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English Literature

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTUAL READING OF THE CHILDREN'S FICTIONS OF J.R.R TOLKIEN: A REVIEW

KEY WORDS: J.R.R Tolkien, Children's fiction, Socio-Cultural contexts, Christian symbols, Nature, Gender.

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ABSTRACT

Children's fiction has consistently been a genre with a large global following. Children's fiction, especially in English literature, has continually been among the best sellers. In the early days children were educated and entertained through children's literature. A distinct genre of children's literature with its divisions and expectations only started to emerge in the seventeenth century. Though most of these literatures are didactic in nature, its themes have got much more depths within the socio-cultural contexts. Beyond its name and nature, children's fiction has socio-cultural dimensions that are hidden inside the childishness of its narratives and the presence of fantasy. Here we analyze "The Lord of the Rings" and "Hobbit" by J.R.R Tolkien and try to find its socio-cultural significances.

INTRODUCTION

Though the children's fictions are meant to be read by the children or by the younger adults, knowingly or unknowingly authors used some socio-cultural contents inside these pretending to be silly writings. The objective of this study is to analyze the selected works of the famous English children's author J R R Tolkien and to explore the socio-cultural elements portrayed through his themes, characters and settings. J. R. R. Tolkien incorporated the frequently debated subjects of human interest—religion, race, gender, nature, myth, morality, and history—into his works. One need to cross the fantasy deserts and read these fictions in the surroundings of society to see the social aspects beyond the innocence of its genre. This review aims to distil the spirit of a few of J. R. R. Tolkien's children's stories while viewing his canon broadly.

Even while J. R. R. Tolkien's writings "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit" exalt the use of fantasy, superficial readings may only result in a few chills and magical effects. But the objective of this evaluation is to examine the previously stated works' inherent sociocultural characteristics. The following literature reviews support the goal and thoroughness of the research.

In his article, Auden, W.H. (1967) "Good and Evil in The Lord of the Rings," investigates the archetypes of good and evil by examining the characters of "The Lord of the Rings". The subject of temptations and the conflict between good and evil is another way he draws attention to the religious reading components in this work. In all kinds of religious writings, good always triumphs over evil, and Auden has provided compelling justifications for this. In the research article by Mobley, Lari E. (1987) "Christian Morality in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings" he says that "The Lord of the Rings" has presented mainly three Christian themes in it. One is the Christ figure, then the fight of good and evil and another is the want for ultimate control over the evils. Through the characters of Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn, Tolkien created a Christian god like characters who are having Christian morals one way or another. This could be perceived as the Christian moral supremacy pervading in "The Lord of the Rings". But critics view these religious themes of "The Lord of the Rings" as a personal attitude of the author and they never consider these elements as his deliberate attempt to produce a religious text. Tolkien numerous times stated that he never written any allegorical stories. He wanted to be a story-teller and write a story that get the attention of the readers, which sometimes amuse them, and give them a sense of pleasure.

In the research article of Croft, Janet Brennan(2002) "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings," deeply analyses the First World War experiences of author, as

well as typical world war reflections in his works. She also looks at how Tolkien preserved his wartime experiences and used them to inform the themes and characterizations of his stories, as well as how he mythologized them in his writings. This can also be thought as a New Historical reading of his fictions as they provide an insight to history.

Ramaswamy, Shobha (2010) asserted in "Archetypes in fantasy fiction a study of J R R Tolkien and J K Rowling" that the element of fantasy and archetypes are interwoven in the works of both Rowling and Tolkien. The archetypes of quest journey, good and evil are recurrent in their works. In his writings, Tolkien tried to address issues pertaining to spirituality and morality of an evolving society. His compositions were illuminated by the ancient Northern European legend and myth legacy, which brought him comfort. He aimed to show that while the outside world changes, the fundamental facts of human life remain constant. Tolkien gained insight into truth by using the fantastical genre. This explains The Lord of the Rings' underlying spirituality and its capacity to evoke strong emotions in even the most sensitive reader. Tolkien's desire to elevate his narrative to an epic compelled him to include archetypes in his writing.

In the research article by di Giovanni, Justine A. (2011), "I Am No Man; J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings as Gender-Progressive Text" speaks about the gender roles of the characters in Tolkien's works. The treatment of gender in "The Lord of the Rings" is unconcerned about conservative or progressive expectations. Even though Tolkien's characters are male oriented, they are not concerned with conventional expression of emotion, or male roles. Tolkien gave space for the male characters but he never forgets the feminine characters in it. Although Tolkien was restricted by gender ideas of the time, fantasy provided secure environment for the expression of revolutionary views. It is important to understand his views on gender because Tolkien was gender-neutral writer rather than anti-feminist.

