FANTASY AS ESCAPISM INTO REALITY: REALISTIC RESONANCES OF THE BATTLES IN LEWIS' NARNIA AND TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH

Meera Prasannan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
NSS Hindu College Changanacherry,
(affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University)
Changanacherry, Kerala , India

Abstract

In this study efforts are made to prove that the fantasy is not escapist literature but a genre that is realistic in spirit and source. For the purpose of the study, C. S. Lewis' series titled *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy will be advocated. This study examines the incessant battles of good against evil in both the fictional worlds. The key point that will be considered here is how these battles reflect the daily struggles of real life and how the battles fought, particularly in Middle-earth, are a reflection of the writer's own experience in the wake of the two World Wars. While dealing with the imagined and the impossible, fantasy tries to show us what is really possible. Where there is grief, there is the possibility of consolation; if there is hurt, there is a possibility of healing. By speaking to the reader about what they are, fantasies also tell them what they can become. In short, a reader's suspension of reality in fantasy is not escaping from reality. As Tolkien pointed out, a key objective of the imaginary worlds in fairy tales and fantasies is to return the reader to reality at the end, refreshed with new insights.

The written word is powerful and the influence which a text has cannot be measured nor underestimated because consciously or unconsciously writers "change people's perception of the world, and help to change the world itself" (Leeson144). Fantasy writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were committed to the issue of morality conveyed in their literature. Modern fantasists took it upon themselves, the belief that they were "moral arbiters of [their] time" (Egoff 81).The genre of fantasy has won much acclaim in every area of art and entertainment, from literary fiction to being incorporated into movies and games. The influence of myths, legends and folklore is quite evident in most of the fantasy. Initially, however, the fiction was branded synonymous to children's literature and looked down for its escapist appeal.

Preference for fantasy and magic was seen as a means of escape from the rash realities of everyday happenings around the world.

What must be noted is that, though the major appeal of fantasy is the sensation of escapism it provides, what makes it more fulfilling is the author's ability to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality. The fantasy writer strives to proximate reality in his fiction, making his characters behave in reasonable and believable ways, so that the reader can easily connect with the imaginary world. In other words, writers mould fantasy real enough to relate to and magical enough to feel transported by. Fantasy offers a certain vividness and high spiritedness unique to itself. The most influential work in this genre was J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* which not only brought the attention of adult readers to fantasy but also let the genre enter the mainstream of academic disciplines. Interestingly, studies on this genre have revealed that the fundamental purpose of fantasy was to comment on the real world so as to explore the moral, philosophical and other such related dilemmas posed by it. While offering an escapist adventure, the themes devised in fantasies also bring to the tale a realistic reminder of the reader's own world. This makes such works of fiction "a method of approaching and evaluating the real world" (Swinfen 230).

The paradox of fantasies, hence, lies in the creation of worlds that never existed with an intention to gain some insight about the real world we live in. Whatever its surface ornamentation, fantasy largely strives to deal with the bedrock of human emotions, conflicts, dilemmas, relationships, that is to say: the realities of life.More than being a mere asylum from the ambiguities of life, fantasy is a medium that detaches itself from the familiar realistic narrative whereby the reader is provided the possibility of viewing the themes and elements of the story in a wider range of time and place, which can easily include the reader's own time and setting. This timelessness is a quality that most fantasy books own and that makes them seem fresh and relevant even today. Beneath all of the epic-fantasy and stories of adventure, fantasies have laid a foundation of the very basic elements of life, building upon the realities of human life.

Undoubtedly, readers recognize their own inner lives reflected in the characters as they journey through the imaginary world, because these tales are built upon those experiences and emotions that we undergo every single day, lined with a conscious sense of morality. It is all of those basic realities and emotions of life that makes fantasies realistic and holistic. They are stories about human relationships and personal character, what makes each individual special and how a single person's efforts can have a profound impact. Tolkien's and Lewis' works show readers how intentions behind actions matter and how even an entire world's evil can't prevail over the goodness of a few determined and noble souls. These tales remind readers of those human values which are eternal, which a person lives through, can relate to, and eventually believes in, and that is what renders timelessness to most fantasies. Even though woven into the fabric of fantasy, they actually help us in understanding reality.

