Imagined Reality*: The Lord of the Rings* as Travel Literature

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Abstract

Lord of the Rings (LOTR), the sequel to a story for the children of the travails of a 'Hobbit, 'Bilbo, becomes a narrative of sin and reprisal, crime, and punishment, darkness, and light. Largely in principle, it embraces the realm of human affairs and lends it a transcendental meaning through its treatment of the narrative technique.

LOTR, from the time of its publication, has created ripples for its language, theme, and technique. The problem of nomenclature is endemic to these books. Having the leitmotif of travels, it surpasses any restrictive canonical structure. The narrative is delineated through umpteen travels taken up by humans and non-humans. The theme of solidarity and interdependence pervades the action and provides the structural framework within which heroic individualism and love for all things function.

The story revolves around the primeval creation of Eru. He creates the Ainurs but bestows one, Melkor, with maximum power and knowledge. Creative, powerful, and jealous, Melkor tries to subvert Eru's creation. Two 'Hobbits 'undertake an arduous, "Christian" kind of journey to destroy the evil spread by Melkor. Though the books are read as romances, fairy tales, linguistic marvels, I would like to study the narrative as travel literature that upholds the quintessential truth- a victory of good over evil.

Keywords: Travel, Imagined Reality, Identity Formation, Narrative Strategy, *duree,* Fertility, Purgatory

In *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), Tolkien has presented the readers with the "elemental nature" (P-3, Bloom) of existence and engagingly describes a plethora of living things on Earth of the Third-Age. In Book III, the Ent–Treebeard- recounts the song of life on Earth teeming with varied creatures:

> ...First name the four, the free peoples: Elder of all, the elf –children:

Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses:
 Ent the earthborn, old as mountains:
Man the mortal, master of horses:
Hm,hm,hm.

Beaver, the builder, buck the leaper,
Bear bee-hunter, boar the fighter:The houndd is hungry, hare is fearful...
hm, hm.

Eagle in eyrie, ox in pasture,
Hart horn-crowned: hawk is swiftest,
Swan the whitest, serpent coldest... (453)

In LOTR, each of these species has a role to play, a fight to fight, a journey to undertake that would change the fate of the Earth of the Third Age. Though the novel is read as romance, fairy tale, linguistic marvel, I would like to study the narrative as a travelogue that foregrounds the quintessential truth: the victory of good over evil.

I

Travel as Solution

Bikash Chakravarty talks about the Romantic and the Age of Enlightenment's travel writers:

While "... the voice of the Enlightenment writer was disinterested, sober, analytical and philosophical.... the voice of his Romantic successor would be committed, impassioned, evocative and lyrical.... the adventurous ethos of the Romantics of the nineteenth century Europe led them to privilege creative vision..." (42).

He further quotes Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay about the Romantic project

"...the fertility of unprogrammed and nonchalant itineraries, the suggestive magic of distance and wilderness ... the equation of strangeness with authenticity" (42).

Besides these, the writers were also concerned with the mode of transportation to alien territories. Transportation was neither in plenty nor covered all the space. So the traveler was compelled to undertake the journey by foot or on horseback. This necessitated a more detailed physical description of the territory.

Travel has been a mode of assessment of territory and of putting a discursive system in place. It brings forth a range of hidden discourses that constitute and explore the issues central to the cultural and literary representation of society and expose politicking.

Travel writing valorises physical and psychic upheaval. From Dante's *Divina Comedia,* Kalidasa's *Meghadootam* to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* the literature of the world is dotted with umpteen numbers of factual and fictional travels. But what is common to them all is a description of virtual and actual, spatial and temporal. The vivid geographical descriptions (even incorporating longitude and latitude) served the purpose of espionage as well as establishing inter-cultural reciprocity.

One additional aspect of travel writing is the time of narration. Like memory writing (autobiography), it is retrospective narration: hence the writer gets time to polish his style. But it is also likely that he may leave some gap due to the passage of time. With the upsurge of critical cannon, critics can bridge the gap or construe a method of addressing these issues.

