

## **We are What We Eat: Food, Society and Culture in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings***

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**Article History:** Submitted-31/01/2021, Revised-20/02/2021, Accepted-21/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Food does more than nourishing the body; it actually signifies the entire social environment. Food can be regarded as a language that reflects human desire and nature. What goes on in the kitchen and the dining table reveals much about a society's physical and ethical health. To know what, how and with whom one eats is to know their character. Consequently, food imagery becomes all the more important in children's literature because it often helps express complicated complex adult ideas that might be confusing for its readers. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, food and dining occupy a major section of the narrative. In my paper, I would be analysing how Tolkien focuses on food habit, cooking techniques and dining etiquettes to depict both the culture, the moral fibre and the nature of his individuals and communities

**Keywords:** food, culture, society, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Food is meant to provide us more than our daily nutritional need that helps maintain a healthy body. Nature provides us ample resources, which can fulfil this primary need. However, the unique feature of human beings is that because he is endowed with the ability to consume most of natural resources provided in both raw and cooked form, he/she is in a position to employ his judgment regarding his/her choice of food for consumption and how he/she wants to consume--- boiled, roasted, fried or raw. Humankind's freedom of choosing how and in what process he wants to consume his food, is what transforms food from mere commodity to a cultural sphere. It consequently is able to highlight the psychological and sociological characteristics of the particular community and individuals. The means of food preparation, choice of food item, environment of eating, participation in food production and pre-occupation with food highlights different facets of a community and its ethics. J. R.R.

Tolkien in his novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* uses food and meals as an important literary element in his narrative. All through his narrative in both the novels turning point and important events are interestingly marked by the presence of sumptuous meals, which Tolkien goes into details to describe. Whenever any character or race is introduced Tolkien along with describing various aspects and physical features of the race, does not forget to give detailed description of the food they consume which refers to the importance that Tolkien placed on food as a cultural item. It is further highlighted through cursory glance of the chapterization of the novels. We have chapters titled “Roast Mutton”, “Unexpected Party” in *The Hobbit*; “A Long-expected Party” and “Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit” in *The Lord of the Rings*. Consequently, it would not be too far-fetched to claim that Tolkien references to food and meals is not casual but is a literary element which he employs to exhibit the subtle nuances, social and moral, of his characters and the communities.

It cannot be denied that food reflects the culture of a society, its characteristics and what it holds dear. In the “Introduction” to *Food and Culture* Massimo Montanari rightly points out food is culture as when food is cooked man transforms them by “carefully wrought technology that is expressed in the practices of the kitchen” (xi). Furthermore, man exercises his judgment on his/her choice of food based on either economic and nutritional dimension or the “symbolic values which the food itself is invested [with]” (xi). It is because of this food becomes a decisive element of human identity and “as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity” (xi-xii).

Considering Montanari's argument, it can be argued that human characteristics and their nature can be decoded from their eating habits. It seems Tolkien aptly employs this technique while sketching out his characters and the various races populating Middle-earth. In the section titled “Concerning Hobbits” in The Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), Tolkien is quick to mention that the good-natured Hobbits are obsessed with eating and drinking. While describing the food habits of the Hobbits he points out that the Hobbits eat mostly locally grown food. Consequently, they are more tied to their land. The Hobbits choice of simple locally grown food cooked as a homely meal without use of too much exotic elements or sophistication highlights their simple nature who is content with their lives which maybe the reason why they do not feel the urge to go outside the Shire. Human beings are able to eat anything. Thus, their choice of what to eat is an important indicator regarding their nature. Tolkien while describing the Hobbits' food habits notes that they do not kill anything for sport and “growing food and eating it occupied most of their time” (*The Lord of the Rings*

