Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*, which feature heroes whose good intentions turn out to be highly problematic in the end (19).

Julius Caesar also highlights this category of moral ambiguity through the character of Brutus, who is “a figure of good intentions gone tragically wrong” (Grady 19).

Furthermore, what is really striking about Shakespeare’s plays is how his characters demonstrate “a keen understanding of the tension between ethics and morals” where morals are “the precepts that can be considered in isolation” such as the wrongness of murder regardless of the particulars, and ethics “applies to particular human situations in which moral judgments might be invoked: for example, in situations where it makes sense to evaluate human action in terms of right and wrong” (Knapp 35-36). This tension can be seen in Macbeth’s “meditations on the justice of killing King Duncan” (Grady 18).

Another striking feature of Shakespeare’s plays are the way they depict multiple perspectives, which enables one perspective to bring forth both the strengths and weaknesses of the other (Fahmi 131).

Is Henry V an ideal leader who inspires a whole nation and leads it to glory?
Or is he a subtle and unscrupulous king who spares no means to legitimize a
usurped crown? Is Coriolanus a great hero betrayed by those he has always
defended and protected? Or is he a proud and condescending snob, who
despises those to whom he owes his power and privileges? ... [N]o matter
what perspective is chosen, the arguments in its favour will always be defeated
by the textual evidence in support of the other perspective. (Fahmi 131)

This perspectivism, as Fahmi calls it, is also linked to how the characters identify themselves, which is an integral part of their motives and the resultant actions (Fahmi 133-34). The self-definition of Shakespearean characters is what often makes them morally ambiguous, such as Macbeth, whose identity as a warrior – an intrinsic part of who he is, played a major role in the murder of the king. Similarly, *Richard II* as well, is a “tragedy of a man who defines

himself as a god on earth, only to realize in the end that few people around him recognize his self-definition” (Fahmi 135).

Thus, through various portrayals of characters from various angles and contexts, Shakespeare’s plays delve into moral ambiguity, allowing the readers and audience to “reflect on the way particular experiences arouse passion, generate moral conviction and complicate moral agency, to contemplate the experience of the ethical in all its phenomenal complexity” (Knapp 39).

IV. Romantic Heroes

The Romantic Age, in its rebellion towards the Age of Enlightenment, produced and reintroduced some iconic heroes who possessed varying degrees of moral ambiguity. What was considered as “cardinal sins” such as pride, individualism and hubris during the Augustan Age, had become “cardinal virtues” in the Romantic Era (Thorslev 16). A key feature of Romanticism is individualism (Thorslev 17). Both the Romantic writers and their heroes “were isolated from the society of their day; they were all in some degree rebels and outsiders” (Thorslev 17). Part of their solitariness lies in their conscious moral choices, which is highlighted in the climactic event of their tragedies as with Faust, Cain, Satan or Prometheus (Thorslev 66).

The spectrum of Romantic Heroes has a broad range from the Noble Outlaw to the Satan-Prometheus, including the Gothic Villain as well as the Byronic Hero, all of whom share many characteristics with each other (Thorslev 20). At their hearts, these characters are all “thoroughgoing rebels” who “invariably appeal to the reader's sympathies against the unjust restrictions of the social, moral, or even religious codes of the worlds in which they find themselves” (Thorslev 22). It is impossible for these heroes to adjust to their existing societies – “they either go down to glorious defeat, cursing God and dying, or they commit

their lives to transforming the world” (Thorslev 66). It is also important to note that most of these Romantic Heroes are, in a sense, transformed eighteenth-century villains (Thorslev 66).

One of the most popular Romantic heroes was the Noble Outlaw, a character type found in the works of Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Sir Walter Scott and later in Byron, among others (Thorslev 66-67). This character type has been very popular with oppressed people, Robin Hood being a prototype of most of the modern Noble Outlaws in the English-speaking world (Thorslev 67). What is interesting about this category of heroes is that in a way, they can be viewed as the glamourization of “tender-hearted criminals of popular fancy” (Thorslev 67). The apex of the Romantic Hero prototype lies in the characters of Satan and Prometheus, who represent the “ultimate in sublimity, in dignity and in rebellion” (Thorslev 108). Prometheus, from *Prometheus Unbound* and later in Goethe’s *Prometheus*, became symbolic throughout the Romantic Movement for man’s “fight for liberty against oppression in all its form” (Thorslev 108). Prometheus’s counterpart in Christian legend, Satan, a character most commonly associated with the personification of evil, became a heroic figure in Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* (Thorslev 108-9). Satan embodies humanist sentiments, possessing “an aggressive and inventive spirit,” a “proud self-assertion” which is the basis of his hubris, “but which is also the basis of Romantic and humanist self-reliance” (Thorslev 110).

V. Gothic Villain-Heroes

The Gothic villain first appeared in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and within the following ten years not only did he flourish in novels but also on the stage (Thorslev 52). “Historically, the term "Gothic" is applied to the novels of Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, M. G. Lewis, Mary Shelley, and Maturin” and also includes works such as Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, along with the works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Charles Brockden Brown, who are considered part of the original Gothic tradition (Hume 282). The Gothic is a sub-division of the Romantic tradition,

and thus they both share many similar themes and characteristics (Hume 288). The hero in both the traditions is a “guilt-haunted wanderer” (Hume 288). Both the Gothic and the Romantic heroes are essentially individualistic, and the writers are mainly concerned with “the insufficiency of reason or religious faith to explain and make comprehensible the complexities of life” and “the paradoxes of human existence” (Hume 289-90). However, the difference between the two traditions arises with how they address this issue. The Romantic writers use imagination as a “vehicle to escape from the human condition” and also as a tool to resolving the contradictions of the human existence in the creation of a higher order (Hume 289-90). On the contrary, though the Gothic writers share the same discontent as the Romantics, they do not have any faith “in the ability of man to transcend or transform it imaginatively... Thus the writers of Gothic never offer any intuitive solutions” (Hume 289).