Morality concerns the code by which we live and act. It is a complex issue, related to systematic beliefs held within society and also relating to one's personal conscience.Life is a perpetual warfare of good and evil within a man. People cannot be entirely good or entirely evil, but everyone is in the process of moving in and out of darkness and light every now and then.The battle between good and evil is a staple of the fantasy genre, and often this conflict occurs on an epic scale, being either a deep concern with moral issues or a struggle for power. The battles of fantasy fiction are also a reflection of a psychological conflict within each individual at the fork of life's choices. Biblically, it is clear that good and evil exist, as do moral

distinctions between them. The story of the Bible is the story of a struggle between good and evil, with good ultimately prevailing over evil as our world draws to a close.Both Tolkien's and Lewis' fantasies concern themselves with the struggle of good against evil. This is best understood as a moral struggle, the battle for good deeds to be done over evil ones.

The devious ape named Shift in Lewis'*The Last Battle* is a fitting reflection of the anti-Christ as described by Bible. Shift finds an old lion's skin and persuades a simpleminded donkey to put it on. The ape then claims that the disguised donkey is Aslan and forms an alliance with Narnia's enemies. Together they set out to control and enslave the subjects of Narnia.In Tolkien's Middle-earth, if Sauron is undoubtedly the devil incarnate, then Saruman, the traitor, is the Antichrist, paving the way for Sauron's foul reign to find full force. Saruman shared the title of the White and even Gandalf believed him to be on the good side until it was brought to light that Saruman had become selfish and his motives were foul, seeking the power of the Ring for himself.

> A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Numenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power . . . As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it.
> (*The Fellowship of the Ring*259)

Dr. Ann Swinfen claims that "the didactic element in the fiction of C.S. Lewis is more overt than in the work of any other recent English author" (147-8). Throughout the Narnian saga, as in Tolkien's mythology, Lewis maintains the theme of the Christian struggle between good and evil, the ethical understanding of which is inherent not only in human nature but in the talking animals and mythical creatures as well who act as moral agents and subjects.

Lewis' morality is simplistic and the actions of his characters are almost always centred on their moral goodness and their willingness to fight evil, with this goodness often being quality enough to conquer the evil forces which thrust themselves upon Narnia. The narrative contains explicit didactic comment regarding these actions and the morally instructive tone to the books penetrates their foundations.Lewis establishes the foundations of the seven books on moral didacticism as the on-going struggle of good against evil and in doing so provides a platform for the examination of morality, choices and ethics.The clear division of good and evil in Narnia assumes the righteousness of the 'good' side to such a degree that the reader is not lead to question the actions of the characters or analyse the enemy in Narnia because there is no question about the certainty of their absolute evil nor of the absolute necessity and righteousness to fight them.

Lewis' notion of good and evil is founded in Christian belief: the polar concepts of good and evil, and heaven and hell are at the very root of his almost uncompromising division of characters and characteristics. "The central theme which provides the entire framework of the Chronicles is the archetypal Christian battle between good and evil, the Holy War" (Swinfen148).In Aslan and the White Witch, we see the personification of the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil.In each of the *Chronicles*, Aslan the Lion is the centrepiece of all that is good, holy, and just. Other characters may embody these traits, but not nearly to the same extent and not consistently. Aslan stands for virtue, condemns vice, and is clearly a Christ figure.The White Witch (Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*) is not an opposite of Aslan in a dualistic sense. She is a being from another world who enters Narnia at the time of its creation.Lewis believed that everyday ethical decisions move one closer in character to good or

evil. Those characters in the Chronicles who are allied with Aslan act more like him, while those who are the Witch's helpers reflect her own evil propensities.

The *Chronicles* are essentially adventure stories and by taking their setting into the fantasy world Lewis is equipped with the ideal tools for exploring moral issues. Protagonists are presented challenges and choices and offered the chance to use their moral judgement. On her first trip into Narnia, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* Lucy is shown to have good judgement in trusting the faun, Mr Tumnus, and seeing the evil in the White Witch. Edmund, on the other hand, is shown to have poor judgment, trusting the White Witch, and desiring what she offers him for his own selfish desires.In falling prey to the Witch's enticements, Edmund is guilty of weakness to temptation and perhaps of the sin greed. In terms of the religious allegory this aligns Edmund with Adam and Eve and original sin.

