

An Analysis of the Female Images in Tolkien's Works: Galadriel, Éowyn and Arwen

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Abstract: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is well recognized for his notable contributions to the genre of heroic romances, as shown by his renowned works, namely *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Consequently, he is widely regarded as the progenitor of contemporary fantasy literature. The study aims to examine the principal female characters in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, namely Galadriel, Éowyn, and Arwen, employing textual analysis and comparative study as the primary methods. The former two individuals serve as exemplars of female warriors, characterized by their courage, strength, unwavering convictions, and relentless pursuit of their aspirations. The latter represents a somewhat less favorable portrayal of the female image. Arwen, being designated as the "second sex", is shown with a dearth of individual narratives and distinct characteristics, primarily serving as a supporting figure to the male protagonists within the story. Nevertheless, despite the deficiencies in Tolkien's depiction of female representations, the merits of his work ultimately surpass the drawbacks.

Keywords: Tolkien, Female Image, Galadriel, Éowyn, Arwen

1. Introduction

Within the domain of fantasy scholarship, few names evoke as enduring a response as that of J. R. R. Tolkien and his colossal literary creation, *The Lord of the Rings* (hence referred to as LOTR). The masterpiece known as LOTR is widely recognized for establishing the benchmarks of modern fantasy fiction within the genre. Many following works of fantasy draw inspiration from this seminal work, as a significant portion of the fantasy genre is characterized by the use of subsidiary worlds akin to those seen in LOTR, or by the reimagining of such secondary worlds. Terry Pratchett, a prominent figure in contemporary fantasy literature, draws a parallel between Tolkien's significance in the genre and the portrayal of Mount Fuji in traditional Japanese paintings. In such artworks, the mountain may occasionally remain hidden from view since the artist is situated atop Mount Fuji. In a metaphorical sense, contemporary authors of fantasy literature draw inspiration and influence from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien [1]. The epic narratives crafted by J.R.R. Tolkien continue to serve as a source of inspiration in contemporary times. Hence, there is significant merit in undertaking a scholarly examination of Tolkien and his literary contributions. In addition to his prominent literary works, Tolkien also authored several other compositions aimed at enhancing the intricacies of the fictional universe he had constructed. Notable examples include *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales of Nú*

menor and Middle-Earth. The aforementioned narrative recounts the genesis of existence and chronicles the events transpiring during the First and Second Ages of the realm known as middle-earth. The latter serves as a continuation that enhances the extensive chronicle spanning from ancient times to the era depicted in LOTR. In its whole, Tolkien has constructed an entirely novel realm replete with intricate depictions of its historical narratives, diverse races and animals, geographical features, and even languages governed by rigorous grammatical principles.

Numerous scholars, both domestic and international, have conducted extensive research pertaining to the characters included in the literary works of Tolkien, with a particular focus on the portrayal of female characters. Lu XinChen conducts an analysis of the heroic portrayals of female characters. According to Lu, Arwen's unwavering support for Aragorn can be perceived as an act of heroism [2]. Li QiuCheng is also engaged in scholarly studies pertaining to the female characters depicted in LOTR. Li not only provides a comprehensive analysis of the defining traits exhibited by these female characters, but also directs attention towards their significant contributions to the development of the plot and their portrayal as fantastical beings [3]. In contrast, Leslie A. Donovan delves into Tolkien's conceptualization of "myth" and its medieval roots [4]. It is evident that a majority of the scholarly research pertaining to the female characters in the literary works of Tolkien is approached from a positive standpoint. Nevertheless, when examining the rich array of personalities in Tolkien's Middle-earth, scholars find it challenging to overlook the dearth of prominently delineated female characters. While it is true that certain female characters do hold key positions within the narrative, a considerable proportion of them, including Arwen, might be characterized as stereotyped and lacking depth.