In the study conducted by Herbener, David Alden, (2015), "The Gathering Darkness: J.R.R. Tolkien's Exploration of Evil" it is stated that evil is present in some of Tolkien's most wonderful works. This study focuses on the social evils presented by the author through fantasy fictions. Many analysis on J R R Tolkien discusses his attitude to evil in the world. A lot of authors have interpreted Tolkien's idea on the origin of evil. Through the analysis of evil characters in Tolkien's woks, this article highlights the examples of Tolkien's expert treatment of evil from a wholly new perspective. Tolkien's attention to evil immensely contributed for the mythological and religious readings of his texts. The evil for him is not just the evil in the fiction but they are the evils

present in everyone's mind. In a research article by Chichester, Christine Loraine, (2015) "Samwise Gamgee: Beauty, Truth, and Heroism in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" made some comments about the mythical and philosophical reading of "The Lord of the Rings". The character Sam represents an archetypal hero who is having unique heroic features like the beauty and the truth. Sam shares many qualities with literary heroes from the Modern and Postmodern eras, even if early readers might not have expected Sam to display traits of the typical archetypal hero. The prominence given to Frodo's character diminished Sam's heroism. Though Sam is portrayed by Tolkien as a timeless hero in a mediaeval setting, yet his courage, dedication, humor, and expertise are part of a larger story. He receives a mission that appears to be above his capabilities and most definitely his capacity for conceptualization. Sam's heroic story combines hardship, compassion, and salvation to show that Truth exists in *The Lord of the Rings* unmodified.

The article of Fahlén, A. (2016). "Racial Issues in Middle-Earth: A Postcolonial Perspective on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*", brings the portrayal of the various races in the text and their interactions with one another in *The Lord of the Rings*. The essay demonstrates racism in literature using postcolonial theories, particularly "Orientalism" and "Otherness." The emphasis is on the text and what can be inferred from the characters' perceptions of one another. The essay demonstrates that there is a subtext of racial difficulties between the various races in the Middle-Earth in *The Lord of the Rings*, and that these concerns can be classified as racism. The geographical details, skin colour descriptions, and stereotypical depictions of other ethnicities are where the colonial themes of the text are mostly to be found. Even while *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be characterized as racist work in its whole, it does contain elements that deal with racial difficulties, and this can be characterized as racism. It is stated that, even Tolkien has been affected by growing up in a society that values Western civilization as superior. It has an unconscious impact on the way he has written. He might not be aware of it, but that colonial hegemony ruled his psyche unknowingly. While analyzing the map of Middle-Earth we can see many races that represent the good originate from the west or the north, while those that the text uses to represent the evil reside in the south and the east. If we were to overlay the Middle-Earth map onto a globe, we can see that the "hero"-inhabited regions are in northern Europe, including Great Britain, Scandinavia and Germany, while the "evil" regions would be found outside of Europe, in regions of North Africa or the Arabic-speaking Middle East. These itself emphasizes the need of post-colonial reading in "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings".

In her article Dawson, Deidre A. (2017) "Representations of Nature in Middle-earth (2016)" discusses the environmental vision of Tolkien and also the depiction of trees in the Middle-Earth. Varied from all other interpretations, here the author's love for nature is analyzed. In his works, Tolkien even personified trees and gave them feelings. This is not only because of his love for nature but a reflection of the influence of his religion too. Still Tolkien's empirical observations on the natural world dominates over his religious consideration of nature and its picturizations.

In the research paper of Therriault, Katherine (2019) "The Christianization of Middle Earth: Heroic Service in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" it is stated that through the Christian values, the religious and moral qualities in Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" is enhanced. Analyzing the emergence of catholic values in what is undoubtedly a heathen environment produces a contrast of heroic ideals that serve as a religious remark on our contemporary world. Sam Gamgee, who serves as the moral core of the narrative, makes use of his Hobbit traits while maintaining a respect for "morally better" ideals. Tolkien's use of human behavior to

examine the moral harmony between inborn human traits and deliberate refinement through moral behavior is appreciable. Through a tightly defined Christian lens, contemporary questions of class status start to emerge by emphasizing this spiritual equilibrium inside Sam Gamgee. "The Lord of the Rings" by Tolkien provides glimpses into the ethical intricacies of human mind and Sam represents concepts of development as a Christian hero.

In the research article of Naaz, Sumaiyah (2019) "Ecology Mythology and Historiography in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien" Tolkien's concepts, particularly in light of how they relate to his own environmental ethic and the ethical and societal issues that Tolkien raised by his admiration for nature are discussed. Tolkien employs morals drawn from the ideals of the natural environment to guide the development of his cultural environment is among the most amazing features of his secondary world creation. Tolkien was firmly opposed to unrestrained industrialization and automation that increased the atrocities of war and resulted in the plundering and annihilation of the environment. He depicts this conflict in his stories by designating the forces of nature and their supporters as the domain of light and the tools of industry and warfare as the world of darkness. The aforementioned works and analyses have clearly exemplified the importance of socio-cultural contextual reading on the selected children's fictions of J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's children's fictions have the scope of immeasurable socio-cultural interpretations in it. Though Tolkien deals with fantasy on the surface level, a deeper reading can bring out the religious, political, mythological, psychological and ecological themes underlying in his works.

As a scope of further research "The lord of the Rings" can be analyzed on the basis of Foucauldian power structures, 'The Hobbit' can be studied as a coming of the age fiction. Both of the works can be analyzed using existentialist philosophy too.

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