

## Silenced Voices and Gendered Absences: Feminist Possibilities in J. R. R. Tolkien's Fiction

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**Abstract:** J. R. R. Tolkien was a distinguished writer, poet, philologist, and scholar of medieval language and literature. He was the pioneer of high fantasy creating the rich and elaborate fictional world of Middle earth for his works such as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien is critiqued for the apparent marginalisation of women in his legendarium. Middle earth is dominated by male heroes and female characters frequently appear absent, silent, or peripheral. A closer reading of Tolkien's works reveals complex feminist possibilities embedded within these silences and absences. In his fictional world female characters such as Galadriel, Arwen, Eowyn and Luthien challenge conventional gender expectations by embodying wisdom, resistance, healing, and sacrificial courage. However, the notable absence or silence of female figures such as the elusive Entwives and dwarf-women raises questions about gendered representation and narrative omission. This paper examines both the meaningful presences as well as the silenced voices of women in Tolkien's fiction. Using feminist literary theory, the study explores how Tolkien negotiates gender through mythic structures, medieval influences, and cultural ideals, while allowing for feminist interpretation. Tolkien employs gendered absence and narrative restraint to point toward alternative forms of power, resistance, and agency. Female characters, though few, challenge patriarchal norms through moral authority, renunciation of violence, healing, and self-determined choice. By reassessing female characters and gendered absences, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Tolkien's legendarium, though limited in representation, offers complex possibilities for feminist readings that foreground agency, resistance, and alternative forms of power.

**Keywords:** Tolkien, Feminism, Gendered absence, Silent voices, Fantasy.

J. R. R. Tolkien was a distinguished poet, novelist and philologist who also served as a professor of medieval language and literature. He remains one of the most influential figures in twentieth century literary studies. Influenced by his scholarly engagement with Old English, Welsh, Finnish, and Norse traditions, Tolkien created an expansive and imaginary cosmos that brought together mythology, fantasy and philology. With his works such as *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), *The Silmarillion* (1977), *Unfinished Tales* (1980), and *The Children of Húrin* (2007), he developed a richly detailed legendarium in which language, history, and storytelling function as the essential creative forces. His legendarium has generated an immense body of scholarship focussing on mythology, language, nationalism, ecology, and ethics.

Tolkien's work has faced constant criticism concerning its representation of women. His work involves expansive male genealogies, heroic quests, and battle narratives that dominate Middle earth but female characters are relatively few and often have marginal roles. Feminist critics have indicated the apparent marginalization of women in Tolkien's works, arguing that his fictional world imitates patriarchal structures based on medieval and mythic traditions. However, such assessments, while valuable, risk overlooking Tolkien's complex narrative strategies. This paper contends that Tolkien's mythopoesis, his manner of creating myth, contains spaces of resistance, ambiguity, and reinterpretation that call for feminist engagement rather than outright rejection. Tolkien assigns significance to select female figures and to silence itself as a structuring principle. As Tolkien stated in *The Silmarillion*, "the deeds of Men are remembered in song, but the griefs of women are often unrecorded." Even if it was not

intentional such a narrative imbalance allows for a feminist interrogation of Tolkien's work. Tolkien's mythopoesis contains latent feminist possibilities that emerge through close attention to female agency, symbolic power, and gendered absence. By examining figures such as Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn, the study explores alternative modes of power embedded in sacrifice, healing, moral authority, and memory. Simultaneously, it interrogates the silences surrounding women in genealogies and chronicles, revealing absence as an ideological construct rather than a narrative oversight.

Through feminist literary criticism, using a qualitative and interpretive approach this paper situates Tolkien's work within contemporary debates on gender, voice, and marginality. The focus is on close textual analysis of selected female characters whose narrative roles explain the broader patterns of presence and absence. The analysis draws on feminist theories about narrative silence, symbolic power, and gendered absence. Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have demonstrated how women's marginality in literary texts often functions not just through exclusion but through constrained visibility. Judith Butler's research into gender as a performative and socially regulated construct further inform the reading of female agency in patriarchal narrative systems. Myth criticism is also included in this framework, specifically understanding myth as a traditionally male-dominated form that nonetheless preserves archetypal spaces for feminine power. Tolkien's mythopoesis is examined as a cultural practice shaped by medieval, Norse, and classical traditions, all of which inform his gendered narrative structures. The methodology consists of close readings of the primary texts including *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* followed by character-based analysis focusing on narrative function rather than mere representation. An examination of genealogies, songs, and mythic framing devices is also necessary as "songs and tales are the memory of the people," according to Tolkien making them important sources for recovering silenced or symbolic voices. This approach allows for an exploration of both explicit representation and implicit ideological structures, especially where women are absent or silent.

