

## BEING HUMAN AMONG OTHERKINS: IDENTIFYING THE SIMULACRUM IN JRR TOLKIEN'S THE LORD OF THE RINGS

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### Abstract

Many different characters or races in *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien had drawn many interest from critical readers. In this fantasy story of his, Tolkien utilized characters which were magical beings and 'unrealistic' such as elves, dwarves, wizards, hobbits, orcs, and trolls which were often identified as otherkins. On the other hand, he also presented humans who were 'realistic' characters familiar to the readers. This research was conducted in order to identify what is 'real' and what is 'unreal', and at the same time a 'copy' or a 'fake'. The research was presented with a descriptive analytical method, and by assimilating the concept of simulacra by Jean Baudrillard, it was argued that the line of real, unreal, fake, and copy was blurring. Humans were otherkins, and otherkins were humans.

**Keywords:** humans, otherkins, simulacra

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The question of what makes us human is a topic in the discourse on identity and existence that has been long become one question which has many answers as well as no answer at all. Since a long time, many people have tried to find and to provide answers for that question. Aristotle, for example, came up with concept of Form and Matter to describe the nature of man (Aristotle, 2016). Plato also came up with the concept of Body and Soul, Sartre, Freud and Lacan and many others are also contributed to the discussion on this question. All of those searching was part of effort to find the meaning of life, society and being a human as a part of it.

A novel, as stated by Jameson in Sarup's book (Sarup, 2003), and a "film was created to produce the effect of momentary 'reality', while in fact, it distorts it (trans.)." The value of being human and how their existence was

identified among the society may also be contained in texts and Medias consumed by the readers. Literature, especially, always brings culture, value, and ideology into text. It has been tightly locked with the author, the readers, and through them, the society. Baudrillard once said, "Reality could go beyond fiction: that was the surest sign of the possibility of an ever-increasing imaginary. But the real cannot surpass the model-it is nothing but its alibi. Baudrillard, 2010)"

Fantasy genre- based works, in particular, can be a safe haven for a producer to be able to freely express their values and ideas as it allows the producer or the author to portray the unreal as real. Among those fantasy works, *The Lord of the Rings* is a masterpiece which has long been a discussion topic of critics.

*Lord of The Rings* (this paper will use the term LOTR in further use)

is a trilogy written by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and published in 1954-1955. Intended to be published as a whole, the readers eventually get it in three different titles; *The Fellowship of the Rings*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. These high fantasy novels are ones of the best-selling novels with more than 150 million copies has been sold. The popularity has also been proven by many adaptations, such as movies, games, fan-fictions, and many other works based on or inspired from them.

The story of LOTR revolved around many different races in Middle Earth, such as elves, dwarves, wizards, hobbits, and humans who fought for their homeland and their freedom against Sauron, The Dark Lord. The representatives of each race went on a quest together to destroy the evil that threatened to conquer their world.

Just like how it was usually found in a fantasy genre, this story also involved many magical elements and ‘unrealistic’ set ups designed by the author. In LOTR, Tolkien created a world in which all those individuals with different backgrounds and different culture existed and cohabitated with the others.

The great depth of work Tolkien put into producing his creation involved inventing landscapes, languages, beasts and beings that have influenced many other fantasy worlds. He didn't just make up Middle-earth; he infused every aspect of it with life. (Hooper, n.d.)

The elves, dwarves, wizards, hobbits, and humans are some of the characters in this story, along with Orcs, Trolls, Gollum and many others. Tolkien bring them to life and highlighted their characters distinctively with different language, different

history, different culture, and different physical characteristics for each one of them. Yet, despite the stark differences between those races, making them and their culture foreign to each other and created conflicts around them, one may want to wonder about the possibility of the differences which may be not different at all. The existence of those races is the focus of this paper.