An interesting aspect of the Gothic novel, what Hume calls one of its “most prominent concerns” is psychological interest – a “concern for *interior* mental processes” where the novels delve into “emotionally complex situations” and “display the reactions of their characters to trying or appalling situations” (283). The Gothic novel also attempts to engage the reader in a new way, which led to the emergence of two distinct forms of the Gothic novel – the terror-Gothic and the horror-Gothic (Hume 284). The novels of Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe lean towards the terror-Gothic where the “terror” is “dependent on suspense or dread” while on the other hand, the works of Lewis, Beckford, Mary Shelley and Maturin lean more towards the horror-Gothic, where instead of arousing suspense, the events have a greater shock value or disturbing factor (Hume 285). This distinction between the terror and the horror Gothic occurred due to “a general shift in conceptions of good and evil” which gave rise to the “villain-heroes of horror-Gothic” through whom “we enter the realm of morally ambiguous” (Hume 285).

The characters of Victor Frankenstein, Melmoth and Ambrosio “are men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns increasingly to evil purposes. They are not merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such” (Hume 285). Captain Ahab, the villain-hero in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, is “a kindly man of real humanity (witness his relations with Starbuck), but a man gripped by a deadly monomania which will destroy him and his companions with him” (Hume 287). In Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* as well, “good and evil, love and hate are intertwined until they are inseparable” (Hume 288). Similarly, Popeye in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, is portrayed as a victim of “a syphilitic father and as insane grandmother” who thus, cannot be morally held responsible for his actions (Hume 288).

Although Thorslev argues that despite being the protagonist of the novel in which he appears, the Gothic villain is always a villain and never a Romantic rebel-hero and thus “he never engages our sympathies with his rebellion”, Hume’s arguments provide ample evidence to the contrary and shows that these villains indeed do possess redeeming qualities which arouse our sympathies (Thorslev 53). The Gothic novel, hence, is one of the truest depictions of moral ambiguity portrayed through its villain-heroes and is “one kind of treatment of the psychological problem of evil” (Hume 287).

Hume also suggests that writers like Byron, seem to be “closer to the Gothic camp than to the [R]omantics” since his characters display darker moralities than his Romantic counterparts (289).

VI. Byronic Heroes

The Byronic hero is “the most popular phenomenon of the English Romantic Movement” who had the most “far-reaching consequences for nineteenth-century Western Literature”, having a significant impact on French, German, American and even Russian

writers (Thorslev 3). The Byronic hero also had a lasting effect on late twentieth century and the beginning of twenty-first century, and remains a pervasive figure in popular texts whose traces can be found ranging from the western hero to the science fiction hero to the action-adventure hero (Stein 1).

When defining the Byronic Hero, it is a common notion to attribute his conception to the biographical image of his creator, Lord Byron, but Thorslev points out that “Byron is not his heroes, in spite of a hundred years of confusion of the two” and he should be studied as he exists in the works of Byron without looking to his personal life, because “we have no clear right to foist on him the characteristics of his creator without clear evidence” (Thorslev 9-11). Moving on to his prominent characteristics, the Byronic hero is considered an outlaw and outsider, someone who defines his own moral code, and often defies oppressive institutional authority (Stein 8). His superhuman abilities, coupled with his self-sufficiency and independence, allows him to defy authorities, all the while being aware of his own superiority, and thus, “defines and creates himself” (Stein 8). He is a loner with a quick temper, who seems to be unable to relate to others and is a self-absorbed as well as a self-tormented individual prone to being moody and melancholy (Stein 8, 74). For him, “the mind is its own place” and he has nothing but defiance and contempt for religion and common social morality (Thorslev 152). He has various borrowed characteristics from the Gothic villain in terms of looks, a mysterious past, and secret sins, however, “[t]he sins for which he accepts responsibility are not those of his misdeeds which society considers most reprehensible” but rather, his sins are his own, according to his own personal moral codes, values which are according to his own choosing (Thorslev 163-4). According to Lockridge, Byron’s heroes “display a reckless bravura in dynamic acts of will—or at least of speech—undertaken in full awareness of futility” (qtd. in Stein 10). He “accepts the burden of his conscience willingly, even defiantly” and “does not attempt to evade his moral

responsibility” (Thorslev 163). The Byronic “hero-villain” also possesses an “irresistible and dangerous sex appeal” (Stein 25). He is also “a creature of extremes” (Stein 20). An aspect of the Byronic hero which greatly appeals to the readers, is the ambiguity surrounding the him which makes it difficult to determine whether he is “a devil or an avenging angel” (Stein 41).

Byron’s Childe Harold is the first important Byronic hero who is the prototype of all the rest. He is Byron’s first Cain or Wandering Jew, as he is “marked and cursed of sin, wandering over the face of Europe in an almost hopeless search for self-restoration, and fearing that this can never come about, even in death” (Thorslev 135). Manfred portrays the classic example of a Byronic hero who is a lonely figure, living in isolation, tormented due to his secret sin, suicidal in his remorse over Astarte’s death (Thorslev 165-6). He repeatedly defies authoritative figures as well as supernatural powers, along with being very self-absorbed, imperious and egotistical (Stein 10-11). Byron’s Lucifer in *Cain*, a descendant of Milton’s Satan, is the ultimate rebel who “rebels against the most powerful authority figure around” which is God, and as such, “he becomes the emblem of the individualist who rejects institutional power” (Stein 22). However, his rebellion proves to be detrimental to his follower (Stein 23). *The Corsair* and *Lara* showcases a “powerful, charismatic, but gloomy outlaw-hero who can openly flaunt social conventions and institutional authority” (Stein 21).

Additionally, Melmoth, Heathcliff and Captain Ahab are as much Byronic heroes as they are Gothic villains, as many of their characteristics overlap with one another. Rochester from *Jane Eyre* is also an overlap between the two (Thorslev 192).

2.4 Point of Departure

As previously discussed, there have been numerous studies analysing morally ambiguous characters throughout the literary canon ranging across various genres. There are also various studies on canonical dystopian fiction inspired by real life events such as

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* which can be considered as dystopian classics, as well as the binary oppositions between heroes and villains in high fantasy tales like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. However, there seems to be a scarcity when it comes to studies being conducted on popular contemporary fiction, particularly in the young adult fantasy genre, more so when such fantasy novels are based on real life events. Since there is such a huge popularity and reader-base for contemporary American young adult fantasy fiction, and an increasingly growing fascination towards morally grey characters within this genre, as aforementioned in the introduction, there is a need of more academic discussions of these novels, genres and character archetypes.