Comparatively a neglected genre, travel literature is woven into the bloodstream of western literature. Following Britain's naval superiority, the Britons made forays into unchartered geographical landscapes, the mariners brought back tales of fabulous riches that ignited the imagination of the writers. Stories and legends from various countries found their ways into the writings of the more fanciful.

By the 18th century, the United Kingdom saw a proliferation of travel writing. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* whetted the appetite for more of the same. Around the mid-19th century, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and then *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) has garnered critical acclaim. Critics extol its language, theme and technique. Problem of nomenclature is endemic to these books. As Amitav Ghosh says in the opening of *The Imam and the Indian*:

To those of a taxonomic bent of mind, it may appear that the contents of this collection are heterogeneous enough to require classification under several headings. I have resisted the temptation to do this in the belief that in the circuitry of the imagination, connections are of greater importance than disjunctions. (I&I, vii)

Albeit having the leitmotif of travels, LOTR undermines any restrictive canonical structure. The narrative is delineated through multiple travels of humans and non-humans. The engrossing story gives the appearance of imagined reality and lends credulity to the reading experience.

The Lord of the Rings (LOTR), a novel consisting of six books, is a sequel to *The Hobbit.* From a travel literature for the children, it is about the travails of Bilbo, a Hobbit, it goes on to become a narrative of sin and reprisal, of crime and punishment, of darkness and light. LOTR is peopled by numerous creatures: Trolls and Orcs, Dwarves and Hobbits, Ents and Willows, humans and Numenoreans imagined or culled from legends. Critics opine that the story is inspired by *Beowulf* and Gallic legends. However, the narration exhibits a photo tactic style, which is completely Tolkien's own. Abstract contrasts like life and death, good and evil represented by Ents and Orcs, Frodo and Saruman, Aragorn and Sauron make the reading an engrossing process.

The specifics of the story encapsulate the primeval creation of Eru. He creates the Ainurs, but bestows one, Melkor, with greater power and knowledge. Creative, powerful and jealous, Melkor tries to subvert Eru's creation. Eru's finest creation in the First Age of Earth, the elves, fought furiously and reduced Melkor to ignominy. But his servant Sauron, well trained and powerful, rakes havoc in the Third Age. Sauron, the Dark Lord, spreads darkness and fear. This Age is peopled by multifarious creatures like hobbits, men, trees, eagles etc. of weaker power besides the evil creatures like the Orks and goblins. Sauron had taught the Elves the creation of the rings of power. But evil, brought on by *the* One Ring secretly forged by Sauron spreads. Sauron had invested a large portion of his power into this ring to control all other rings of power. So Gandalf, Saruman, Radagast, and two other Istaries are sent to Earth to destroy Sauron. Helped by Gandalf, two Hobbits, Frodo and Sam, undertake an arduous, "Christian" kind of journey to destroy evil. "The Third Age was my age. I was the Enemy of Sauron, and my work is finished." (950) Gandalf says after fulfilling his task.

LOTR stands at crossroads of social upheaval. Gandalf is sent to Earth to alleviate the troubles of Earth, Aragorn, the king, designate, the Hobbits no way related to the business of the big people, the Dwarves seeking their lost relatives, and the Elves whose allotted time on Earth has lapsed but linger on with their memory, create the Fellowship of Ring to destroy Sauron. Gandalf's crusade against Sauron goads him to circumnavigate the Earth, sacrificing his pleasure. He admires Aragorn and tries to help him, which would ultimately serve his cause of liberation of all characters from the spell of the Dark Lord.

The Hobbits, small in size and shunning lands beyond their borders, were generally ignored or unknown to the world. Short like human children, they love parties and food. Thus they stand for life in a world dying of cowardice and sloth. Their physical limitation is well made up by their courage and determination. As Gandalf had exclaimed before the fellowship was formed: "My dear Frodo! Hobbits really are amazing creatures..." (61). Frodo, the central character, far outweighs the stronger lot by his tenacity and courage. He is no classical or even an Elizabethan hero. But he is kind in his dealings with his subordinates, selfless towards his companions, even compassionate towards Gollum or the vile Saruman in his fall. He is a hobbit, full of life and fun. But the inheritance of the ring from Bilbo changes his life. None the less he is heroic enough for his appointed task. Frodo and Sam, the two hobbits, undertake an arduous, "Christian" kind of journey to destroy evil. Christian is the central character in the allegory by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress.* In a dream narrative, he undertakes a journey to heaven. Christian's quest for salvation is hindered by obstacles in the shape of hardship, temptation, and evil.