In contrast, this research will be examined from a critical perspective. This study aims to critically analyze the representation of female characters in the works of Tolkien, employing feminist theories put forth by Engels, Virginia Woolf, and Simone De Beauvoir. The objective of this analysis is to assess the extent to which Tolkien's portrayal of female characters can be considered both progressive and stereotypical. Tolkien maintains that the narratives he has authored merely constitute a fraction of the events transpiring within Middle-earth, with the other portion being open to interpretation and imaginative expansion by both readers and authors [5]. This paper aims to offer inspiration to artists by examining the virtues and weaknesses of Tolkien's characters, with the goal of enhancing the richness of the Middle-earth he has crafted.

2. Analysis of the Main Females

There are many female characters in Tolkien's works and many of them have shaped the fortune of the middle earth. In the following part, the author is going to choose three of the main female characters and analyze their images in the works.

2.1. The Mighty Warriors

Throughout the literary works of Tolkien, a discernible and unorthodox group of female characters emerges, characterized by their role as warriors. Despite their limited presence, these individuals significantly influence the progression of the tale, making their impact both profound and remarkable.

2.1.1. Galadriel, Man-Maiden

The name bestowed upon Galadriel by her mother of elven descent is "Nerwen," which can be translated to mean "man-maiden." Although this metaphor may still reflect a male-centric viewpoint by implying that a woman's achievements are attainable by adopting masculine traits, thereby potentially associating femininity with negativity, it also indicates an androgynous mindset within Galadriel. This mindset surpasses conventional gender roles and emphasizes a potential amalgamation of masculine and feminine attributes in Galadriel's character.

In her article titled *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf provides a detailed exploration of the notion of androgyny, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of both masculine and feminine qualities inside an individual's psyche. It is advisable for individuals to refrain from allowing their biological sex to exert a dominant influence on their cognitive processes, but rather to embrace and incorporate the qualities associated with the opposing gender. In the realm of written expression, it is advisable for authors to transcend preconceived notions and the binary construct of gender, and instead adopt a writing style that encompasses both feminine and masculine perspectives. Woolf's interpretation of androgyny posits it as a potent and harmonious mental state, serving as the sole means by which individuals can foster creativity and maintain equilibrium. The most natural condition is the unification of the two genders within one's head, which exemplifies a sense of balance as shown in Galadriel's mindset [6].

Galadriel challenges conventional gender norms by exemplifying attributes commonly attributed to both males and females. One instance of this phenomenon is observed in her reaction to her uncle Fëanor's vehement quest for retribution against the formidable adversary Melkor. Following the demise of their esteemed ruler Finwë at the hands of Melkor, who subsequently absconds with the Silmarils, Fëanor solemnly pledges to pursue Melkor relentlessly and restore rightful possession of the Silmarils. Galadriel, despite her familial relationship as Fëanor's niece, harbors uncertainties regarding her uncle's spiteful undertaking. In the given scenario, Galadriel exhibits a notable capacity for logical reasoning, which stands in stark contrast to the impulsive and emotionally driven behavior displayed by her uncle. Subsequently, she elects to depart alongside her relatives due to her deep familial affection, although she resolutely aligns herself with her maternal kindred in the face of her uncle Fëanor's heinous act of slaying their own blood relations, displaying remarkable courage as she confronts her uncle in battle. Galadriel exemplifies a harmonious equilibrium by combining the usually masculine attribute of logic with the traditionally feminine attribute of sensibility. She exemplifies the coexistence of fervent emotions and logical reasoning, without allowing one gender's authority to overshadow the other.

Moreover, Galadriel's decision to embark on a journey to Middle-earth is not exclusively motivated by her family ties. Instead, it is propelled by her yearning for the unfamiliar and her aspiration for personal achievement. In defiance of the admonitions and prophetic foretellings of the Valar of the inherent misfortune associated with the Silmarils, Galadriel steadfastly refuses to accept their benevolence. Her sense of pride compels her to opt for the course of exile, so exemplifying her ambitious and resilient disposition. Galadriel's character exhibits a remarkable distinctiveness due to her possession of attributes such as ambition, pride, logic, and resistance, which are commonly perceived as uncommon for masculine characters.