Taking this existing gap, as well as the growing need for more studies to be conducted within such a popular genre into consideration, this thesis aims to examine the binary opposite traits of good and evil associated with heroes and villains, through analysing the morally grey characters in one of the most popular contemporary American young adult fantasy fiction novels, *An Ember in the Ashes* series by Sabaa Tahir, through a post-structuralist lens.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction

I. A Decentred Universe

Post-structuralism, a concept derived from philosophy, emerged in France in the late 1960s (Barry 61, 63). Two names most commonly associated with it are Jacques Derrida, whose lecture in 1996 titled “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” can be considered as the starting point of post-structuralism, and Roland Barthes, whose essay “The Death of the Author” in 1968 introduced the concept of textual independence from any contexts or author’s intentions (Barry 63-4). The post-structuralism of Derrida, often called as deconstruction, is the first version of post-structuralism to reach the United States (Bertens 93).

As the name itself suggests, post-structuralism is a continuation of structuralism, but it is also simultaneously a rejection of it (Bertens 93). While the structuralists accept that the world is constructed through language, post-structuralists present a fundamentalist view regarding the consequences of reality being textual itself (Barry 62). One of structuralism’s characteristic views is that language not only reflects or records the world, but rather, it shapes it; thus, how we see a thing, becomes what we actually see (Barry 59). According to post-structuralists, this belief results in a universe of “radical uncertainty” since we cannot have access to any landmarks beyond linguistic processing and so, there are no certain standards by which to measure anything (Barry 59). Therefore, post-structuralism insinuates that if we take into consideration what the structuralists state about language, then that, in effect, permanently removes fixed intellectual reference points (Barry 59). This situation of being without any intellectual reference points, is known as the “decentred universe” in post-

structuralist terms, a universe in which “we cannot know where we are, since all the concepts which previously defined the centre, and hence also the margins, have been ‘deconstructed’” (Barry 60).

According to Derrida, “language is inherently unreliable” since it operates on the basis of differentiation – words referring to their intended meanings based on their difference from other words instead of a direct link to their referents (Bertens 96). And since the meaning of words are a product of difference, these meanings are not pure because every single word contains the traces of other words (Bertens 97). For example, the red of traffic lights carries the ‘traces’ of amber and green within it, which gives it the meaning of stop, since red, in other contexts have different meanings, such as how the red of red roses has stood for the meaning of love for centuries, and thus, there is no pure, unadulterated meaning of red (Bertens 97). Furthermore, meaning is not just a product of difference but also a process of deferral – words are not only related to and take part of their meaning from words which have preceded them, but their meaning is also modified by whatever follows them (Bertens 98). Words which come later, whether immediately after, or in a sentence or even in a paragraph, will subtly change the meaning of the original word in consideration (Bertens 98). “The ‘present’ of a word we speak is therefore not the true present, which forever eludes language: ‘spacing’ and ‘temporization’ intervene. Derrida captures this in a self-coined term, *différance*, that contains both the idea of difference and the process of deferral of meaning” (Bertens 98). The relationship between the signifier and the signified, thereby, becomes destabilized (Bertens 98). This destabilization thus causes a confrontation between the “authentic truth” we want to express and the unreliable medium we use to express it (Bertens 98).

In the absence of presence... all that is left is a language that is subject to *différance*. Whatever our intentions, they are never fully transparent to ourselves

because there is nothing that can escape language... Even if we did have an authentic self that knows things prior to and outside language, we would become the victims of language's inherent unreliability as soon as we started to speak. We could never fully control the meaning of what we say. (Bertens 99)

II. Binary Oppositions

The concept of binary oppositions is also an important aspect of post-structuralism, one that is also borrowed from structuralism (Bertens 100). According to post-structuralists, "texts set up one or more centres of meaning in order to give themselves stability and stop the potentially infinite flow of meaning that all texts generate" (Bertens 100). However, if there is a centre, then there must also be a marginal – that which does not belong to it (Bertens 100). As Bertens states, "Setting up a centre automatically creates a hierarchical order" and such hierarchies between the centre and the margin take the form of binary oppositions, wherein the "texts introduce sets of oppositions that function to structure and stabilize them" (100). There is a wide range of these oppositions; some tend to be general such as good vs evil, truth vs falsehood, masculinity vs femininity, purity vs impurity, etc. (Bertens 100). There are other oppositions which are more culturally bound, such as the notorious white vs black opposition in Western culture (Bertens 100). Sometimes, these oppositions can also be implicit; either hidden within a text's metaphors, or only one of the terms is explicitly mentioned which then invokes the other, absent term (Bertens 100).

Within these oppositions, one of the terms is always taken as the centre – "it is privileged, in poststructuralist terms, and accorded a natural status. Some terms have always been privileged – good, truth, masculinity, purity, whiteness – others may either be found in the centre or in the margin" (Bertens 100). Bertens also suggests that binary oppositions and what they imply are problematic, because "[o]nce difference has given rise to meaning, we privilege one pole of the oppositional axis and condemn the other" (101). Additionally, they

also contribute to “negative stereotyping, repression, discrimination, social injustice, and other undesirable practices and might even be said actively to perpetuate them – after all, the oppositions speak through us” (Bertens 101). However, within the oppositional relationships between the terms in these binary oppositions, there is also a complicity since “[t]he two terms in any oppositional set are defined by each other: light by darkness, truth by falsehood, purity by contamination, the rational by the irrational, the same by the other, nature by culture” (Bertens 101). Therefore, “the attribution of meaning is made possible by difference. If there were no falsehood, we would – strangely enough – not find truth meaningful” (Bertens 101). Thus, “words are always ‘contaminated’ by their opposites – night cannot be defined without reference to day, or good without reference to evil” (Barry 62). This creates a paradox where the inferior term becomes a condition for the opposition, hence, “as important as the so-called privileged one” (Bertens 101). As such, deconstruction seeks to dismantle the oppositions, “arguing that binary oppositions are a good deal less oppositional than they would seem to be” by showing that “both terms only exist because of difference and that they are, as often as not, in themselves wholly neutral” (Bertens 101-2).