This question arose from the reassumption about the existence of humans among others in the story. Human was of the races Tolkien had put along his plot as one of the main characters. Nearly all the other races in the story were magical beings who lived on the same world alongside humans albeit in different parts of land. Humans lived in the kingdoms of men in Middle Earth, while other characters/ races lived in each respective kingdom or society. Each often showed wonder about the others, emphasizing their difference. Each had values and culture of its own. This very set up by Tolkien provoked a questionable situation about the existence of the ‘realistic’ humans alongside the ‘unrealistic’ non-human or otherkins in the story. If they were ‘unreal’, did it mean that they were ‘fake’?

A ‘copy’, a ‘fake’, or a ‘representation’ is often discussed in its relation to a matter of subjectivity and identity. Jean Baudrillard, a prominent figure in postmodernism, was very critical about the concept he ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’. He questioned the duality and their position by discussing about a concept he called as Simulacra or simulacrum (simulacra in its plural form). On Lexico, an online dictionary powered by Oxford, ‘simulacrum’ means, “An image or representation of someone or something (Oxford University Press (OUP), n.d).”, and “An unsatisfactory imitation or

substitute (Oxford University Press (OUP), n.d).” While in his book, *Simulacra and Simulations*, he used the concept to argue that the real world is in fact constructed from simulacra. Every reality is a copy from another copy. Every image is reproduction. There is no origin in culture but a imitation and simulation.

This research relied heavily on this theory of him in hope to restart another discussion about humans’ existence and to discover more about how values and culture are construction that is always in process with no end.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

LOTR is such a legendary masterpiece that there were many books and critical papers written in respond to this work. They have approached the story with various perspectives; psychology, feminism, gender, sociology, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and many others.

Michael N. Stanton, in his book *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards* (2001) compiled a lot of information about what happened in LOTR along with what he discovered about the characters, the landscapes, and their history. He served the information quite objectively in such a way resembling an encyclopaedia so the reader will find it easy to gather all what they want to know about Tolkien’s world. Colin Duriez did the same with his book *Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings: A Guide to Middle Earth* (2004). These book provided many information needed in this paper which takes the information further by contemplating the meaning Tolkien’s identification of his characters, especially in its relation to humans’ existence in his story.

Among the critical responses is an article written by Verlyn Flieger entitled *The Orcs and the Others:*

*Familiarity as Estrangement in The Lord of the Rings* (2017). The writer brought up the issue about how other race and other culture could become so foreign that it implied racism. Thomas Fornet-Ponse also wrote “*Strange and Free*”- *On Some Aspects of the Nature of Elves and Men* (2010) in which he compared the values of Elves and Men.

While both texts brought up the comparison between Men (Humans) and Otherkins, highlighting their similarity and difference, which this paper also did, they did not consider about the possibility that ‘one’ may be the ‘other’. It is possible that there is no ‘one’ and there is no ‘other’. This paper, however, tried to question and to blur the line between them.

Meanwhile, Diane Prenatt wrote about the discourse of identity in her paper *Simulation and the Authentic Self: Issues of Identity in Works by Flannery O’Connor and Mary Gordon* (2005). In her research, used various concept of simulation to analyse self-identification in the novels. Different from this paper which focused the discourse in comparison of how Tolkien presented his humans characters among otherkins, Prenatt tended to find the meaning of self through a recognition reflected by the characters’ dialogues.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

To answer the question of this research, the writer used a descriptive analytical method after gaining information from the primary source (*The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien) and the secondary source (references about Baudrillard’s *Simulacra*, human identification, social categorization, etc). First, a close reading was done before assembling and classifying the data according to their relevance to the research question. The data, then, were presented through description and

analysed by utilizing Baudrillard's concept of Simulacra. The whole process focused on the discourse of human existence and identification and its position among otherkins, and vice versa. Lastly, the conclusion was drawn based on the findings found through the discussion.

#### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The diversification of many magical beings in LOTR brought a lot of attention from readers and critics alike. Tolkien portrayed them in such a way that those imaginary and 'unrealistic' characters felt real as he gives the readers a chance to know them like they do to the 'real' people. Tolkien gave them history, language, songs, distinctive physical traits, values, and culture as he did for humans in the story. Therefore, how exactly they were different or similar to humans, and how those 'unrealistic' beings were as 'realistic' as humans?

