An evaluation of a post-colonial critique of Tolkien
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It is a well-known fact that J. R. R. Tolkien’s works have inspired countless generations of people of all backgrounds in the many decades since they were published. Just as well-known is the fact that Tolkien’s works have had a shaky relationship, at best, with his peers and fellow critics. One of the many charges that have been brought against Tolkien’s writings is the alleged element of racism. However, a great number of critics have also read Tolkien’s works in quite the opposite way, arguing his works are anti-racist in nature. So, who is in the right? Are Tolkien’s works pro-imperial or anti-imperial in nature? What follows is an evaluation of his works, taking into account both sides of this decade’s long war of words from an objective viewpoint. I will begin by contrasting the arguments for and against reading Tolkien’s works as racist texts, and follow this by contrasting his writings to another ambiguous text, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

The first, and most obvious, accusation of racism in Tolkien’s work is tied up in his use of language. Linguistics being his academic expertise, it is a very compelling approach to take his every choice of word literally. Tolkien refers to his ‘evil creatures’ as being ‘swart and slant-eyed’ (Curry 1998, 41) and originating from the South, as in the Haradrim, who are black or brown skinned (Day 2001, 116); or the East, as in the Easterlings, who are swarthy skinned (Day 2001, 68). Mordor being in the East, it is no surprise then that the Orcs are described in a very similar manner to the Easterlings and the Haradrim (Tolkien 1995, 405). The Haradrim are known as the Swertings in the Shire, derived from the Old English *sweart* (swart), and some dead goblin-soldiers are described as also being swart at one point, further enforcing the similarities (Gilliver et al. 2006, 199). Kathleen Herbert points out that the descriptions of the orcs closely match those of the fourth and fifth century descriptions of the invading Huns, being ‘broad-shouldered, bow-legged… talking a language that sounds like no human speech and practicing ghastly tortures’(Curry 1998, 42). In the same way, the Haradrim of the South echo the Saracens in their skin-colour, weapons and armour (Kocher 1972, 16). The Easterlings come in wagons, very similar to the Tartars (Kocher 1972, 17). The corsairs of Umbar sail in a fleet of black ships (Tolkien 1995, 828), reminiscent of the pirates of the Barbary Coast, who would sometimes serve as auxiliary fleets for Ottoman campaigns (Bak 1996, 53).
Those opposed to these readings argue that skin colour has no bearing on the morality of the characters, as corruption and evil, according to Curry (1998, 43), can be found in the people of Gondor, Rohan, the ‘incorruptible’ Wizards, and the innocent Hobbits. The near-angelic figure of Galadriel seriously contemplates the idea of possessing the One Ring (Tolkien 1995, 356), and Iluvatar destroyed the Men of Numenor for worshipping Melkor (Tolkien 1999, 325). They also argue that the Haradrim and the Easterlings themselves are not inherently evil. In the first Appendix of *The Lord of the Rings* an account is given of Aragorn’s wanderings:

… and went alone far into the East and deep into the South, exploring the hearts of Men, both evil and good, and uncovering the plots and devices of the servants of Sauron. (Tolkien 1995, 1035).

Before *TLoTR* even begins, Aragorn has already discovered that the Easterlings and Southrons are, like the Westrons, a morally mixed people. Sam argues the same point, though internally, far better than any given explanation could:

He wondered what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace… (Tolkien 1995, 646).

From the above extract, we can clearly see that Sam’s view of others is not affected by the hue of their skin. He does not assume that the Easterlings are evil, though they have sided with the Enemy.

Tolkien, when asked about the geography of Middle-Earth, likened it to North Western Europe. Rhun, the Sindarin word for East, he said, refers to Asia and the Middle East. Everything south of Harad is Africa (Curry 1998, 43). In this instance, Tolkien seems to have implemented one of the Orientalists’ key colonial tools within his secondary world. He has generalised all the people of ‘Rhun’ as the Easterlings, and all the people of the South as the Southrons, or Swertings. Through generalization, the people in question lose their individual identities, which are essentialised as common amongst them all (Birt 2002, 35). Once people begin to see them in such a broad, general group, they can never achieve individuality.
(Fanon 1990, 269). In contrast to this, Tolkien takes great pains to individualise the Rohirrim from the Gondorians, or the Elves of Lothlorien from those of Rivendell and Mirkwood.