In short, “Deconstruction tries to demonstrate that the apparent either/or patterns of texts mask underlying both/and situations and to reveal those texts’ fundamental undecidability” (Bertens 102).

Keeping in mind the post-structuralist concept of linguistic instability which produces meanings that can never be one hundred percent pure, this dissertation seeks to prove that “good” and “evil” are contextual, and the notions of wholly good and wholly evil do not exist, since one concept is always contaminated with its binary opposite. By analysing the primary texts in light of Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, I will analyse how the concepts of “good” and “evil” are subverted in Tahir’s novels, embodied by the morally

ambiguous characters who represent the decentred universe where the signified floats free from the fixed point of its signifier.

Chapter 4

Analysis

4.1 Summary of the Series

In the first novel, *An Ember in the Ashes*, Elias Veturius attempts to desert Blackcliff Academy, but gets caught up in the Trials, a series of tests to determine the next Emperor and the Blood Shrike, because of the Augurs' promise of finding true freedom if he participates. Laia of Serra, desperate to free her incarcerated brother Darin, agrees to spy on the academy's Commandant as her slave, on behalf of the Scholar Resistance. The Trials reveal that the supernatural creatures from their folktales actually exist, and Laia discovers that the Nightbringer from the myths is very much real. In the end, Laia gets caught for spying, Elias gets branded as a traitor and doomed to the gallows for refusing to execute her, but they both manage to escape. *A Torch Against the Night* picks up on Laia and Elias' journey to save Darin, and they learn more about the Nightbringer's history and how his people, the jinn, were wronged – a millennium ago, it was the Scholars who had betrayed him, and then massacred and imprisoned the jinn. Now, he seeks vengeance and a way to free his brethren. The current Blood Shrike, Helene Aquilla, Elias' best friend who helped him escape, is tasked with capturing Elias and Laia, while she struggles to balance between following the half-mad Emperor's orders, stabilising the throne and ensuring her family's safety. Laia succeeds in freeing her brother, the only Scholar with the knowledge of forging Serric Steel, but at the cost of discovering that her lover, Keenan, had been the Nightbringer himself, and that Elias had died but agreed to be resurrected as the Soul Catcher in order to complete his mission, and seek salvation. Helene, meanwhile, fails to capture Elias and faces the execution of her family as punishment, except her younger sister, who is forced to marry the Emperor. *A Reaper at the Gates* depicts the ruthless road both Helene and Laia walk as they step into

their roles as leaders for their nations. Elias prepares to take on the duties of Soul Catcher – passing ghosts on to the next life, the Scholars are refugees in Marinn, Helene loses the Martial capital to invaders and the Nightbringer frees the jinn from their thousand-year-long imprisonment. In *A Sky Beyond the Storm*, the Nightbringer carries out an ethnic cleansing of the Scholars and their allies, while Laia becomes desperate to stop him. Helene strategizes to recapture the Martial capital, defeat the Commandant who works for the Nightbringer, and secure the throne for her nephew after the Emperor's demise. The Scholars and the Martials form an alliance for mutual benefit, and Elias, meanwhile, takes on his responsibility as a Soul Catcher. In the end, the Nightbringer finally meets his end, the Scholars are now a free people, Helene becomes the Empress, Elias regains his humanity and Laia, upon realising the depth of the Nightbringer's love and pain, vows to make his true story be heard and remembered by everyone.

4.2 Beneath the Mask

Elias Veturius is a twenty-year old Mask – a member of an organization of elite soldiers who have graduated from Blackcliff Academy, serving the Martial Empire. The Masks are called such due to the silver mask they are given during their time in the Academy, made of living metal, which moulds itself into the skin of the soldier and becomes a part of them. Blackcliff was built by the Augurs – a group of fourteen people who have been alive for five centuries, considered as holy by the people of the Martial Empire – in order to train potential candidates since the age of six, to become the next Emperor and Blood Shrike. Unlike other soldiers who think being chosen for Blackcliff is an honour, as only the Augur-chosen are selected for the academy, Elias detests being stuck in a life he never chose for himself and having to do horrifying deeds, including murder, in order to survive. Thus, he wants to desert the academy and flee the Empire, even though he is one of the best Masks the academy has produced. Elias has good enough reasons to detest his own Empire and the very

organisation he is a part of – the Masks are not just the most elite group of soldiers, but they are also the most brutal soldiers who are the backbone of the Empire’s oppression of the Scholars – a nation who lost a war with the Martials five hundred years ago and had their lands annexed and most of their people enslaved by the Martial Empire. Laia, a Scholar girl, describes the Masks as “silver-faced monsters” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 8). Even though the Empire’s Masks are sadistic brutes who take amusement from torture, rape and killing of the Scholars, making them quite the ideal vision of evil monsters, Elias is the anomaly which subverts this very image associated with the Masks.

The Masks have been behind the murder of Laia’s family and her brother’s arrest. All she has ever known from them is torturing her people, killing and enslaving them, not even sparing the elderly and the children. This is what she expects from every Mask, particularly those in Blackcliff where they get trained to carry out such acts. And thus, it utterly baffles her when Elias, a Mask in training, offers to help her and her fellow slave and friend Izzi. When she sees how Elias goes out of his way to help her and save her from the Commandant, she cannot make sense of his actions and suspects there must be some ulterior motive. She cannot accept the fact that it is possible even for a Mask to have some form of goodness in them. However, she could not ignore the numerous instances where Elias proved her inherent notions about Masks to be wrong, and thus she settles on the perception of him being someone “[n]ot good, necessarily. Just not evil” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 362). Soon enough, after being forced to spend time with him, she begins to see the person he is beneath the Mask, and it unnerves her. She has never before stopped to consider that these monsters may also very well be humans; “I’ve never wondered, because he’s never been anything more than a Mask” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 369). After getting to know him better, she slowly recognizes the goodness in him despite the bad, and begins to accept it. And she admits that it makes it harder for her to hate him, to which Elias scoffs at her in a friendly,

melancholic way, “Seeing the enemy as a human. A general’s ultimate nightmare,” indicating how neither her people nor his viewed each other as human beings (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 370). As Laia continues to see him for who he is, realising that there is more to Elias than his label as a Mask, she understands that he is merely a prisoner of his circumstances. She admits to him that “you’re not evil... You’re not like the others. You killed to save” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 372). For Laia, this “knowledge is a revelation and one so staggering” that it completely changes her perception of the associations of good and evil with mere labels and identities (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 372).