Frodo, helped by Gandalf and Aragorn undertakes a similar arduous journey to Mount Doom to destroy the ring that is the centre of Sauron's power. But here Frodo's journey is for the world and its release from Sauron's clutch. As he marches deep into the unknown he loses his exuberance and vivacity. Beset by evil in the forms of Shelob-the fierce, wicked spider, orcs, Gollum, and then lack of food, water, and sleep, having to walk through fire and rocks tests his endurance. But after completing the quest, the Hobbits return to the Shire, their home, to resume life. Thus their quest takes a full circle, thereby asserting life over death. Characters are primarily imagined or, as Kenon says, are constructs that stand for real social order or disorder. In the social order of LOTR, the story of Aragorn, a Numenorian, occupies centrality. Numenoreans in LOTR mimic heroes who are many above men in size, stature, and life-span. In the site of identity formation, the story of Aragorn demands centrality. The greed of his forefathers had shorn him of his kingship and

Aragorn is in a mode of resistance and fixated with his past. Aragorn, bereft of his rightful claim to the throne, suppresses his love and needs. And his restrictive life condition is compounded by his association with the underdogs like the hobbits, dwarves, and men. As in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, Ramachandra, the banished king designate of Ayodhya, had taken the help of the Vanaras (monkeys) to reclaim his right (wife), Aragorn seeks the help of the underdogs and marches ahead to destroy Sauron and win the love of his life (Arwen, the Elf princes).

The Willows and the Ents are alive to the vibes around them. While the willows (trees) move, they are feral and constricting. The Ents, on the other hand, are the shepherds of the forest and try to contain the wild and the unruly. There are many legends about the ents. But they are severely crippled by the absence of the Ent-wives. Each one had their preferences. The Entwives, drawn after human females, loved to decorate, garden, to build a home. They are ever in search of new pastures. They walk and walk away from the Ents limiting the process of Enting. While the movements of the Entwives were aimless, the Ents play a major role in the fight for good. Their stagnation propels them to violent action and destruction of evil when called into action. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Louis, Tolkien's contemporary, creates a world of talking and moving animals and trees which help in the more significant cause during war and peace. Likewise, Tolkien's plant kingdom teems with walking, talking, acting trees which create an impressive and believing world. They had isolated themselves from the rest of the world.

But at last, they travel beyond their comfort zone to accost the villainous Istari, Saruman. Their travel ends Saruman's treachery and ensues the fall of the Twin Towers, his abode, and the source of his power. Thus their sterile life that had alienated the male-female is thawed, and there is the possibility of fertility.

The Dwarves 'journey is of a different kind. They move mostly for riches, though Gimly is of a different disposition. He is able to rise above his limiting self to love the Elf Legolas, which helps the war of good against evil. Orcs, trolls, and goblins are creatures who are always moving towards destruction. Evil and destructive, they are the conduits of the Dark Lord. Interesting to note that Treebeard doesn't have the names of these creatures in his song of life. They were the creation of the Dark Lord, who had mutilated and maimed the dark elves to create these hideous creatures. Sauron is the Dark Lord, his home is the Dark Tower, his messengers are dark riders, his land is dark and barren. He is the Miltonic Satan: more attractive and persuasive than god, twisting and

maiming all that is good. But hounded by the Free peoples even he has to travel and run from place to place.Thus travel occupies the focal point of the narrative.

Travel writing is currently a dynamic, prolific, and socially important genre. Profoundly shaped by the legacies of the Colonial era, travel writing played a pivotal role in ideating world order. In LOTR, travel is not for espionage purposes rather. It valorises victory of good over evil. Frodo, at the penultimate moment, goes completely under the power of *the* Ring and fails to consign it to the flames of Mount Doom. It's the devious Gollum who divests him of the ring. He loses a finger to complete his quest. This similarity with Sauron, who had lost the finger with *the* ring to Aragorn's predecessor, bears testimony to the power of evil.