On the other hand, in *The Magician's Nephew*, Jadis the Witch tries to convince Digory into taking the apple from the Tree of Youth with promises of not only kingship but also healing for his mother who was ill. He struggles with the choice, feeling the force of the terrible decision before him. In the end, though, despite his desire to help his mother, Digory makes the right choice. He has made a promise to Aslan and he will not break it, no matter what.In Narnia, the existence of the enemy is absolutely certain and, just as in real life, the threat of this ideological difference is cause for conflict. In a way, each of us stands in a garden with forbidden fruit before us, just like Digory and just like Adam and Eve. These are the crisis points where our character is formed.

However, in today's world, moral heroism has lost its sense. Where culture is afflicted by pessimistic social determinism, secularization has almost eliminated heroes who are heroic for their goodness. Lewis portrayed hisfictionalheroes as mortals with weaknesses but with a will to stand for what is morally right. King Edmund's knees knock when he fights Fenis the Wolf, but he still fights him. Jill, through her own carelessness, misses the first two signs in her quest for the lost prince, but she repents and is successful with the final sign. Edmund and Eustace are transformed, but they still struggle with some of their old personality weaknesses. Their failures do not make them less attractive as heroes. They make them more believable and more likely to be imitated.

Through his works *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien also stresses on the fact that the struggle between good and evil is never-ending.Though the air of defeatism prevalentin today's world gives the impression that evil is stronger than goodness, Tolkien's trilogy highlights the undeniable truth that Evil cannot prevail over goodness. The light may be hidden or blocked, thereby allowing darkness to grow, but light cannot be destroyed. As *The Lord of the Rings* points out, removing the obstacles to the light is often very difficult and comes at a very high price. More importantly, even though the light returns as strong as before once the obstacles are removed, the damage caused by their evil lingers, sometimes long after.

To depict evil, Tolkien often used the word 'shadow,'so far as to refer to Sauron as the Shadow. "All folk were whispering then of the new Shadow in the South, and it hatred of the West" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 59). This appellation of Sauron as the Shadow reinforced the insubstantiality of his evil. Because darkness is created by an object blocking out light, a shadow lacks substance. Shadow can also mean a faint representation. Tolkien used 'shadow' to refer to darkness and gloom, as when Aragorn told the Elves that Gandalf had fallen "into shadow" in Moria.

In the Norse mythology that so influenced Tolkien's writings, the final battle called the Ragnarok is quite unlike the Christian notion of Armageddon in the Book of Revelation. There,

the angels of God overwhelm and cast down the Devil and his beasts just before God creates a new heaven and earth — it's not even a fair fight. In the Norse battle, the gods face giants and other fell beasts knowing they will be killed in the process. Both good and evil annihilate each other and the few survivors establish the new world.

To depict the last battle in Middle-earth, Tolkien fashioned something closer to Ragnarok than Armageddon. This assumption is based on the way in which Gandalf and Aragorn face the Battle of Morannon near the end of *The Lord of the Rings.* Here, they decide to face the Enemy and his great forces right outside the Black Gate of Mordor — not from any naive notions of victory but to buy necessary time for Frodo to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom.They know full well that the chances of Frodo succeeding are remote, and that even if he does they may not live long enough to see it. Nevertheless, like the Norse gods at Ragnarok, they're ready to battle the enemy in the face of almost certain defeat.

Tolkien's attitude toward warfare in *The Lord of the Rings* closely resembles the outlook prevailing since World War I: Tolkien's heroes fight with little assurance of victory in their particular struggle, to say nothing of a final triumph of good over evil in a much later Last Battle. They fight knowing that they must resist evil to preserve the islands of light in Middle-earth and to arrest the spread of darkness, even with no guarantee of success. In them, you can see a blend of Viking courage with a lot of 20th-century ambiguity over the final outcome of the good/evil question.Together with the Quest of Mount Doom, the War of the Ring in the Third Age, is one of the overarching plot-lines of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The war was initiated by Sauron who had gained strength since the end of the Second Age and he fought against the free peoples of Middle-earth for control of the One Ring and dominion over the continent.