4.3 Two Sides of the Same Coin

If Elias Veturius is a traitor to his Empire, sick of the oppression carried out by his own people, then Helene Aquilla, his best friend and the only female student in all of Blackcliff, is the flip side to his identity as a soldier; she is his foil. Helene is the ideal soldier who loves the Empire, a proud Martial who is wholeheartedly loyal to her state and its policies. “Helene is a true Martial, more loyal to the Empire than her own mother. Like any good Mask-in-training, she takes Blackcliff’s motto to heart: *Duty first, unto death*” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 13-14). Like a true Martial, she endorses the Empire’s enslavement of the Scholars and thinks nothing about their oppression. She justifies the Martial occupation when Elias attempts to show her the injustice of it: “What are you saying? That I should feel sorry for the Scholars? That I should think of them as equals? We conquered them. We rule them now. It’s the way of the world... The Empire has rightfully annexed this land. It’s *our* land. We’ve fought for it, died for it, now we’re tasked with keeping it. If doing so means we have to keep the Scholars enslaved, so be it” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 247). To Elias, the slaves at Blackcliff are “just girls” but to Helene, they are slaves whose “only concern is to please their master” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 247). The lives of the slaves also seem to mean very little to her due to her blind acceptance of Martial laws, proclaiming to Elias that

“slaves die all the time” and that “Marcus has killed before” when he insists her to help save Laia’s life after Marcus critically injured her (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 317).

Where Elias’ sense of morality stems from his idealism, Helene’s moral compass is driven by her sense of duty to the Empire. For Elias, the entire Blackcliff institution and its purpose is wrong: “This school. The students that come out of it. The things we do. It’s all wrong” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 317). But for Helene, it is necessary for being a Mask and to serve the Empire: “The Empire is not perfect. But we have held strong against the backward traditions of the broken lands beyond our borders for five centuries now” (Tahir *A Torch Against the Night* 67). Elias nearly goes insane with grief and self-loathing after the Third Trial, where the Augurs made them kill their own friends and comrades, but Helene shares none of his agonising remorse. “You did what you had to. Just as I did what I had to,” she tells Elias with the true spirit of a soldier, trying to convince the both of them that what they did was necessary, or else they themselves would have died (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 380). Elias thinks it is “unforgivable” and wishes he had begged to be killed, but Helene calls him “naïve” and “a fool” for it (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 380). She continues to argue, saying she is happy that he did what he needed to in order to survive, but Elias cannot see beyond his overwhelming guilt. He tells her, “You’re sick... Don’t you have any regret? Any remorse? Those were our friends we killed,” to which Helene replies, once again, as an ideal soldier: “They were soldiers... Empire soldiers who died in battle, who died in honour. I’ll celebrate them. I’ll mourn them. But I won’t regret what I did. I did it for the Empire. I did it for my people... The Trials are bigger than you or me, bigger than our guilt, our shame” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 381).

As Elias judges Helene from his own moral perspective – not having remorse for an action they were equally guilty of – Helene did what she, from her point of view, thought was the right thing to do. She refuses to be crippled by guilt like Elias, moving forward with it

because there is no other option, but Elias judges her to be evil simply because she refuses to feel guilty. He refuses to acknowledge her sense of duty, and is repelled by it, just as how Helene refuses to understand why Elias would ever turn his back on his duty, why he would ever want to be free from the Empire. “This *is* freedom, Elias! When will you understand that?” she tries to reason with him, “We’re Masks. Our destiny is power and death and violence. It’s what we are. If you don’t own that, then how can you ever be free?” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 382).

Elias, much like Laia, harbours similar ingrained notions towards Masks, that they are inherently evil. And Helene questions this notion directly – is she evil by default just because she is a Mask? Helene’s devotion and loyalty are commendable qualities in and of themselves, though, these very noble qualities within her are precisely what blinds her from viewing the actions of her state as wrong and oppressive. However, she is not completely blind to the Empire’s actions. She has enough sympathy and conscience to want to stop the raids and the killings that take place in the Scholars’ Quarter if she were to become the Empress. Furthermore, she even heals Laia and brings her back to health from the verge of death, despite both Elias and Laia’s reluctance to believe so. Like a true hero, she saved Laia with her newfound supernatural healing powers, despite it feeling like it sucked the life out of her – prioritising another person’s wellbeing over her own. When Laia finds out she saved her, she considers Helene to be among the “forces of good” that walk the earth, even though a day previously she exclaimed that everyone at Blackcliff was evil and monstrous (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 327). At Elias’ disbelief, she directly confronts him that he always sees the good in everyone except her, and she tells him that “I’m not evil, Elias, no matter what you say” (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 326).

Despite Elias believing that he is on a morally higher ground compared to Helene, he is no noble saint either. He has done his fair share of crimes as a Mask, as a soldier of the

Empire, and he knows it. Being nurtured and raised upon violence, it has become a part of his very nature. He recognizes this, his calling for bloodlust and his attraction to it, all the while being appalled at himself for it. He is in a constant state of war with who he is and who he wishes he was, between what he needs to do and his desire to never have to do it again. And much of his moral compass is built around his internal conflict between his reality and his larger-than-life idealism. His idealism also makes him manipulate and kill others in order to save those whom he thinks deserve saving. Upon watching a child being whipped to death as a traitor for attempting to desert the academy, Elias reminds himself that it is for this reason that he will be deserting, so that he's "never a part of this again" (Tahir *An Ember in the Ashes* 32). However, Elias' decision to turn his back on the Empire is to rest his own conscience, to spare himself of the disturbing nature of his surroundings, and not for any heroic reasons such as defeating the Empire or helping the Scholars with his skills and knowledge. He feels pity for the Scholars and hates the actions of the Empire, but that is all. He has no grand notions of saving the world or the society. He merely wants to escape the hellish place where he is forced to torture and kill others while being beaten and tortured himself. Therefore, though he is rebellious, and his altercations with Helene may show that he has managed to retain his humanity and preserve his moral compass, but in essence, Elias' decision to desert is quite selfish. It is selfish to the point that he agrees to participate in the Augur-orchestrated Trials to choose the next Emperor and the Blood Shrike, the Emperor's second in command, and risk becoming either of them, which will intrinsically tie him to the Empire he so wholeheartedly abhors, just to attain freedom from it, as per the Augur's promise.