2.1.2. Éowyn, Lady of the Shield-arm

Éowyn, the princess of Rohan, experienced the loss of her parents during her childhood, leading her and her brother to be brought under the care of their uncle, Théoden, who held the esteemed position of king in the realm of Rohan. From an early age, Éowyn has possessed the awareness that individuals lacking swords are yet susceptible to perishing by them. Éowyn's upbringing diverges from traditional gender roles, since she is instructed in the art of warfare rather than being groomed for a conventional feminine role. Consequently, she earns the title of the shieldmaiden of Rohan. However, Éowyn is confronted with a challenge that is commonly encountered by many professional women in the real world, which might be metaphorically described as a confinement referred to as "protection." The male gender often employs the justification of safeguarding in order to impede women from attaining public authority, as exemplified by Éowyn's desire to participate in warfare. When Aragorn refuses

Éowyn's offer to enter the Road of Dead with him and reminds her of her "duty" as a woman, Éowyn points out the false of men:

"All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more" [7].

As a shieldmaiden, Éowyn sees the battlefield as where she belongs, yet she is always left behind in the name of duty or protection. She fears no pain or death. When asked what she does fear, Éowyn says: "'A cage', she said. 'To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire'" [7]. Similar to Mulan in traditional Chinese stories, Éowyn chooses the same path. She determines that her fate should only be in her own hands, so Éowyn breaks the "cage" herself by riding to battlefield disguised as a man and taking Merry the hobbit with her, who is also left behind. In the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, she witnesses her uncle, King Théoden, being wounded by the Witch-king of Angmar and trapped under his horse. However, no riders alive near Théoden dare to offer help for they all flee out of fear. It is Éowyn alone to face the Witch-king. She stands bravely between the Witch-king and her wounded uncle. The Witch-king says to her: "Thou fool. No living man may hinder me" [7]! Éowyn however answers him with a laugh and says:

"But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him" [7].

Engels points out in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that "the emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private" [8]. Éowyn, despite her military training, is persistently assigned the duty of a caregiver, a traditionally domestic position imposed upon women by societal expectations. She encounters opposition from multiple sources, including her monarch, her sibling, and the heroic figure Aragorn, all of whom seek to prevent her from attaining a position of public authority. Éowyn is compelled to liberate herself from her state of imprisonment through a series of arduous efforts, ultimately achieving her predetermined role as a shieldmaiden.

In contrast to Galadriel, Éowyn encounters a greater number of obstacles that impede her journey towards self-realization and recognition of her worth. Éowyn, being a female character, is repeatedly advised to remain in the rear and assume responsibilities pertaining to the care of women, children, or the injured male individuals. It is anticipated that she will fulfill her responsibilities in accordance with societal expectations of femininity. However, she perceives her obligation as being centered around wielding swords and providing protection for her nation and its citizens. Éowyn never once compromises her ambitions of "doing great deeds" and great deeds she did. In the end, Éowyn accomplishes something that no other living "men" could ever have done.

The portrayal of female warriors exemplified by characters such as Galadriel and Éowyn stands out distinctly, challenging and overturning traditional female archetypes. Unlike the conventional depiction that often confines women to family life, these female warriors engage extensively in social affairs, exerting a substantial and enduring influence on the broader societal context. They have unique personalities, marked by independent choices driven by their individual experiences and values.

2.2. Arwen, the Second Sex

On the other hand, Arwen, is the representative of another type of female characters, which is also the more common type in Tolkien's works—female as the second sex. Even though portrayed as

the fairest of the Children of Ilúvatar in the Third Age, Arwen seems to be nothing more than a beautiful symbol for her most remarkable contribution is to be the one and only love of the king of man, Aragorn.