During the War of the Ring, thousands of Men of Rohan and Men of Gondor were killed. Battles were fought in Gondor, Rohan, Lórien, Mirkwood, at the Lonely Mountain and at Dale. The forces also fought fervently in Battle of Osgiliath, Battle of the Pelennor Fields and Battle of the Morannon. These were primarily waged against Sauron's forces, but Saruman, a third contender, also had armies, who fought battles at the Fords of Isen and Helm's Deep. The war signified the decline of the elves' power in Middle-earth, the rise of Men in the West, the restoration of the King of Gondor and Arnor and the start of the Fourth Age.The wise wizard Gandalf the Grey was a master strategist and tactician, spending many hours, searching, scavenging, and sifting out archaic maps and accounts in long-hidden archives strewn about Middle-earth. He would often carefully examine them, figuring out the best way to defeat the Enemy and marshal as many allies as possible to his cause. Gandalf's adaptability and aptitude for strategy proved invaluable to his allies during the War of the Ring.

The objective of Sauron's grand strategy was to defeat the strongest of the nations that opposed him, Gondor, for which he needed to capture the capital fortress, Minas Tirith. To keep Gondor's ally Rohan, on its northern border, from sending aid, Sauron promoted the rise of Saruman at Isengard to the west of Rohan. Thus all of Rohan's forces would be focused in the west trying to stem the tide of the Isengard attack, and none would be sent to Minas Tirith's defence. However, Sauron's divide and conquer strategy was ultimately foiled and a united front of Gondor and Rohan's forces faced Mordor.

Towards the end of the War of the Ring, Elessar was crowned King of Gondor, and forgave the Men who had fought under Sauron, heralding a great renewal of cooperation and communication between Men, Elves, and Dwarves.The war ended with the deaths of Saruman and GrímaWormtongue. After the defeat of the Dark Lord, Saruman used the magic of his voice to convince Treebeard to release him from Isengard. He travelled to the Shire, where he replaced

Lotho Sackville-Baggins as the Chief under the name Sharkey. Under his command ruffians entered The Shire and ruined it. They were defeated by Hobbits under the lead of MeriadocBrandybuck and Peregrin Took and when they reached Hobbiton, Frodo ordered Saruman and Wormtongue to leave the Shire. Wormtongue however killed Saruman, before he himself was killed by the Hobbits and their arrows. With the death of the wizard Saruman, the War of the Ring finally ended and thus, the end of the Third Age.

The entire trilogy is clearly a quest to destroy the Ring and wars are fought to either seize the Ring for selfish motives or to ensure its urgent expiration. The theme of power in *The Lord of the Rings* centres around the corrupting influence of the One Ring on its bearers. The One Ring, created by the demonic figure Sauron, is symbolic of sin, enslaving and destroying the one who holds it. It is the Forbidden Fruit that everyone wants; the "Precious" thing that no one who has it wants to give up.The use of the Ring is addictive, and the ringbearers may become "obsessed and possessive of it to the point of insanity" (Yell 108). Gollum shows many traits of an addict when he withdraws himself and becomes suspicious and angry at anyone.Gandalfwisely rejects the Ring after Frodo offers it to him, and this view of the nature of the Ring is reinforced as Elrond, Galadriel, Aragorn and Faramir in their turn, also reject the Ring.

Potential parallels between the Middle-earth saga and events in Tolkien's lifetime indicate that the setting of *The Lord of the Rings* probably represented Europe during the World Wars. When the First World War started Tolkien was a student at Oxford University. After his graduation he joined the British Army and landed in France. While there he began to take record of what was happening and of the machines of modern warfare - machine guns, tanks, and poison gas. He was fighting in some of the bloodiest battles known to human history.*The Lord of the Rings* was written in the 1930s, during the time of World War II. He may have been easily influenced by the wars, which helped him create the basic scenario of the plot. It is also possible that the Ring symbolized the atomic bomb.

Another interesting fact is that the map of Middle-earth that Tolkien drew appears to be a fictional replica of Modern Europe. Mordor, the land of evil, is approximately in the location of Germany. The Nazi Germany was similarly the center of evil and Mordor was inhabited by beings with inhumane desires to kill. The tyrannical characters Sauron and Saruman also reflect the traits of Hitler or Stalin. The Dead Marshes of Mordor is eerily reminiscent of World War I's Western Front and its utter devastation of life. Gondor, the land of the white city - the city of Kings, is in the location of France, west of Germany. And finally, the Shire, which is obviously England for Tolkien is an Englishman, is remotely north-left of everything.

Other than his experiences at war, Tolkien's ecological attitude against the developments in his country are vividly presented in his fiction. Tolkien had an intense dislike for the side effects of industrialization, which he considered to be devouring the English countryside and simpler life. Tolkien's concern for nature echoes throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Evil dominated the natural resources of Middle-earth, abusing it to bolster their own power. For example, Saruman, the corrupt wizard, devastates an ancient forest as he builds his army.