What Elias strives for, above everything else, is to attain personal freedom – from the Empire, but most importantly, from his personal sins. Much like the Byronic hero, Elias is haunted by his sins, unable to forgive himself. He wishes for redemption, so that his mind can

be at peace. Initially, his idea of redemption was to be away from the Empire, which was quite selfish, because not being able to witness the Empire's brutality will not make it go away. When Laia saved him from his execution on the condition of helping her brother, he saw that as another chance at redemption. Although Elias seems to have a hero complex and considers himself responsible for everyone's actions and failures around him, for which he gets reprimanded by Izzi, it is an extension of the guilt which haunts him, the guilt which birthed his self-loathing. And it is this guilt which he wants to be free from, to the extent that he even agreed to become a Soul Catcher, hoping that helping the dead pass on peacefully might serve as an atonement for all deaths he has caused.

4.4 Love for My People, Rage for My Enemies

Helene Aquilla is not just an ideal soldier of the Martial Empire; she is an ideal leader as well. Even though becoming the Blood Shrike – the Empire's supreme military commander, has cost her her family and her most cherished companion, she still does not shirk away from her duties, and proclaims that the Empire is the meaning of her life. During the siege of the Martial capital of Antium, she refuses to leave behind the soldiers under her leadership, even though the Emperor himself commanded her to do so. She fights standing with her soldiers and her people against the Karkaun invaders, and is willing to die to protect them. Her pinnacle of love for her people can be seen when she sacrifices a part of her soul, her entire identity as a Mask, when she peels off the silver metal and gives it up to the Nightbringer to save the citizens of Antium. She does so despite the immense physical pain it causes her: "My face burns. Blood pours from where I have already clawed at the mask... But I don't care about my identity. I don't even care if I am a soldier anymore. I just want my people to live, to survive to fight another day" (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 430). Even the Nightbringer acknowledges the depth of her love for the Martials: "Your love of your people runs deep. It was nurtured through all the years spent at Blackcliff. It grew deeper when you

saw the suffering in Navium and healed the children in the infirmary... It fused with your soul when you fought for them on the walls of Antium. And now it culminates in your sacrifice for them” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 420-30).

However, even though Helene is a hero and a saviour to her people, who cheered her as the Emperor Invictus when she liberated Antium, she was still blind to the oppression that her people committed against other innocent people, and it took a near death experience for her to finally realise that. She is willing to kill and torture innocents, all for the sake of duty. For Helene, the Scholars are not even worthy of being enemies, because “[t]hey are a slave class – a lesser class” (Tahir *A Torch Against the Night* 224). And thus, it does not bother her to think of killing a Scholar girl for personal reasons, in order to gain the favour of the Emperor. Whatever sympathy she had left for the Scholars were burnt out after her family was killed as a punishment for failing in her mission to capture Elias after his desertion – an event which left her unhinged. In a desperate attempt to save her only remaining sister, she is willing to do whatever is necessary, even if it means killing and torturing innocent civilians of another race, such as the Tribes. Her disregard for Scholar lives runs so deep that when her sister, the Empress Regent, decreed to free them from slavery, she was not happy with the decision and wanted to “throttle” her sister for it (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 123). The Augur Cain questions her double standards when she accuses him and the Nightbringer to be monsters, all the while ignoring the monstrous actions of her own people: “What of you, Blood Shrike? Are you not a monster? ... You live and breathe and eat and sleep on the backs of those less fortunate. Your entire existence is due to the oppression of those you view to be lesser ... Why did fate see fit to make you the oppressor instead of the oppressed?” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 70).

The Empire that Helene so dearly cherishes is the reason behind thousands of Scholars being displaced, losing their families and livelihoods. Living all her life as a free

Scholar in the Quarter, initially Laia was never interested in becoming a saviour of any kind; she only wanted to save her brother, her only surviving family. However, when she was no longer confined to the limited world of the Scholars' Quarter in Serra and was out on the road, witnessing the horrifying reality of her people at the hands of the Martials, a passion to save them began to bloom within her. She realised she could no longer afford the luxury of turning a blind eye towards the suffering of the Scholars, and decided to stand up for them. She freed countless people from the wagons carrying Scholar slaves, and also freed all the prisoners in Kauf prison, the Empire's most fortified prison, with the help of others, despite the immense risk it posed. She had to kill people multiple times for self-defence, as well as for defending her people who would have been killed otherwise. All of these deeds made the Scholars see her as a blossoming leader, someone who could pave the way towards their liberation, especially as the daughter of the Resistance's former leader. Her love for her people and her passion to liberate them made her appeal to the King of Marinn to upgrade the status of the Scholars from refugees to citizens, as well as take on the daunting task of defeating the Nightbringer in order to stop him from freeing his own people and taking vengeance upon the Scholars and annihilating them. And even at the face of invaders and otherworldly forces wreaking havoc in Antium, she prioritised saving the lives of the Scholars above her own.

The more Laia stepped into her role as a leader, the more desperate she grew to stop the Nightbringer by any means necessary – even if it meant arming the Tribes with Serric Steel while knowing they were most likely to use it in their war against the Martials and kill everyone, including non-combatants. “To lead, you have to do ugly things,” she says as a justification (*Tahir A Reaper at the Gates* 157). In her attempts to stop him from setting the jinn free, Laia does not even stop to consider that his people have suffered the same fate, if not worse, as her own people. What makes the lives of the Nightbringer's people inferior to

the lives of the Scholars? The jinn have been wrongfully imprisoned for a millennium, after scores of them were brutally killed, betrayed by humans – the Scholar king and his men – whom they trusted. Why should they continue to be wrongfully imprisoned, never attaining freedom? Just as she freed the Scholars from the wagons and from Kauf prison, the Nightbringer wants to free the jinn from their imprisonment and suffering as well. Even the Augurs have admitted it various times that “the Nightbringer is no monster, child, though he may do monstrous things. He is cloven by sorrow and thus locked in a righteous battle to amend a grievous wrong” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 70).