##### 4.1 Human & Otherkins

Humans are characters Tolkien portrayed in LOTR which is a fantasy story about Middle Earth and its inhabitants. Fantasy genre, in general, involve the characterization of humans as well as other characters which are mostly magical beings. In many fantasy genre-based works, there are several occasions in which humans possess magical elements, such as magical powers.

In this particular work by Tolkien, however, humans were mostly depicted 'realistically'. They shared the same feature and values as humans in the world outside the story. Although there were some exceptions in their features, such as extraordinary long lives of Aragorn and his ancestors which were caused by the blood of Numenoreans flowing in their bodies.

Many other aspects of humans in this story, though, followed closely of those ordinary humans. The familiarity of this character allowed the readers to sympathize more with the character and to be able to see how different the others were.

The others here refer to the characters such as elves, dwarves, wizards, hobbits, orcs, trolls, and other two-leg individual who shared the same landscape with humans but led different lives and culture from theirs. 'Otherkin' is an alternative term to identify them.

In categorising the Otherkin as an example of the kind of spiritualised grouping one might find amongst hyper-real spiritualities, it is chiefly their rootedness in the fantasy genre and their self-understanding through popular culture which contributes towards this designation. (O'Challagan, 2015)

The term 'otherkins' has been long used as a term that refers to individuals who identify themselves as not humans. Although the discourse about otherkins have yet to be widely known or discussed as there is a lot of people who do not know about this and there is not a lot of research conducted on this topic, it is in fact already a term that is often used in subculture discussions.

The meaning of this term actually had been a long time topic of debate. Many people around the world actually believed themselves as otherkins,

People who believe themselves to be Otherkin, generally view themselves as being so ontologically. These, in other words, are not just belief

systems associated with lifestyles or with the choosing of beliefs for doctrinal or even ethical reasons. They are systems of belief and belonging born out of deep inner conviction that one might be other than human or a very different kind of human being. (O'Challagan, 2015)

While the others discussed this issue in a virtual and fantasy world.

Nevertheless, the use of the term in this paper was fitting because it proposed a solution to the problem of identifying those other races which in some cases resembled humans as well as they did not. Their depiction alongside humans side by side in the story allowed the readers to easily compare and point out the similarity or differences they shared.

Physiologically, there were distinctive features differentiating them, such as dwarves with their shortness and beards, elves with their pointed ears and melodic voice, hobbits who are short and childlike, etc. However, they all had features that human had: hands for holding something, hitting, and writing, legs for jumping and running, mouth for eating, laughing, smiling, and singing, eyes for seeing, reading, and winking, and many other things with their bodies. They could do all of those things in the same way as humans. Culturally, however, they could be vastly different. Each of the races could display different behaviour and response even when they faced the same situation.

The story of LOTR followed closely on the events and the journey of some races against the others on the account of one ring and the Dark Lord, Sauron, which could be seen symbolized Evil. The groups of races

that went against them were often identified with 'light', and the others who followed them were often shrouded in darkness. Interestingly enough, almost every race in the story picked the same side of war. The elves, the dwarves, the hobbits, and the ents fought side by side to drive out the darkness from their land, while orcs and trolls were the faithful followers of the Dark Lord.

Elves were depicted as graceful beings. They had tall and slender bodies which move elegantly, according to other races. They like to sing melodic songs with sweet voices, they moved gracefully and run swiftly. They were generally calm and rarely got angry. They tended to love nature as in their forests, their trees, and their flowers more than other races.

This race was a race that Tolkien presented as the closest to the Humans. He wrote about the history of Men and Elves which originally had the same ancestors who were elves. Yet, they differed when two sons of an elf chose two different destiny, one to be immortal (elf), and one to be mortal (man). Fornet- Ponse (2010) talked about the different destiny of elves and men which came from their choices. This issue indicated that elves and men might not be so different after all.