6). Mathew Dickerson is correct when he links this aspect of the Hobbits food habits with their general nature of living a peaceful life where the community bond among the Hobbits are strong and worth emulating, for as Tolkien points out “Hobbits are [indeed] slow to quarrel” (Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings* 6). The Hobbits’ love for their land becomes one of the important reasons for the Hobbit uprising in the chapter titled “The Scouring of the Shire” in Book III, *The Return of the King*. It is also another driving force leading Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings* to undertake the treacherous journey to Mount Doom to destroy the Ring. Frodo realises that the presence of The Ring, Sauron will once again rise to power resulting in the destruction of his beloved Shire along with the rest of Middle-earth. One of the important reasons for the uprising besides the oppressive rule of Saruman and his men is rationing of the food and forcing them to restrict their habit of eating together as a community. The forced change in lifestyle that the Hobbit community had to undertake was contrary to their ethics of their community. The practice of eating together, the presence of plentiful food emphasized their close bond and absence of greediness except in maybe a few. The destruction of the Party Tree in the Shire particularly enraged Frodo and his companions. The Party Tree was not only just a tree but it also represented their lost lifestyle. The Party Tree was synonyms to eating and Parties where all the community came together enjoying their meals and nourishing and forging close relationship with each other. Thus in the latter pages we see Sam in his newly appointed position as Mayor of the Shire takes special care to return the vegetation of the Shire to its previous glorious state and specially the plantation of the *Mallorn* in the place of the Party Tree. Tolkien holds their practice of sustainable agriculture as reflected in their choice of food and practice of having food together as a model of healthy society.

Concerning food and their experience and attitude towards it is reflected in the description of food habits of the Elves. While depicting the Elves Tolkien consciously uses food as a means to create the aura of mystery and ‘otherworldliness’ around them. However, what is noteworthy is that in none of the scenes in which food and Elves are put together we are never shown the Elves themselves sharing a meal or do we come across any passage where the author goes in details regarding the fare of their meals. The fare of Elvish meals are mostly described through other characters, mainly the Hobbits in the narrative. The otherworldly taste and nature of Elvish food is first expressed through the comments of Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin when they share a meal with Gildor and his company of elves. Though Gildor calls it “poor fare”, the Hobbits regards it as “bread, surpassing the savour of

a fair white loaf to one who is starving” (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 82). The Hobbits in regards to the Elvish food feels that the food surpasses the taste of even the best produced Hobbit food. The unearthly nature and taste of Elvish food can be said to be in keeping with their immortal nature who does not wholly belong to the mortal world of Middle-earth. Elvish food like their art has a touch of the ‘enchantment’, artistic and natural communion with the world that is associated with the Elves in general. This is something that is noticed later on when Merry and Pippin are shown to enjoy delicious food at the Last Homely Home in the West, the Elvish community of Rivendell and also during their stay in the Elvish realms of Lothlorien. Regular Elvish food seems not too different to ‘human food’ yet it seems to “affect humans in a positive way” whose Elvish origin enables the consumer to partake in the “Elvish “Enchantment” of the world so that the Hobbits recover the meanings of these food items” (Honegger 214). The Elvish understanding of the world is also partly reflected in their food, which is echoed later in Pippin’s account of the Elvish meal.

What is conspicuous in Tolkien’s description food of the Elves is that all through the narrative in *The Lord of the Rings* the Elves are never shown enjoying their meals or even sitting together for a festive meal, though it is hinted at that they do eat to sustain their body unlike Sauron’s Dark Riders. We do not see Elves like Galadriel, Elrond or even Gildor in the act of consumption even though they are the host. Both in Lothlorien and in Rivendell it is hinted at that Elves do take part in meal but not much space or time is allocated to it. Food is more associated with the everyday life of existence, but the Elves being immortal is rightly shown to be above such earthly materialistic matters of food and consumption unlike the Hobbits preoccupation with food as evident through their activity of taking multiple meals and a well-stocked ladder. The Hobbits love for food signifies their humanity and groundedness, which sets them apart from the ethereal elves. The silence of the text in regards to the preparations of elvish bread, Lembas. Unlike normal bread, the lembas bread “is more strengthening than any food made by men” (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 369) stays fresh longer than regular bread and tastier than the honey-cakes of the Beornings who are regarded as the best bakers among men. The nature of the lembas or wayfare bread symbolizes their higher fine aesthetics and ‘otherworldliness’.