What is most interesting is that his vengeance is something which appears to be divinely ordained and justified, as both the Augurs and Mauth – a divine entity who created the race of jinn and is the source of all magical powers, attest to the necessity of the jinn being freed in order to restore the balance of the world, “even if that means war” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 414). The prophecies also state that “so shall the great wrong be set right” indicating that setting the jinn free is the right thing to do, despite everyone else fighting to prevent it (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 42). Though initially the Nightbringer’s vengeance appears to be mindless monstrosity, once the characters discover the truth of his suffering and betrayal, their perception about him and his actions changes. “Though it’s discomfiting, I am forced to admit that the jinn were wronged. Grievously wronged. Which doesn’t make what the Nightbringer has done right. But it does complicate my view of the world – and my ability to look on him with unadulterated hatred” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 361). While Elias is no longer able to fully hate him, Helene finds a bit of herself in him: “the Nightbringer’s desperation to protect his kind. That part of the story is so familiar that I clench my fists in sympathy. I know what it is to fail my people” (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 91).

It is not surprising that Helene sees a bit of her in the Nightbringer, because his love and passion for his people rival hers. He was not just a king for his people, but he was also a “father”, a “teacher” and a “leader” (Tahir *A Torch Against the Night* 315). He diligently spent one thousand years solely dedicated to finding the scattered parts of the only weapon that could free his brethren, despite his anguish and loneliness, despite the emotional turmoil he went through every time he had to leave a loved one, all for the sake of his people. “Family is worth dying for, killing for,” he says, “Fighting for them is all that keeps us going when everything else is gone” (Tahir *A Torch Against the Night* 188). The sorrow of losing his home and his people and being betrayed by the those he trusted was insurmountable. After freeing his people, he makes a declaration of vengeance to the Augurs, the original Scholars who betrayed him and imprisoned his people after committing a massacre: “I [will] destroy everything you hoped to save, so that you may know what your greed and violence have wrought” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 455). He knows that the Augurs regret everything they did and wish to make things right, but it means nothing to him. He calls this a “pathetic, human notion – that by drowning in guilt and regret, one can atone for any crime, no matter how despicable” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 456). His rage and vengeance stem not just from the injustice of what happened to his people, but also due to his guilt regarding failing to protect them. He feels that as their king, it was his duty to protect his people, a duty he failed in, which is why the first thing he does after he frees them, is apologise.

To the jinn, the Nightbringer is their hero and their saviour who rescued them from a millennium of unjust suffering. “You freed us,” they whisper in awe and gratitude, “Our king. Our father. Our *Meherya*. You did not forget us” (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 458). Being freed, however, does little to diminish their suffering; the jinn want vengeance. And as their king and beloved leader, he complies. The humans repeatedly call him a monster for his

actions, but he calls out their hypocrisy. When Laia is about to kill the Commandant, the Nightbringer highlights how similar they are in their motives:

You wish to murder her, Laia of Serra... For Keris is the font of all your woes. She destroyed your family and turned your mother into a murderess and kinslayer. She annihilated your people and torments them still. You would do anything to stop her, yes? So what makes you so different from me? ... My family was killed too. My wife slaughtered on a battlefield. My children murdered with salt and steel and summer rain. My kin butchered and imprisoned. (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 31-32)

The Nightbringer also points out the hypocrisy of the humans who are dedicated to their own ideals and duties, like Elias and Helene:

Not a single word for the woman you used to love... And your kind think that I am cruel. Do you even remember those you've killed, boy? Or are there so many that their faces fade together? The latter, I think. That is how humans go through this life. Murdering and smashing and forgetting. But... I understand every death caused in service of my purpose. I do not take them lightly. Am I not kinder than you or your ilk, who cannot recall face or form of your foes? Your homes and lives and loves are built upon the graves of those you never even knew existed. (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 188)

Everyone is always intent on making him the villain, when in reality they are all doing the same things in different ways. He is not some evil incarnate that people always make him out to be. Rather, as Elias says, "He is but a living creature, who loves and hates, desires and mourns," just like everybody else (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 186).

The Nightbringer is also similar to a tragic hero, love being his fatal flaw. This has been hinted numerous times throughout the series, when stating the importance of the Nightbringer's name – Meherya, the Beloved. "It is his name... His first, truest name. It defines all he has done and all he will do. His strength is in his name, and his weakness" (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 232). His queen used to tell him that he loves "too much" and that his heart was "made to love", but she also feared for him because of the severity of his love (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 3). In his past life, before the massacre and imprisonment of his people, when he was still Meherya, he did not just love his own people, but he loved the humans too. Created as a Soul Catcher, he dealt with the human souls with utmost tenderness. "I was born to love," he says, "It was my calling, my purpose. Now it is my curse. I know love better than any other creature alive" (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 305). His queen was right to fear for him, because it is his love that made him commit genocide against the Scholars, and the massacring of their allies: "All that I do is driven by love... Love of all that was taken from us. Love of what is left" (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 444). And thus, as the Augurs said, "The Nightbringer's name was his making. And it will be his unmaking" (Tahir *A Reaper at the Gates* 322). For indeed, it was the love for his people which caused him a millennium of agony and pain, which made him forsake his name after he lost everything he loved. But the pain did not go away even after he freed them, for he was even more taken with vengeance, seeing how broken his people were after a thousand years of imprisonment, which further contributed to his relentless rage and pain. His love was his fatal flaw, because it was ultimately his love which brought about his downfall and caused his death. The Nightbringer not only loved his people whom he was attempting to free, but he also genuinely loved every single human he had to manipulate and deceive in order to assemble the weapon that would free his people. Laia describes him as "haunted", because like the Byronic hero, he is haunted by his betrayals, which are now "a sea of regret which he