Tolkien's desire for ecological existence is reflected in his depiction of the Elves who lived in harmony with nature, appreciating its beauty and power, and reflecting a sense of enchantment and wonder in their artful songs. He indemnified technology in his trilogy to show his despise for the technological advancements. The palantiri, which were the Seeing Stones through which elves intended communication, were put to evil use by Sauron. Pienciak notes that technology is only employed by the forces of evil in Tolkien's works and that he found it to be

one of "the evils of the modern world: ugliness, depersonalization, and the separation of man from nature" (37).

Fantasies offer important lessons to combat evil of the prevalent time, not to counter evil thoughts alone but inhuman actions as well. Selfishness, Corruption and Faithlessness are the evils that Narnia and Middle-earth tried to eradicate through their battles. The real world bears witness to diverse ways in which good and evil battle out in psychological, social, spiritual and geographical levels. The fantasies of Lewis and Tolkien show us how, from the scars of their real life experiences, thewriterssought to inspiretheir readers to tune their actions and decisions to a reasoning and lifestyle that was moral in nature.

The means are as important as the ends. Besides the didactic purpose, the elements the writers incorporated into their imaginary worlds are fundamental wherein the battles in Middle-earth were linked to the time of Tolkien and Narnia's to the scriptural narratives of the past. Hence, Tolkien's adoption of life experiences into his trilogy proves that his masterpiece is not just spiritually representative like Lewis' portrayal of moral battles in Narnia but also historically realistic.It was in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" that Tolkien devised the term "Secondary World" which was the writer's ability to create an internally consistent world.

> Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (37)

However, by drawing from myths and folklore, the fantasy writers are adopting 'historical reality' into their Secondary World, to create the depth or internal consistent that is required of such a created dimension. The 'illusion of historical truth' does not imply that a Secondary World must cohere with the actual history of the Primary World. It could refer to the invention of a pseudo-history which appears to be 'true' while providing the backdrop for the main action of the story.By providing a time span, expansive genealogies, culture, language and script to Middle-earth, *The Lord of the Rings* exhibits genuine antiquity that successfully induces 'Secondary Belief'. The fact that the trilogy is set within the context of an extremely detailed and elaborate mythic history increases the *realism* of the Secondary World since it resembles actual history.

Drawing from Christian beliefs, Lewis takes a very different approach to represent contemporary realities in his fantasy creation of Narnia. He delays the expulsion of man from Eden and contrives the eventual fall of man and loss of paradise simultaneous to the end of that world. Lewis constructs Narnia from purely historic, archaic imagery by bringing the Christian elements and prophesies to materialize in his world. Through the new world of Narnia, he highlights what he saw as the shortcomings of his world. As Ann Swinfen says, fantasy is "a method for approaching and evaluating the real world" (230). Modern fantasy writers have taken this charge with utmost seriousness. Through the inclusion of history and Christian myths, Lewis attempted to rewrite the tale of Earth's creation and development and the imminent end of the gradually corrupted world. He established, hence, a system of morality and authoritative strictures that were prevalent in the religious past, finding the values of scriptural history more valuable and worthy than the contemporary.

The world of make-believe has probably coloured every man's childhood and as man grew, his attempts to keep intact the essence of the imagined creations can be seen in most of the art work be it in painting, sculpture, filmmaking or literature. The fantasy author Terry Brooks, in a public talk he gave his readers at TEDxRainier in Seattle on November 10, 2012, reflected

on this from his own life experience. He also asserted that when he commenced writing fantasies, he aimed them to be mirrors that exposed pressing issues of the real world. He believed the reason he ardently continued to write about imaginary creatures like elves was because he found the answers to life's mysteries in that mode of narration.

Along with Brooks, the works of many fantasy writers have that ensured fantasy is not avoidance of real-world issues but a different angle of viewing them. They portrayed fantasy stories as creative, value-based binoculars to understand the essential aspects of human life and deal with the issues of good and evil. As C. S. Lewis concluded in his series, though the long story ends with the last chapter, for the readers "it was only the beginning of the real story". In other words, all the adventures, discoveries and warfare endured in the fantasy world were only part of a thrilling preparation for a better story to be written. The Story of Real Life.

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