Tolkien while depicting all his living characters has depicted the food they consume, be it the Ents and their wondrous but strange 'earthy' Ent draught or else be it the foul creatures like Goblins, Orcs and Trolls whose food habits are cannibalistic in nature, to be synonymous with their nature. However, all through Tolkien’s narrative the only characters

who do not require food or drink are the Black Riders. Food is a symbol of the living corporal world. Hence, it can be argued that since the Black Riders are not a part of the corporal world, they are not mortal humans. However, though the Black Riders do not belong to the sphere of mortal humans but they are unlike the immortal elves with their noble uplifting attributes. The Black Riders exists in the twilight zone who were once mortal men but now has been corrupted by the evil of Sauron and exists only as shadows of their previous self. Tolkien refrains from providing these characters with the attributes of eating since eating is the mark of living and not the dead.

Another interesting aspect of food while drawing his characters and depicting their culture is taste of the food consumed and the process of its production. Taste can be said to be socially constructed which is intricately linked with the psychology of the community and even reveals the psychology of an individual. What one person finds delicious is regarded as tasteless by another. The taste of food is also dependent on its process of production. Food and all its aspect- choice of consumption, state and process of transformation of raw to cooked meal- is a manifestation of culture pointing to the deepest instinct and nature of its member. Mostly we equate raw uncooked food with transgression of the implicit cultural norms of the civilized society. This transgression is perceived as barbaric in nature devoid of the finer sensibilities of culturally civilized society. Civilized society is associated with moral and just values. Consequently, Gollum in his refusal to partake the cooked meal prepared by Sam and the exquisitely delicious Elvish bread Lembas, refuses to associate with the civilized world. Furthermore, Gollum's incompatibility with Lembas can also be attributed to his corrupted nature which is unable to bear the purity and ethereal attribute of lembas bread since its produced by the elves. In Gollum's choice of raw and cannibalistic food habits, he firmly establishes his morally depraved and deranged personality, which is beyond redemption. Tolkien presents the character of Gollum as an immoral character prone to deceit due to his long association with The Ring. Gollum's degenerated, corrupt nature is in stark contrast to that of the Hobbits as highlighted through Gollum's frequent reference to Frodo and Sam as 'good hobbits'. (Nangy 247) The difference in the personality of Gollum and Frodo and Sam is highlighted through Gollum's violent reaction in response to Sam's kind offer of conney stew and chips. Gollum believes that through the act of cooking Sam is ruining the taste of delicious raw juicy fish, which Sam finds revolting.

French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his seminal essay "The Culinary Triangle" proposed his famous concept of the culinary triangle. Levi-Strauss points out that

though people all over the world consume different food, the 'process of food elaboration' or rather preparing to make it fit for consumption is few and static. The first version of the triangle puts food within three neatly divided categories based on their process of 'elaboration'--- 'raw' (unelaborated, nature), 'cooked' (elaborated, culture), and 'rotted' (elaborated, nature). Later on, Levi-Strauss added another dimension to this triangle by including the different process of elaboration such as smoking, boiling or frying. He comments:

The smoked and the boiled are opposed as to the nature of the intermediate elements between fire and food, which is either air or water. The smoked and the roasted are opposed by the smaller or larger place given to the element air, and the roasted and the boiled by the presence or absence of water. The boundary between nature and culture, which one can imagine as parallel to either the axis of air or the axis of water, puts the roasted and the smoked on the side of nature, the boiled on the side of culture as to means; or, as to results, the smoked on the side of culture, the roasted and boiled on the side of nature. (42)

In keeping with Levi-Strauss' line of argument stewing is regarded as a highly culturally technique, since the process of stewing includes not only the act of boiling in intermediary fluid (juices/broth or oil) but also requires vessels to hold the liquids and the food. Consequently, his process of elaborate Hobbit style cooking requires him to carry his cooking gear into the wilderness. Sam's cooking gear signifies his lingering hope of a happy-ending. Thus, when he is forced to part with his cooking gear it was the hardest thing to do. To discard his cooking gear was synonymous to cutting himself off from his culture and the Shire.