strives to hide” (Tahir *A Torch Against the Night* 366). He still mourns everyone he loved and left, even after a thousand years. It was because he loved so deeply that he felt the losses so keenly. A millennium of suffering and betrayal made him unhinged – not only did the humans deceive him, but so did his own kind, who caused the jinn to be imprisoned, as well as his own wife, who turned out to be alive but left him alone in his pain and his mission. His hatred, rage and need for vengeance were thus just as intense as his love. In the end, his convoluted love and pain amalgamated into madness, and he sought to die. When he was finally killed, he was grateful for it: “This world was a cage. Thank you for setting me free” (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 449). In the end, even Laia, who always hated him more than others as he was the perpetrator of the ethnic cleansing of her people, feels that he did not deserve all the pain and suffering that he had to endure, that his father and his foes were to be blamed for what became of him, for turning him from the Beloved to the Nightbringer. She finally understands his name, and the sorrow that stems from it, and sympathises with him despite all his crimes: “I see all that he has done and I choose not to hate him” (Tahir *A Sky Beyond the Storm* 472).

Thus, we see that all of them are passionate leaders who love their people, who are a hero and a saviour for their own people, but a villain and an oppressor for others. Helene is the torch of victory for the Martials, the Empire’s proud Blood Shrike who reclaimed their capital, but an oppressor of Scholars who did not wish to end their enslavement. Laia is a ray of hope for the Scholars to end their nightmare, who wants to free as many of her people as possible, but who also does not want to free the Nightbringer’s people, the jinn who were wrongfully imprisoned for a millennium, due to being afraid of the consequences. And the Nightbringer, who has unconditionally loved his kind and has spent a thousand years trying to free them, unleashes a genocide upon the Scholars and their allies in vengeance, the ones who unjustly killed and imprisoned his people for power.

Conclusion

As the analysis demonstrates, each of the characters depict both the qualities of a hero and a villain. Elias Veturius is a soldier of an oppressive regime. For the Scholars, he is one of the biggest villains, but because we see much of the story unfolding from his perspective, we experience his moral dilemma and anguish at having to do all the things which come as a part of being a Mask, which are a part of his responsibility. He seeks to escape this institution, but instead of choosing to help free the people his Empire kills and tortures, he seeks to isolate himself. He has a hero's typical grand notions of right and wrong – which does not allow him to understand Helene as he considers the world to be black and white with no in-betweens, and all Masks unequivocally fall into the most despicable of the two categories – and yet, he does not have the hero's grand notion of changing the world for the better. He has selfish motives and questionable methods of saving people, through murder and manipulation. His only redeeming quality is remorse, which the Nightbringer completely invalidates, calling it a ridiculous emotion, since it does not have the power to reverse the damages already caused. Elias is much like a classic Byronic hero – an absolute rebel, “an outlaw and an outsider who defines his own moral code, often defying oppressive institutional authority”, tormented by his dark past; but also like the Byronic hero, it does him little good (Stein 8). Helene Aquilla, on the other hand, despite being a proud soldier of a horrific Empire, she has her reasons. She is loyal to her duties and her people, and does what she thinks needs to be done to maintain law and order in her Empire, to ensure the safety and well-being of her own people. Similar to Shakespeare's Macbeth, for Helene as well, “killing has been a means to an end—the privilege, responsibility, power, and honor he receives” (O'Dair 82). Though possessing much of a typical villain's lack of empathy and abuse of power, she also displays a hero's bravery, determination and the quality of self-sacrifice. And just like Macbeth, whose “decision(s) to murder flow reasonably, or at least understandably,

from his self ... based primarily in the role of warrior, a role he plays well, sincerely, and with society's full approval," all of the horrendous acts that Helene does, is for the same reasons as well (O'Dair 75).

As for Laia of Serra, even though she has been subjected to harrowing oppression, she lacks the empathy towards other people. Despite the jinn having faced what her own people are facing, she seeks to passionately free the Scholars while actively working to stop the jinn from being freed from a thousand years of unjust imprisonment. This leaves the Nightbringer to be the only saviour for his people. While he has the qualities of a classic villain – ranging from abuse of power to manipulation and extreme use of violence – he also possesses the qualities of a classic hero – he is passionate about bringing justice, he puts all of himself in service of his people and he dedicated a thousand years to fulfil his mission of saving his people, at the expense of his own self. In the Nightbringer, we get to see a tragic hero whose depth of love brought about his downfall, as well as a Nietzschean superman who did everything for the sake of his people and not to fulfil any selfish goals, albeit in a questionable manner. He has the viciousness of Marlowe's Barabas, but he also has the righteousness of Shakespeare's Brutus. Like the Byronic hero, he is tormented by his sins, and he "accepts the burden of his conscience willingly, even defiantly" and "does not attempt to evade his moral responsibility" (Thorslev 163).

Therefore, it can be concluded, that the concepts of good and evil are not mutually exclusive in light of the previous analysis; they are contextual and can be interchangeable depending on the circumstance and the narrative. Hence, good and evil, and in turn, heroes and villains, are not binary opposites. A hero is contaminated with many villainous characteristics, such as the normalization of violence, and a villain is also imbued with many heroic qualities, such as love, compassion and a keen sense of justice. Thus, *An Ember in the Ashes* series highlights the YA American fantasy fiction genre's fascination with morally

ambiguous characters, which is also reflective of the postmodern world where metanarratives with their privileged truths have collapsed, paving way for micronarratives where the truths of the marginalised are coming into focus. The grand narratives of good and evil as found in Biblical and other classical stories have dissipated with the flow of time, and now in the contemporary postmodern world we have more and more stories depicting morally grey characters where everyone can be the hero of their own story, while simultaneously being a villain in someone else's. This is why they are grey characters; they walk the fine line between black and white, just like everyone else in the world who contend with their own ambiguities in their own lives. Tahir's series highlights and masters this popular phenomenon which is found in numerous other contemporary literary works, such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Marie Lu's *The Young Elites*, Marissa Meyer's *Renegades* and *Heartless*, Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows*, as well as many other non-literary works including a plethora of movies such as the *X-Men* franchise and *The Dark Knight* trilogy, and television shows like *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad* and *The Vampire Diaries*.

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