#### Female Presence and Alternative Forms of Power

Tolkien's legendarium, though perceived as male-centred, also presents a range of female characters whose modes of agency resist simplistic classification. The women in Middle earth are not known to exercise power through sustained militarism or political domination. Alternatively, they operate through moral authority, endurance, memory, healing, sacrifice, and ecological or spiritual guardianship. These alternative modes of power call for a feminist reconsideration of agency itself, moving beyond traditionally masculinist paradigms.

Luthien Tinúviel stands as a symbol of resistance and sacrificial agency in Middle earth. Luthien is one of the most powerful female figures in Tolkien's Legendarium. She is an Elf who is introduced in *The Silmarillion* as "the most beautiful of all the Children of Iluvatar." However, she is never reduced to being an ornamental beauty or a narrative reward for male heroism. Her defining moments in the tale actually reverse traditional gender hierarchies. In *The Tale of Tinúviel* her father Thingol who was determined to forbid her from marrying the mortal man Beren, set him an almost unachievable quest. In defiance, Luthien along with Beren manages to complete the task by confronting Morgoth and wresting the Silmaril from his crown which results in the approval of their union. When Beren is imprisoned by Sauron, it is Luthien who carries out a successful rescue. Tolkien's observation that "the power of her song was greater than the might of the towers of stone," gives emphasis to art and voice being instruments of resistance rather than force. Her confrontation with Mandos to reclaim the life of Beren further highlights this agency: "Never before had Mandos been moved to pity, nor had he been deceived." Luthien's plea alters the fate of both Elves and Men, placing feminine grief and love as cosmically transformative powers. From a feminist perspective, Luthien represents sacrificial agency as she chooses mortality not out of submission but as an act of will. Her power disrupts patriarchal mythic norms by placing importance on endurance, creativity, and emotional truth rather than on violence, physical domination and martial conquest.

Galadriel represents a different manifestation of female power, one that is based on wisdom restraint and moral authority. Tolkien describes her as "the mightiest and fairest of all the Elves that remained in Middle earth." She resists domination through self-governance and ethical choice instead of

violence and conquest. Her greatest test comes in her refusal of absolute power. When the One Ring is offered to her, Galadriel is at first enticed by its powers. In her heart she has longed for what the ring offered. Subsequently, when she rejects the ring saying, "I pass the test. I will diminish, and go into the West," she redefines heroism as ethical self-control. Feminist readings show how Galadriel's power is moral rather than coercive and is associated with preservation rather than domination. Her authority challenges patriarchal assumptions by presenting leadership as nurturance and foresight. Her realm, Lothlórien, operates as a counter-space to the industrial violence of Isengard and Mordor, emphasizing a gendered ethic of care and sustainability.

Arwen Undómiel's narrative presence is restrained yet symbolically decisive representing free will and silent strength. Tolkien characterizes her as "the Evenstar of her people," a character whose significance lies in choice rather than action. In *The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*, her agency is voiced through renunciation as, "She made her choice, and she said farewell to the light of Elvendom." Though her role has been criticized as being marginal, her narrative significance lies in her deliberate choice of mortality. She relinquishes immortality for love and so exercises a form of agency that reframes sacrifice as self-determined rather than imposed. Arwen's silence does not diminish her importance but places her within Tolkien's broader framework of deferred presence emphasizing endurance and futurity over immediacy. Her power is symbolic and temporal, shaping the future of Middle earth through lineage and memory rather than immediate action. Her relinquishment of immortality parallels Lúthien's earlier sacrifice, creating a lineage of feminine choice that shapes the destiny of Middle earth. According to feminist theory this silence can be read not as absence but as symbolic depth.