According to the conclusions drawn by Beauvoir in her well-known feminist work *The Second Sex*, women have long been in the state of “the Other”. Sartre posits that the formation of one's identity is contingent upon the presence and interaction with others. Put simply, the construction of subjectivity is dependent on the presence of “the other”. Beauvoir expanded upon this theory and employed it in the context of the interaction between males and females. In a patriarchal society, males have complete control over women and perceive themselves as the indisputable authority, resulting in women being subordinate to men [9].

Arwen, unfortunately, appears to be “the Other” in the stories. She shows up only in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Arwen is the daughter of Lord Elrond, who is the son-in-law of Lady Galadriel, making Arwen the granddaughter of Galadriel. During her childhood, Arwen predominantly resided with her grandparents in Lothlórien, where she initially encountered Aragorn and solemnly pledged their commitment to one another. Subsequently, Arwen is faced with the decision of embracing mortality or journeying to the immortal realm alongside her own kindred. If Arwen selects Aragorn, a mortal, she will be fated to a solitary demise and eternal separation from her father. Regardless of her decision, Arwen will never have the opportunity to see either her father Elrond or her beloved Aragorn again. Arwen, filled with sorrow, makes the difficult choice to relinquish her eternal existence and commit to spending only one lifetime with Aragorn. (At the end of the story, Arwen bestows upon Frodo the opportunity to depart for the sacred realm, therefore enabling the eventual restoration of his injuries and suffering inflicted by the Ring.) Subsequently, amidst the conflict against Sauron's armies, Arwen skillfully crafts the Livery of Elendil just for Aragorn. The banner significantly bolsters the morale of the warriors by proclaiming the king's homecoming, so contributing to the victorious outcome of the battle. Following the destruction of the Ring and the defeat of Sauron, Aragorn ascends to the throne as the monarch of the unified realms of Arnor and Gondor. Later in May, Arwen and Aragorn finally get married thus making Arwen the queen of the united kingdoms.

Arwen, one of the primary female characters, is explicitly referred to a total of 17 times throughout the entire trilogy. Arwen's name predominantly arises in the context of other characters' dialogues or as a fleeting presence in a single scene. Furthermore, the discussions and depictions concerning Arwen can be categorized into two distinct themes: Arwen's physical attractiveness and Arwen's romantic relationship and marriage with Aragorn. Focusing just on a woman's physical attractiveness is arguably the most shallow characteristic. Furthermore, it should be noted that Arwen lacks an independent storyline within the trilogy. Her name is frequently associated with being someone's daughter or wife. Her role in the plot is to aid Aragorn. For example, during the fight of the Pelennor Fields, Arwen weaves the standard of Gondor and has her brothers deliver it to Aragorn, which contributes to the victory in the important fight. Arwen's name remains absent until the Ring is annihilated and Sauron is vanquished, at which point she ultimately marries Aragorn and assumes the role of queen. Essentially, the presence of the character Arwen is contingent upon the primary male characters in the narrative, as her role becomes unnecessary in their absence.

Arwen and Aragorn's love is also why she turns out to be subordinate to Aragorn. Their love is one of the most important factors that promote the development of the plot. However, the author does not spend many explaining why they love each other so much. All the reader can get is a hint that suggests they seem quite close.

“Frodo halted for a moment, looking back. Elrond was in his chair and the fire was on his face like summer-light upon the trees. Near him sat the Lady Arwen. To his surprise Frodo saw that Aragorn stood beside her; his dark cloak was thrown back, and he seemed to be clad in elven-mail, and a star

shone on his breast. They spoke together, and then suddenly it seemed to Frodo that Arwen turned towards him, and the light of her eyes fell on him from afar and pierced his heart” [7].