In travel writing narrated *duree* is as important as the narrator. This narrative is supposedly written by Frodo after he reaches the Shire. In the quiet confine of his home he recapitulates the incidences and pens it for posterity. So the style is smooth and noteworthy. It is said of Tolkien that he

> ...used languages to delineate cultural attitudes, to expose racial personalities, and to lead the reader to an understanding of or a feeling for the quality of consciousness of the various groups. (Bloom 170)

As of language the mode of transport needs a mention. Here one finds oneself amongst great hindrances. Except during war the characters walk through uncharted, unfriendly terrain. During the last lap of his quest, Frodo snails up his way, even without food or drink, through fog, fire, and Orks. Thus, one can assert that travel narrative mode provides a solution to the problems LOTR is based on.

II

Imagined Reality

Imagined Community, a 1983 publication of Benedict Anderson, depicts a nation as a socially constructed community. Plato's Republic and Thomas Moore's Utopia had created an imagined land of plenty and perfection. Barth explains that post-modern writer makes use of the older work in an important way- he employs the same old themes. Still, he gets rid of the technique..., much as we engage ourselves every moment in "throwing out the bathwater without for a moment losing

the baby" (70). It is as much for Tolkien's narrative: of subordination of realism to fantasy, of Aragorn's ethical configuration of identity.

Tolkien's fictional world explores the issue of social dynamics, resistant culture, and power politics that underscores the note of magic realism. Photo tactic presentation of landscape and society, the ordeal of the living world blurs the fact, fiction binary. This section addresses the interchangeability of fact and fiction that inhere an imagined identity.

LOTR is a travel narrative in a double bind. Every individual nourishes an agenda covertly or overtly: The Orc, Ugluk, while following his master's order, wants to steal *the* Ring, whose covert aspiration for power reinscribes the happenings of the mortal world. His fight with other Orks starts a stampede that paved Frodo's path. The Ents, while shepherding trees, become instrumental in the victory of the Free peoples. Felling of trees propels them to action that removes one Impediment-Saruman, the devious Istari- from the Free peoples 'path. Likewise, Frodo or Aragorn's passage through metaphoric purgatorial fire, which is at the epicentre of the travel, also romanticises their ordeal and subsumes it to narrative strategy.

Tolkien's portrayal of the Elves-Hobbit-Satan story with the dying Numenorian clan as the nucleus is a masterstroke of the narrative that travels from one species of this imagined Community to the other even as the world in flux gravitates towards annihilation. The seeming old but ageless Gandalf working furiously to subvert Sauron's plan, Sauron's engagement in a mind game, Aragorn's endeavour for identity formation and peacekeeping while all the time he tries to reclaim his hereditary right of kingship to win his love: and all other species are either pawns or instrument of change. All these lend credibility to the imagined identity of *the* Tolkien world.

But identity is not just socially constructed but has real episteme and political consequences. They examine how theory, politics, and action clash with or complement each other, providing an alternative to the widely influential understanding of identity. The reality about his identity is briefly summarised at the end by Aragorn himself when he and Sam talk after the fall of Barad-Dur:

> 'Well, if this isn't the crown of all! 'he said. 'Strider or I'm still asleep! '

> 'Yes, Sam, Strider, 'said Aragorn. 'It is a long way, is it not, from Bree, where you did not like the look of me?'(932-33)

The postmodernists while trying to reclaim identity do not think it to be fixed or stable. As Himansu S. Mohapatra says:

> The significance of identity depends partly on the fact that goods and resources are all distributed according to identity categories. Who we are...will significantly affect our life chances: where we can live, whom we will marry...(Ravenshaw Journal 71)

Thus the identity of the construct named Aragorn gets upwardly mobile, and this momentum is achieved through cause-effect chainsaw. Aragorn's identity was dependent on his knowledge of his forefather's greed and his love for Arwen, the Elf Lord Elrond's daughter. Arwen, as Elrond says "is too far above you" (1034). But that becomes the catalyst for his metamorphosis from Strider to Elfstone. His normative cultural identity takes root through the Fellowship of the Ring. He outgrows his inertia, rejects temptation, even accosts Souron in his ground, thereby positing a positive transformation. Thus it is no surprise that Aragorn is considered by some critics to be the main protagonist. Because there is nothing arbitrary, nothing accidental, in the organic growth of the narrative that is based on cause-effect rapprochement.