Eowyn is the singular female character of humans with significant development in *The Lord of the Rings*. Eowyn embodies defiance and reimagined heroism by providing the most explicit challenge to gender norms in *The Lord of the Rings*. Describing her frustration, Tolkien writes, "Shall I always be chosen?" which becomes a question that encapsulates her resistance to enforced passivity. When she disguises herself as a warrior, she slays the invincible Witch-king. With this moment she fulfills the prophecy that "no living man" may kill him while destabilizing patriarchal assumptions about heroism. Yet, Tolkien complicates Eowyn's arc through her rejection of perpetual violence as the ultimate form of fulfillment. In the Houses of Healing, she renounces the veneration of death and glory and instead resolves, "I will be a healer, and love all things that grow." Her healing marks a transition from destructive heroism to restorative purpose, aligning courage with care. Feminist critics have noted that this shift does not negate her heroism but reframes it and it is not a retreat but a redefinition of restoration over destruction. Absence, Invisibility, and Gendered World-Building

Tolkien's legendarium is also shaped by forms of feminine presence that are structurally marginal, understated, or absent. Apart from the named heroines of Middle-earth, Tolkien's treatment of certain groups of women such as the Entwives, female Hobbits and Dwarf-women, reveals how gender operates at the fundamental level of world building involving ecology, domesticity and historiography. These figures occupy a liminal space between presence and absence, shaping cultures and histories while remaining quite invisible within the narrative. Further, feminist analysis highlights how women's cultural labour and reproductive roles are acknowledged only indirectly, even though they are integral in sustaining the moral and social continuity of Tolkien's world.

The Entwives characterize one of the most poignant examples of gendered absence in Tolkien's mythopoesis. While the Ents tended to the wild, ancient forests, the Entwives associated themselves with cultivation, agriculture, and care for gardens. Treebeard, the Ent recalls that the Entwives "loved order, and peace, and tended gardens," in contrast to the Ents' wandering existence among wild forests. When the Entwives' lands were burned and destroyed by Sauron, they disappeared. Their disappearance following the destruction of their land signifies not merely loss but ecological and cultural rupture. Through feminist and eco-critical readings, the Entwives can be interpreted as embodiments of silenced feminine labour, cultivation, care, and sustainability, erased by warfare and industrial devastation. From an ecofeminist perspective, the Entwives suggest feminized environmental labour dealing with nurturing, sustaining, and shaping life, that is rendered invisible and ultimately lost. Their absence underscores how

nurturing forms of power are made vulnerable within masculinist histories of conquest. Their absence parallels modern concerns about environmental degradation and the marginalization of ecological wisdom traditionally meant to be feminine. The unresolved fate of the Entwives underlines Tolkien's recognition that some losses, particularly those tied to care and cultivation, cannot be restored through heroism or conquest.

Though female Hobbits are rarely central to Tolkien's epic narrative, they have a significant cultural influence in sustaining the Shire's social fabric. Tolkien notes that Hobbits "were, in fact, a merry folk," with domestic stability and communal bonds at the heart of their society. Characters such as Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and Rosie Cotton may be marginal to the epic action but have a major role in sustaining social continuity and post-war renewal. They demonstrate that influence in Hobbit society operates through community norms, domestic authority, and moral pressure rather than overt power. Tolkien emphasizes that Hobbits value peace, fertility, and continuity, qualities closely associated with women's roles in the Shire. Rosie's marriage to Sam Gamgee towards the end of *The Lord of the Rings* symbolizes restoration and renewal. Sam's final return home is invariably tied to Rosie's presence, stressing that the true victory of the narrative lies in domestic regeneration rather than martial triumph. and her role in restoring the Shire emphasize that regeneration, not warfare, marks the narrative's ethical closure. The marginalization of Hobbit women may tend to reflect a broader tendency to naturalize domestic and emotional labour as background activity rather than heroic achievement. However, feminist readings can also reinterpret female Hobbits as custodians of everyday resilience and post-war healing.

Dwarf-women represent perhaps the most extreme instance of narrative invisibility. This is an explicit instance of gendered erasure in Tolkien's world-building. Tolkien remarks that they are "so alike in voice and appearance to the dwarf-men that the eyes and ears of other people's cannot tell them apart." Dwarf-women are few and so similar in appearance to Dwarf-men that other people cannot distinguish them, leading to the belief that there were no dwarf-women. This near-total absence brings up critical questions about gendered recognition and historical erasure. By rendering Dwarf-women unseen, Tolkien literalizes how patriarchal cultures collapse female identity into male norms, making women present yet unacknowledged. From the feminist point of view, the state of Dwarf-women can be seen as a commentary on patriarchal historiography, in which women's lives are subsumed under lineage, craft, and male inheritance. Their absence from narrative voice reflects how mythic histories prioritize warfare, craftsmanship, and kingship over reproduction and care. Nevertheless, the very survival of Dwarven culture depends upon Dwarf-women, revealing a contradiction between narrative importance and textual silence.