Levi-Strauss in his essay associate's raw food to nature/wilderness and cooked with cultured or nature altered/tamed. Nature has been always viewed with respect and regarded as return to the pre-existing innocence of humans before Fall. Hence, Tolkien's Woses of the Druadan being native forest dwellers since the beginning are shown to consume raw wild roots and food. Though the Woses are associated with raw food highlighting their close association with nature, they are not depicted as morally depraved. They have not been in touch with the civilized outside world thus have not yet lost their primary innocence. However, in the case of Gollum or other creatures like the Orcs and Trolls the association with raw, unelaborated food becomes complicated.

Gollum's origin as a proto-Hobbit is what makes Gollum's preference for raw food as a transgression against established norms of the society. Being a proto-Hobbit by origin, his original association with food was cooked similar to the Hobbit style cooking. It is only after his association with the Ring and his moral degradation that we see his change in food habits from cooked to raw. Consequently, only after his Fall, we see his cannibalistic tendencies and preference of raw or 'unelaborated food' which Levi-Strauss associates with uncivilized and barbaric. So though unelaborated food is associated with nature, Gollum's origin and his initial association with civilization makes the return to 'nature' problematic. Moreover, Gollum's inability to stand or eat Lembas the elvish waybread, symbolizes his morally depraved personality, which is beyond redemption. Such is the case also of the Orcs and Trolls. Trolls and Orcs are shown to be capable of mincing, roasting or making jelly but since they are a part of the civilized world, it problematizes the interpretation of their food production. However, Levi-Strauss in his culinary triangle associates rotten and roasted food with 'elaborated food' but which is closer to 'nature'. However, here nature is referred more to the wilderness and malignant "nature" which is represented through Old Man Willow who is referred to as having gone "dark" by Tom Bombadil. Thus, rotten and roasted food is more in the category of 'raw food' than 'cooked food'. Thus, because both Orcs and Trolls are morally degraded races created by Morgoth (Evil) mocking the noble Elves and the Ents, they can be regarded as creatures after the Fall. This is the reason why Orcs are unable to stand the smell or taste of Lembas and exhibit cannibalistic nature. The 'Lembas incompatibility' of evil creatures can also be interpreted as an expression of the Fall from primary innocence. Consequently, a spiritual dimension has been attributed to food in the context of *The Lord of the Rings*.

As one of Plutarch's characters says in his *Debates among guests* that we do not invite each other simply to eat and drink, but to eat and drink together. Taking meal together is a communal act consequently it helps in bonding. Consequently, eating together breaks barriers and brings closer even strangers thus attributing meaning to a simple gesture. Food not only sustains us and provides us nutrition but how it is consumed has bearing on our social sphere and the way we are perceived. In Tolkien's Middle-earth narrative both in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* food occupies a major section of the narrative. Tolkien treats food and meals not lightly. He uses meals to highlight his themes and uses it to help in his characterisation of both individuals and communities.

In his Prologue of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien emphasizes the Hobbits love for food. While describing a Hobbits' primary characteristics he is quick to establish that they love to grow food and eat multiple meals throughout the course of the day. Growing food, eating, drinking are the simple joys of life. It depicts a life of simplicity. Tolkien by focussing on their love for food and drink is able to depict that Hobbits are simple people who enjoy a life of simplicity and is content in their life.

The act of taking meal together can be seen to help create bonding even among strangers. Tolkien exhibits this in the scene in *The Hobbit* where an unwilling hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, is forced to feed an unwelcome group of thirteen dwarves and one wizard, Gandalf with some of his best fares like seed cakes, raspberry jam, apple tart and other delicacies along with beverages and drinks. It is through the course of the meal only that Bilbo is able to slowly trust the Dwarves and gets involved in their mission of reclaiming of lost treasure. Shared meals or the act of eating together provides an ideal background to make plans for future action as the act eating not only helps us feel happy but also puts us in a relaxed mood, which is ideal for any discussions. Similar scenes can be seen even in *The Lord of the Rings* where most of the planning or discussions regarding the course of future actions is taken either during the meal times over a meal or after a meal. Consequently, we see the decision regarding the fate of the Ring and the formation of the Fellowship after one such meal in Rivendell. This is one of many examples that is strewn across the narrative.