Tolkien’s concept of ‘moral cartography’ suggests that, in the world of Arda, the closer one is to Valinor, the higher in rank one is spiritually (Curry 1998, 42). Valinor is situated in the West, making the homelands of the Easterlings very far from the heavenly lands indeed. The Orientalist conception that West is superior to East holds strong here. After all, according to Said, the West defines itself by saying it is everything the East is not (Said 1990, 234). If the Easterlings are ungodly, the Westrons must be pious. This argument, however, does not hold up quite as well as one first assumes. Mordor is very close to the Western coast of Middle-Earth in comparison to Rhun. Yet Mordor and her people, obviously, cannot be morally or spiritually higher than those of Rhun. In fact, the theory of ‘moral cartography’ itself is dubious at best. After all, Tolkien’s concern was more to do with the journey to Valinor than the West itself. The closer one is to Valinor, the greater one is in regards to moral learning and, as a result, the more culpable one is if one then chooses to reject the evangelion one receives. A chief example of this can be found in the tale of Feanor and the Noldor (Tolkien 1999, 63-121).

The languages the characters use are another colonial tool which Tolkien cannot help but address in his narrative. The anti-colonial aspect being that the Eldar do not oblige everyone else to speak their tongue. However, Elvish languages are given an elite status as the Numenoreans and their successors mark their status linguistically by adding an Elvish language to their repertoire as well as the Common Speech – which is both lowly and ‘common’. Yet the very presence of a dominant Common Speech contains echoes of imperialistic values. The Elves are leaving Middle-Earth and the Age of Men is soon to begin. Anyone who wishes to communicate with another Race must use the Common Speech, the language of Men, to do so. In a similar way, the colonized in Africa had to learn to read, write, and speak in English, with great difficulty, just to tell the colonizers how they felt about it (Achebe 1990, 273). This analogy is weakened by the fact that the Common Speech is not seen as a superior tongue in the same way as the Numenoreans view their Elvish languages. Nevertheless, the argument does hold up in regards to the treatment of the Black Speech of Mordor. The Black Speech has been tabooed in the West, so much so that even the name ‘Mordor’ is a Sindarin name, meaning ‘Black Land’ (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 178). The renaming of Mordor is reminiscent of the renaming of the Ghanaian
coastline as the Gold Coast by the British Empire.

In a few of his many letters, Tolkien addressed head on the issues of race and racism. Tolkien distanced himself from Nordic, racialist theories (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 37-38 & 375-376) and expressed his hatred of these beliefs quite clearly, whilst making it plain that he had nothing good to say about people who spoke ill of the Germans for the sole reason that they were German (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 93). He also spoke of being ‘horrified by the treatment of colour’ in South Africa (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 73).

Interestingly, one post-colonial critic, James Obertino, sees Sauron’s aggressive expansion against other people as imperialistic (2006, 118). Assuming this is true, the free people of Middle-Earth are resisting a foreign, imperialist invasion. Sauron’s focus on industrialism grounds him in the role of ‘civilization’, the Free People’s connection with nature which, according to Obertino, links them to barbarism (2006, 121) - a classic example of the imperialist use of binaries to define colonizers through the colonized. Sauron’s subjugation of the people of Mordor is an example of how the typical empire is run (Obertino 2006, 128).

In a similar style, Melkor’s corruption of the orcs (Tolkien 1999, 47) can be read as the distortion of a native people’s culture until there is nothing left for them to turn to (Fanon 1990,268). The Orcs, who were once Elves (Tolkien 1999, 47), lose their connection to their past under the domination of Melkor’s empire, and accept his ideology as their own. The orcs have been dehumanized in a similar way to how the African people were dehumanized by the colonial Europeans (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 195).