Collectively, Entwives, female Hobbits, and Dwarf-women illustrate how Tolkien's mythology encodes gender not only through character but through absence, marginality, and daily existence. They reveal that Tolkien's gender politics extend beyond individual characterization to the structural logic of Middle earth. Entwives, Hobbit women, and Dwarf-women embody forms of power that sustain life, memory, and continuity, even as the narrative marginalizes or silences them. In these absences, feminist reinterpretation finds not merely limitation, but a powerful invitation to interrogate how mythic histories are constructed and whose voices they leave behind.

#### Myth, Patriarchy, and Feminist Reinterpretation

In spite of the presence of powerful female figures, Tolkien's legendarium is marked by pronounced gendered absences. Women are excluded from historical chronicles, councils, and genealogical records. This absence is not just accidental but mirrors the patriarchal structures inherited from mythic traditions. Tolkien repeatedly prioritizes the authority of written history, noting that "much of this history is preserved in the words of the Wise," a phrase that subtly signals exclusion. In *The Silmarillion*, extended genealogies of kings and warriors dominate the narrative, while women appear unnamed or relationally defined. Tolkien acknowledges the partiality of such records when he observes that "the histories of the Elder Days were written by the loremasters of the Eldar." Feminist theory interprets this as an admission that history is shaped by those who record it. It suggests that absence itself communicates meaning, shaping readers' assumptions about authority and value. Feminist theory emphasizes that such silences are not neutral but ideological, shaping readers' perceptions of authority and value. Narrative silence thus functions ideologically, presenting male experience as

universal history. Yet these silences also generate interpretive gaps. As Tolkien writes elsewhere, "some things are lost beyond recall," a statement that resonates with feminist efforts to recover erased voices. By leaving women unnamed or underdeveloped, the text invites contemporary readers to question whose stories are preserved and whose are forgotten. Absence becomes not a void but a critical space for reinterpretation.

Tolkien's mythopoesis functions within a productive tension between reverence for inherited tradition and critique of power. Tolkien argues that myth is not static but adaptive, capable of "renewal and change." This adaptability allows feminist reinterpretation to coexist with mythic conservatism. He presents his view in *On Fairy-Stories*, that myth is not ideological escapism but moral engagement, arguing that fantasy enables readers to see things as they are meant to be seen. This moral vision shapes his representation of power, authority, and resistance. Patriarchal structures in Middle earth are undeniable, particularly in its emphasis on kingship, lineage, and male heroism. Yet it also preserves archetypes of feminine wisdom, creativity, and endurance. Female characters exercise power through song, choice, healing, and renunciation, through modes that are often marginalized in heroic discourse. Tolkien also repeatedly destabilizes domination as an ethical ideal. As Gandalf observes, "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer," a statement that reframes authority in restorative rather than coercive terms. Feminist interpretation finds resonance here, as healing, care, and restraint are traditionally feminized modes of power.

Female characters consistently embody alternative values. Luthien's bravery and resistance, Galadriel's refusal of the Ring, Eowyn's rejection of endless warfare, and Arwen's choice of mortality exemplify what Tolkien describes as "the strength of spirit" rather than physical force. Myth, in this context, is where patriarchal norms are both preserved and quietly questioned. Feminist reinterpretation does not have to reject Tolkien's mythic vision but engage with its contradictions. By focussing on alternative modes of agency and interrogating narrative silence, feminist readings reveal Middle earth to be having an ideologically layered narrative rather than a monolithic patriarchy. Tolkien's myth does not simply reinforce gender hierarchy; it exposes its limits by elevating forms of power that operate outside masculine domination. Such readings demonstrate that fantasy literature is not marginal to feminist criticism but deeply relevant to its ethical concerns. Therefore, these reinterpretations challenge the marginalization of fantasy literature within feminist criticism, demonstrating its capacity to engage deeply with questions of gender, power, and representation.

In conclusion, Tolkien's works, while shaped by patriarchal mythic traditions, contain significant feminist possibilities. Through characters such as Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn, Tolkien articulates alternative forms of power grounded in moral authority, sacrifice, and healing. As Tolkien writes, "Deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised," a sentiment that resonates strongly with feminist efforts to recover marginalized voices. At the same time, the gendered absences that pervade Middle earth reveal the ideological limits of mythic historiography. A feminist reading of Tolkien need not dismiss his work but can instead uncover latent spaces for critique and reinterpretation. Such readings enrich both Tolkien studies and feminist literary criticism, affirming the relevance of canonical fantasy texts to contemporary debates on marginalized voices and gender representation.

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