On the flip side, their relationship in the trilogy is characterized by practicality rather than romance. Arwen is the object of Aragorn's enduring affection, and he is deeply committed to safeguarding her. Furthermore, Arwen fulfills the role of being Aragorn's exclusive love interest, serving to exemplify Aragorn's qualities of chivalry and unwavering devotion to love. In every heroic narrative, the male protagonist invariably possesses an attractive and devoted spouse or romantic partner. Their love serves as a symbol to enhance Aragorn's heroic persona. Furthermore, within the historical context of Middle-earth, there were merely three instances of the harmonious coexistence between elves and humans. Among these occurrences, the most renowned is the union of Beren and Lúthien, who happen to be the common ancestors of Arwen and Aragorn. The love between Aragorn and Arwen in this context creates a connection with their predecessors, contributing to a perception of predetermined fate in Aragorn's portrayal.

Arwen embodies the archetypal, one-dimensional female characters found in the trilogy and many previous novels: the second gender. They are shown in the stories solely as the daughters, wives, or mothers of males, with no other defining characteristics. These women are reduced to a mere symbol devoid of their own individuality or character. Their presence in the plot is not self-centered, but rather serves to facilitate the character development of males.

3. A Comparison between the Main Females

Within the Western literary tradition, the representation of female warrior figures has been fairly restricted, primarily found in the domains of mythology, folklore, or balladry [10]. The historical narrative has predominantly emphasized women's amorous endeavors, whereas men's narratives frequently revolve around ambition and destiny. Nevertheless, J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth reintroduces women warriors into the realm of significant literature, particularly through figures such as Galadriel. Within Tolkien's intricately constructed universe, Galadriel sets herself apart by actively participating in battles alongside her male siblings and sacrificing a comfortable existence in order to fulfill her aspiration of creating a dominion in the faraway land of Middle-earth. Éowyn, in a same vein, stands out as a remarkable female character, displaying great courage by placing herself bravely between the formidable Witch-King and her beloved uncle, while other male warriors succumb to terror and run away. Tolkien's depiction of heroines such as Galadriel and Éowyn demonstrates a conscious endeavor to defy and oppose the dominant stereotype of fragile and timid female characters in literature. Tolkien introduces a fresh and inventive feminine vitality into serious writing by portraying these female imagery, so broadening the conventional narrative range for female characters. Furthermore, Tolkien clearly devotes more attention to these types of people by imbuing them with their own narratives. As previously explained, both Galadriel and Éowyn are portrayed as dynamic personalities, demonstrating development and intricacy in their individual quests.

In contrast, the portrayal of the second type of female characters, represented by Arwen, appears significantly less nuanced. Despite being one of the principal female characters in *LOTR*, Arwen's depiction remains relatively scant. Arwen adheres to traditional clichés commonly seen in romance epics, epitomizing the compliant and supporting spouse who remains at the household while her husband embarks on expeditions to pursue his convictions and aspirations. As one of the important characters, also one of the few female characters in *LOTR*, Arwen's character is marginalized, primarily serving as a background to the story of Aragorn, a classic male hero. Evidently, Tolkien spares limited attention to Arwen's character, resulting in a portrayal that lacks vivid personality and an independent narrative. Not only does Arwen conform to stereotypical expectations, but her character also appears noticeably flat. In comparison to the more dynamic female characters

exemplified by Galadriel and Éowyn, the depiction of “the second sex” female images represented by Arwen can be perceived as a certain deficiency in Tolkien’s writing.

4. Conclusion

In Tolkien's novels, the female characters possess both strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, due to the impact of feminist movements during Tolkien's age, the depiction of female soldiers effectively challenges the conventional portrayal of women in literary works. On the other hand, the majority of the female characters in Tolkien's writing are portrayed as one-dimensional, exemplified by Arwen. They are categorized based on their roles as a spouse, parent, or offspring rather than being recognized as individuals in their own right. *The Lord of the Rings* exhibits a dearth of female characters, with a just five among the numerous characters. However, every writer is inevitably bound by the constraints of their era. Accusing Tolkien of sexism from the perspective of current feminists would be unjust. The undeniable achievement of his creation of those iconic and formidable warriors is impossible to overlook.

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