Looking at all of the above arguments for and against reading Tolkien as a pro-imperialist writer, one point has become inherently clear. Tolkien is not as much concerned with ‘races’ as he is with ‘Races’. It is important to note the difference between the two terms. The former, ‘races’, without the capital, refers to differences in appearance within the latter. A ‘Race’ refers to Elves, Men, Trolls and Hobbits. It is more than skin pigmentation that divides these peoples; it is their genetic make-up.

Amongst the Free People, no one group is seen as being of lower status in the eyes of their peers. In the Council of Elrond (Tolkien 1995, 234), all who have a stake in the proceedings are asked to be present; no Race is left out of the meeting on the grounds of inferiority.
Similarly, the Fellowship of the Ring itself is multi-cultural, with people representing Men, Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits and even the Maiar making up the Grey Company (Tolkien 1995, 268). Boromir, though, seems an exception to this rule, speaking like a true pro-imperialist, he states:

… These elves and half-elves and wizards, they would come to grief perhaps. Yet often I doubt if they are wise and not merely timid. But each to his own kind. True-hearted Men, they will not be corrupted … (Tolkien 1995, 289).

His hinting at his belief in the superiority of Men above all others, and the superiority of Gondoreans above all Men, is common amongst colonizers and fundamental for imperialism to work (Kocher 1972, 128). Imperialism relies heavily on the concept of the ‘Other’ (Said 1990, 234). The imperial powers must see the ‘Other’ as inferior, so they can feel superior. Boromir sees the elves and wizards as timid and capable of becoming corrupted under the Ring’s influence, but believes ‘True-hearted Men’ to be incorruptible, showing that even outside Mordor there are those who sympathise with imperialistic values.

Racism is also present in the estrangement between Elves and Dwarves, and in the orcs’ contempt and hatred of Elves (Tolkien 1995, 722). However, in both of Tolkien’s most popular writings, there exist anti-racist subplots. In The Hobbit the Dwarves originally believe that Mr. Baggins is not up to the task at hand (Tolkien 1998, 31). Over the course of the journey, they begin to respect the Hobbit. By the end Thorin sees Bilbo not only as an equal, but also as someone to look up to (Tolkien 1998, 346). In this first example, the initial divide between Bilbo and the dwarves seems to be more cultural and less racial, Bilbo being a bourgeois and not a warrior. A more convincing example is presented in the estrangement and mistrust between Legolas and Gimli in The Fellowship of the Ring (Curry 1998, 44). Over time they build a deep sense of camaraderie and friendship that bridges the Racial gap that has long stood between the Elves of Mirkwood and the Dwarves of Moria.

A third example is the inter-Racial marriage of Aragorn and Arwen (Curry 1998, 44). Aragorn and Arwen, who marry after the events of TLoTR (Tolkien 1995, 1037), are of different Races entirely – making for a fine example of multiculturalism. This is not the only coupling of Man and Elf, however, as Beren and Luthien came well before them (Tolkien 1999, 218), and from their line came Dior, and from his came Elwing. From the marriage of
Tuor and Idril (Tolkien 1999, 289), another inter-Racial marriage, came Earendil and, through his marriage with Elwing, the Numenoreans and Half-Elven (Tolkien 1999, 295). All three of these inter-Racial marriages are thus fundamental to the history of Middle-Earth.

The eucatastrophes in Tolkien’s most famous narratives are constituted by ‘the restoration of peace and friendly commerce’ between different Races (Kocher 1972, 127). According to Kocher, Tolkien takes care to avoid ‘any such mingling of species as will erode the special identity of each’ (1972, 127). The concept of hybridity is therefore seemingly avoided in Tolkien’s works, save for in the House of Strider, for they are, as has already been stated, of the lines of both Elves and Men. This union, according to Tolkien, is part of a ‘Divine Plan for the ennoblement of the Human Race’ (Carpenter & Tolkien 1995, 194). It is a good thing, as Iluvatar has planned it from the beginning. Flieger agrees (2002: 145). However, this is not the only time Tolkien deals with the hybridization of two species. After all, Morgoth breeds orcs with Trolls (Kocher 1972, 128), and Sauron and Saruman both breed orcs with Men, resulting in the twisted Uruk-hai, ‘squint-eyed half-Men’ (Kocher 1972, 128) and Olog-hai (Tolkien 1995, 1106). Tolkien looks at hybridity from both a positive post-colonial view and a negative imperialistic view. Both sides are explored, though the use of ‘marriage’ as a step forward, and ‘breeding’ as a step back should be noted. ‘Breeding’ is an immoral process, whereas marriage is a blessed union.