Dwarves were often portrayed as the opposite of elves. They were short, bushy bearded, and rough, "Gimli is traditional, for example, in being short, strongly built, bearded, skilled in the use of tools (including axes), and possessed of a grim sense of humor. (Stanton, 2001)". In the beginning of the story in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gimli, a dwarf, and Legolas the elf clearly showed their distaste to each other, appointing each other as enemy upon their meeting. Insulting what they

could find about each other, be it appearances or manners.

Meanwhile, different from the other characters (elf, dwarf, orc, troll, etc) which were often found in other fantasy work, Tolkien's hobbit was a creation of his that was rarely seen if not never in other fantasy- genre based work. Furthermore, Tolkien seemed to give this race a special treatment by bringing them onto surface as the focus of the story, the bearer, even if they were small in size and did not have any magical power. In this sense, they were almost humanlike albeit smaller in size, more specifically, they were childlike, as they were playful and were 'protected' by Tolkien from the serious business in the Middle Earth before he brought them the ring of Sauron.

Fawcett (2014) discussed how Tolkien presented his orcs and trolls as monsters, beings who were associated with darkness and evil. A threat that should be conquered. She stated that Tolkien were "focusing on the harshness of their speech and the cruelty of their actions. (Fawcett, 2014)". He described them "with terms like 'clawlike hand' (TT 437) 'evil voice' (TT 436), 'yellow-fanged' and 'swart, slant-eyed' or 'long-armed crook-legged' (TT 437; 441; 441). (Tolkien as cited in Fawcett, 2014)".

The trolls were also described in similar manner to the orcs, indicating them as a fallen race and an enemy to the other 'good' races.

But at the end of the Third Age a troll-race not before seen appeared in southern Mirkwood and in the mountain borders of Mordor. Olog-hai they were called in the Black Speech. That Sauron bred them none doubted, though from what stock was not known. Some held that they

were not Trolls but giant Orcs; but the Olog-hai were in fashion of body and mind quite unlike even the largest of Orc-kind, whom they far surpassed in size and power. Trolls they were, but filled with the evil will of their master: a fell race, strong, agile, fierce and cunning, but harder than stone. Unlike the older race of the Twilight they could endure the Sun, so long as the will of Sauron held sway over them. They spoke little, and the only tongue that they knew was the Black Speech of Barad-dûr. (Tolkien, 2001)

The depiction of those characters suggested the idea of Tolkien tended to infuse the personality of his characters into their physical manifestation. He complimented those who were with 'light' with praises and gave nothing of the sort to orcs, trolls, or gollum highlighting them with appalling description on their physical traits and manner. That very attitude of storytelling, could be argued as being racist.

#### 4.2 Races as Identification

One can understand the concept of race as an attempt of humans to categorize themselves and the others into different identities and to feel the sense of belonging in the very categorization. One cannot deny that humans tend to identify themselves as American, Asian, European, British, Spanish, Indonesian, Chinese, etc. when they are in sphere they may think there are people who are different from them. With this kind of identification, they bring with them values and culture they hope the others will understand. That is usually the case when they are in majority. When they are with minority,

however, it will become easier for them to adapt to the new values and the new culture. Often, they also covered their original race and to assimilate themselves into the background.

Just like what could be found in the world outside LOTR, the story involved many characters in different races as already has been discussed before. Every one of them often proudly declared their identity with the race where they felt belonged. The group (fellowship), for example, consisted from representatives from each race and every individual brought with them their values and norms. Every one of them thought how the others behaved as strange. They strongly stuck to what their own races practice. Still, when it came to a situation in which they were in need and they had to practice others' culture, it was not like they were unbending.

In both worlds, the categorization relied a lot on the geographical factor. Just like what they were called, Asian refers to a person who comes from Asia territory, or was descended from Asian ancestry who used to live in Asia. The same idea can also be applied to the other races. It was the same with characters in LOTR. Each of the races has a territorial geographic landscape in which their family resided as members of society and practiced their own culture.

Still, the story proved that the culture was not naturally theirs. They could easily adapt to a foreign culture if it was needed. One of the most obvious example for this is the cases with Gimli and Legolas, the dwarf and the elf. They were originally hostile with each other. Gimli scowled at whatever Legolas did, and Legolas elegantly did so. Yet, their friendship which grew later could change their manners and their values. Gimli hated the forest and riding horse,

but he visited the forest and rode the horse with Legolas. Legolas who, as an elf, loved nature and open space was willing and then approving the cave showed to him by Gimli.