III

Identity Formation

At the root of the narration lies the epistemological crisis that haunts the free peoples as Sauron claims their territory portents a nightmarish future. The narrator presents the story as a travelogue wherein the narrative, subordinates realism to the operation of fantasy. The narrative thus has a double focus: the individual and the larger entity, identity formation shaped by politics. The narrative represents the arduous journeys undertaken by different travellers towards different ends: some to remove fear politics of Sauron to construct the identity of the Free Peoples, others to be the conduit of Sauron to create a niche for themselves. This significantly foregrounds man's place

on Earth. Superior to many, man is an integral part of his environment. His holistic involvement is also essential for survival and identity formation. Bilbo's song stands testimony to this:

> ...The Road goes ever on and on
> Down from the door where it began.
> Now far ahead the road has gone,
> And I must follow if I can,
> Pursuing it with eager feet,
> Until it joins some larger way
> Where many paths and errands meet.
> And whither then? I cannot say. (35)

But we know that the journey that started from the Shire ended in the Shire. Bilbo's journey from the Shire ends in Mount Doom where Frodo consigns the destructive Ring to fire. Thus he rises far above even the kings of yore by sacrificing temptation while all the time being aware of the risk to his life. At times one needs to sacrifice to be the harbinger of peace. Frodo's conversation with Sam at the penultimate moment of the narrative bears a testimony to this:

> 'I am glad that you are here with me, 'said Frodo. 'Here at the end of all things, Sam.'
> 'Yes, I am with you, Master, 'said Sam. But after coming all that way I don't want to give up yet'...
> 'Maybe not, Sam, 'said Frodo: 'but it's like things are in the world. Hopes fail. An end comes... We are lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape.'(929)

Each construct goes through some sort of purgatory to realise its identity. Thus this travel valorises the sacrifice of every individual, but especially of Frodo, that would remove evil and establish peace and harmony on Earth. Since physical dangers enmesh spiritual life, each traveler is accosted by his angst while on this quest.

It is claimed by many critics that LOTR doesn't have any religious orientation. But in the ways, it mirrors Christian's toil is a mark of the religious orientation of the story. Moreover, Gandalf's death in Moria and later his resurrection: the suffering of Frodo, the manner of his climbing to

Mount Doom carrying the weight of the Ring heavy as a Cross, aware all the time of the need for sacrifice, avers the toil of Jesus of Nazareth for his people. Moreover, after the war, the great Eagle brings the news of victory to the city of Gondor:

> Sing now, ye people of the Tower of Anor,
>
> for the realm of Sauron is ended forever,
>
> and the Dark Tower is thrown down.... (942)

> The reverberations of form and content here are biblical, with particular reference to the psalms. The image of a saviour-king who will return to rule the faithful and the promise of a return to life ... have Christian reverberations that again reinforce the sense of elevation, the high importance of the song, as does the identity of the messenger, for in medieval Christian iconography, the eagle was the symbol of St, John the Evangelist, who is noted for his contemplation of the divine nature of Christ. (Bloom 169)

Tolkien in LOTR critiques the complicity between knowledge and power that jeopardises life and Earth. And he has adopted an appropriate narrative mode - the travel narrative – to exhibit the space-time continuum. It asserts the fact that whenever the world is in crisis, there is a "Second Coming" to redeem His followers:

> Yada yada hi dharmasya
>
> Glanirbhavati Bharata
>
> Avhudhanam adharmasya
>
> Tadatmanam shrijamyaham
>
> Paritranaya sadhunam
>
> Vinashaya chatuskrutam
>
> Dharmasansthapanarthaya
>
> Sambhvani yuge yuge (Shrimadvagawadrita, Ch-4, stanza 7,8)

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