Tolkien’s works have been compared, by Shippey (2000, 128) to Joseph Conrad’s, another author whose writings remain unclear in regard to their relationship with imperialism. Similarities can be drawn between Frodo and Sam’s journey into the heart of Mordor, and Marlow’s journey into the Heart of Darkness.

Both Mordor and the Congo are populated by a subjugated people, who work as slaves for a leader who is not of them. The natives of the Congo are slaves in the obvious sense of the term, but also slaves to the will of Kurtz (Conrad 2006, 1931-3). Similarly, the lowliest of the Goblins are slaves in both senses of the term. Like the natives of the Congo in Darkness, the Orcs of Mordor are slaves to the will of the Dark Lord. The smaller Orcs are referred to as Snaga by the larger Uruks (Tolkien 1995, 1105), a term that means ‘slave’ in the Black Speech.

The leading orcs came loping along, panting, holding their heads down. They
were a gang of the smaller breeds being driven unwilling to their Dark Lord’s wars; all they cared for was to get the march over and escape the whip. (Tolkien 1995, 909)

The text itself is very sympathetic to Snagas. Later on in the same scene, Frodo and Sam experience the treatment and the whips of the Uruks first-hand. If seeing Snagas whipped did not make Frodo sympathetic, as Marlow is to the Congolese, then being whipped certainly did. There are ‘great slave-worked fields’ in Mordor (Tolkien 1995, 902), and Sauron’s soldiers bring slaves from the East to work them, meaning there are Men working as slaves in Mordor as well (Tolkien 1995, 902). Like Marlow, there is an aura of mystery surrounding Frodo’s long-term feelings toward the natives of the land into which he is travelling deeper and deeper. However, Frodo is reluctant to see any more deaths once the War of the Ring is over, even in regards to the half-Men / half-Orcs that have invaded his homeland (Tolkien 1995, 987).

The two texts differ when Tolkien gives the natives of Mordor a voice in a way that Conrad did not give to the natives of the Congo. There are entire chapters devoted to Orc-kind and their conversations. These sections reveal in these ‘Orcs’ a freedom of thought, the ability to discern between good and evil, and belief in a higher cause, as well as a sense of morality, friendship, teamwork, loyalty, and humour (Shippey 2007, 248). Though dehumanized, as mentioned earlier, the power of speech gives them a sense of humanity that the silenced people of Congo lack in Heart of Darkness.

At the beginning of this essay, a question was asked in regards to Tolkien’s writings as to whether they were imperialistic in nature. Over the course of the essay, what has become clear is that Tolkien himself was neither racist, nor pro-imperialistic and was quite vocal in expressing his views in this regard. However, his texts are slightly more ambiguous. There are many occasions where Tolkien’s characters show themselves to be above such beliefs – Aragorn, Frodo, Sam, Legolas and Gimli spring to mind immediately. Some characters contradict this, Boromir being chief among them. There is strong evidence of Orientalist views in the Western lands of Middle-Earth, and generalized ideas of their enemies are common. However, there is a strong case to be made for the imperialistic nature of Sauron and the land of Mordor to counteract this. What can be said then is that Tolkien’s works are post-colonial, and not unsympathetic towards the so-called ‘evil’ Races of his secondary
world. Skin colour, in Tolkien’s writings, has little or no effect on how characters are reacted to by others. Yet it cannot be said that his texts may not be read in entirely the opposite way. Both arguments are equally strong, and it seems we have reached a state of aporia.

For Tolkien, on a personal level at least, a perfect world would be one in which all are equal, regardless of Race. Aragorn’s rule (Kocher 1972, 128-129), tells us this, if nothing else

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References


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