#### 4.3 Identifying the Simulacrum

Based from what has been discussed before, one may want to contemplate about the reality or the originality of 'race'. The discussion proved that race is a cultural concept which is a construction, and it can be reconstructed again and again. This result of the discussion in turn prove that this production of culture is in fact a reproduction, therefore what is called a production may turn out to be a reproduction. What were stereotypes were acted out according to how they should be acted out. One action was mimicry of another. So, was there an original after all?

A dwarf scowled at what was not dwarf like. When he did the unlikely, he claimed that it was a mistake. A hobbit dreamed always to be a hobbit. When he could not do that, he claimed that he was broken. It was possible for a stereotype not to be practiced after all as it was possible for an identity to change. A culture was a reconstruction, a reconstruction was a culture. The 'real' self was what was thought to be 'real', it was a 'copy' which came from the 'unreal' as it became 'unreal'. So, what was the 'real', and the 'unreal', or a 'copy' after all?

The very discussion about the races led to another discussion about the existence of humans and otherkins in the story. How they were really different? One might argue about animals which coexist with human. Yet, humans refuse to be called as animals as they think that they are far more civilized. This idea then was

contradictory with the categorization of humans and otherkins which each of them thought that they were more civilized than the others.

The point that should be taken here was how in fact those other races were similar to humans. As what has been previously discussed, physically they have the same part of the body with the same function. They spoke as humans spoke, walked as human walked, and had emotions just like humans. So, why were other characters similar to humans were presented in the story?

One solution to answer the question is an assumption that the otherkins were copies of humans, and they were created with humans as the models. Those copies were manifested by Tolkien with additional characterization suited to portray certain personalities. Their identification then were reproduced. Also, they were put into one single group, a fellowship of the ring, and given the same situation and purpose alongside a human. By doing so, Tolkien showed their contrast from humans. The grouping could also serve as a 'simulation' of how individuals from different races around the world could be similar and at the same time different. Each individual in LOTR could be a signifier of what lied outside it.

However, it meant that they were not copies anymore. The reproduction of their images became their real images. This, then, marked the blurring line of what 'real' and what were 'copies'. Each of them was real enough with its own language, its own values, and its own culture. The 'unrealistic' then became 'realistic'.

In this case it is a matter of a reversal of origin and end, since all forms change from the

moment that they are no longer mechanically reproduced, but conceived according to their very reproducibility.... We are dealing with third-order simulacra here. (Baudrillard, 1993)

Moreover, the so called 'original' human was in fact might not be original at all. This was argued from the fact that there was nothing original about humans. Each identity was fragment of on another. Take Aragorn, for example. One time he was the King of Gondor, another time he was a friend of elves. He was a lover to Arwen, a descendant of Isildur, and at the same time a lone ranger. Through the time he changed while also did lose his past self. Culture did it to him, conditions encouraged him to do so. In retrospect, it was the same with the otherkins. Therefore, it could be argued that there was no 'real' self from the beginning as there would be no a final self. The 'real' someone is 'becoming' someone. The real and the copy then fused. The simulacrum could come from reality which later turned out to be another reality while forgetting its original form.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A copy is often perceived as something fake which in turns often leads to negative conception. Something that cannot be without the real that is copied. Yet, just like Baudrillard said, the real may be a reproduction from another real. In other words, there is no 'fake' or a 'copy'. Everything is 'becoming' with no origin and no end.

*The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien provided us with images of humans and otherkins who lived alongside each other. Each of the race had its own traits and stereotypes, yet it could be argued that there was no who



they are but who they are becoming. Therefore, one is a simulacra of another in their race. They perceived an image and acted out the very image as their own.

Also, one could argue that they were different despite their similarity or similar despite their difference. In the end, one also could argue that they are copy of another. What were identified as humans were just like the otherkins.

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