In children's literature like in any literature offering of food is considered as offering a hand of friendship. Moreover, offering a seat in the dining table or sharing a meal often leads to clearing of misunderstanding or forging and sometimes re-forging strained relationship. One such event is the sharing of meal at Farmer Maggots house by Frodo and his companions while leaving the shire having narrowly escaped the dark riders. It is in the midst of the welcoming food with the warm laughter, delicious and plentiful food we see the new realisation dawning on Frodo who loses his fear of Farmer Maggot when he says "I've been in terror of you and your dogs for over thirty years, Farmer Maggot, though you may laugh to hear it. It's a pity: for I've missed a good friend" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 95). Tolkien repeats this metaphor of inviting people for meal with creating bonds in *The Hobbit* when we see the usually suspicious Beorn finally offers a place at his dining table after starting to trust Dwarves. In *The Lord of the Rings* when the Elves share their meal with the Hobbits, the Hobbits are gradually able to lose their distrust and unease towards Elves. It



has been observed that Tolkien has repeatedly displayed that sharing meals not only helps form relationships but also clears misunderstanding.

Presence of food and in particular delicious and surplus food has been mostly been associated with 'home' signifying comfort and security. The food items that Tolkien single out is that of familiar food items like cheese, meat, potatoes, butter, honey apples mushroom etc. familiar food items breeds a sense of "home". The availability of these items can be seen in the meal that the Hobbits had in The Prancing Pony or be it at Farmer Maggot's house or at the house of Beorn. The presence of familiar food items induces a sense of homeliness and security. It is simply taking the above point one step further. Since sharing of meal or offering a seat at the table is equated with strengthening relationships and provide a sense of love and warmth towards their guests, similarly the offering or consuming delicious food after harrowing experiences also provides people with a sense of security and relief. It provides a means of recovery and relaxation in the most an unobtrusive and realistic way. This is something, which we repeatedly observe in Tolkien's narratives be it after escaping the Old Man Willow in the Old Forest, or the meal provided at the Prancing Pony at Bree after Frodo and his companions' narrow escape from the Black Riders. Tolkien takes great pain to describe the food at length of all the meals specially those consumed after hardship or harrowing experiences, which are usually marked by lack of food. Maybe because of Tolkien's association of food with home, security and comfort when Merry and Pippin complain of lack of food and their growling stomach Aragon judiciously inspires them to hurry on withstanding their hardship asking them to "think with hope of the tables of Elrond's house!" (Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings* 190). It is worth noticing all reunions are marked by feasting and good food. Like Roland Barthes had mentioned in his essay "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" food is not simply food and consuming are more than the act of eating. What Barthes means is food acquires different connotation depending on the situation and how and with whom and the circumstances in which it is consumed. For his purpose he uses the example of coffee, how the commodity coffee is attributed with different meanings at different times. Tolkien too employs this method when he transforms food from mere food but invests it with the psychology of the consumer and circumstances. Consequently, we see description of subdued meals and happy boisterous meal considering the circumstances under which these meals are consumed. Bilbo's birthday feast, meals at Tom Bombadil's house, meals at Rivendell were happy, joyous and relaxing meals as the environment was one of happiness and relaxation. However,

the meals that the Hobbits and Aragon had during their journey from Bree to Rivendell were mostly subdued as they were under great distress being pursued by the Black Riders who wanted to harm Frodo.

Food belongs to the cultural sphere of human society. Hence, society and its traits are reflected in their food habits. What you eat and how you eat says more about a person than a thousand words can. It seems Tolkien had realised this core idea. Consequently, the element of food and meals appear extensively in his narrative more so in *The Lord of the Rings*. The food and element not only help make the fictitious world of Middle-earth more real but it also helps accentuates the subtleties of his characters. Both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* reflects how food is central in our life for not only keeping body and soul together but is an integral part of our culture, reflecting who we are.

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