

PRITHA KUNDU

The Anglo-Saxon War-Culture and *The Lord of the Rings*: Legacy and Reappraisal

The literature of war in English claims its origin from the Homeric epics, and the medieval accounts of chivalry and the crusades. In modern war-literature, produced during and after the two World Wars, themes of existential trauma, alienation of man as victim, horrors of the nuclear warfare and the Holocaust, and the evils of a totalitarian government, critique of narrow nationalism have become dominant; yet some memories of the Classical and the Medieval war-culture can be found, either as subtle allusion, or as a means of irony or satire, as in *Catch-22* or *Mother Courage*. However, another ancient culture of war—that of the Anglo-Saxons—has failed to hold its sway over the thoughts of the modern war-poets and novelists. In fact, the process of oblivion began as early as the 12th century, when the image of loud and boasting warriors, bursting the mead-halls with their genial laughter, and fighting to death for the love of their lords, was replaced by the courteous Christian knights on their quest for the Holy Grail, rescuing damsels in distress, representing abstract virtues and ideals of a feudal culture. In the long run, the medieval image of the knight-warrior, alongside the raw and ‘real’ quality of the Homeric battles, has found ways into the modern imagination, and produced modern reappropriations of these old materials, whereas re-works on Anglo-Saxon literature are of a poor amount. John Gardner’s *Grendel* offers an existentialist and psychoanalytic approach to *Beowulf*, rewriting it from the monster’s point of view, and G.K. Chesterton’s *The Ballad of*

the White Horse recalls the tone of sadness and lament in the Old English elegies, but none of them shows interest in the war-culture of the Anglo-Saxons, which, notwithstanding the ‘fantastic’ elements of monsters and dragons, remained so realistic in the battles themselves, and a strong bond of love and duty between the warrior-king and his thanes.

Considering the scarcity of the Anglo-Saxon influence in modern war-literature in general, one may wonder and stop by a work like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Silmarillion*, which few would be willing to categorise as serious war-literature. The fictional writings of J.R.R. Tolkien are said to have revived the genre of fantasy and magic-realism, and they have been readily assimilated into the new genre of popular literature. What seems to have been forgotten in this process is Tolkien’s own passionate and critical engagement with the war-literature of the Anglo-Saxons, which has gone into the making of his otherwise ‘fantastic’ creation of the ‘Middle Earth’. Tolkien’s lecture, later published as an essay, “The Monsters and the Critics”, brought a formative and seminal change in the course of *Beowulf*-criticism. His fictional works are at the same time holding the Anglo-Saxon legacy with devoted fondness, yet his reappraisal is of a critical kind—it critiques, reconstructs and reappropriates several Anglo-Saxon themes and ideas while constantly referring back to an old war-culture passed into oblivion.

Before delving into Tolkien’s achievement in reviving the Anglo-Saxon war-culture, the original sources and themes need a brief examination. Elaborate accounts of this can be found in Patrick Wormald’s *Anglo-Saxons: The Making of England*, F. M. Stenton’s *Anglo-Saxon England*, and also in Thomas Roe’s dissertation, *A Response to Anglo-Saxon Heroism and Fourteenth Century Chivalry: Ideals for the Warrior in the Writings of J.R. R. Tolkien*. As Roe aptly points out, from the intense loyalty of the Teutonic warriors to their chiefs praised by Tacitus (1st century AD) to the portrayal of heroism in a 10th century war-poem like *The Battle of Maldon*, what stands out is a common theme of kinship between a lord and his thanes. When the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes began to settle in South-East England during the 5th century, they brought with them a distinctly Germanic concept of the warrior and the culture of a warlike society.

In Tacitus’ *De Origine et situ Germanorum*, we have a vivid account of the Germanic warrior-population who lived bordering the Roman Empire during the 1st century AD. The bond between lord and thanes and the warrior’s pursuit of glory—both appear prominently in Tacitus’ account:

When going into battle, it is disgrace for the chief to be excelled in bravery; it is disgrace for the soldiers not to equal the bravery of the chief... to have retreated from the field, from one's own chief, is lasting shame and infamy for all life. To defend him, to protect him, to ascribe one's own great deeds to his glory is their particular oath: the chiefs fight for victory, the warriors for the chief¹.

The pagan Germanic warriors, as in several other ancient war-like cultures, sought to win glory by doing great deeds in battle. What was interesting about the Germanic ancestors of the Anglo-Saxon warriors, that winning glory for them was not merely personal, but corresponding to the community-virtue and bonds of duty and kinship, in their service to the community and mainly to the chief.

The Anglo-Saxon ideal of kinship between a lord and his warrior-thanes bears obvious resonances of the Germanic heroic ethos. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records several moving accounts of such intense loyalty and kinship-ethics. An entry for 757AD, for instance, recounts how Cyneheard, a rebellious earl(atheling), and his men took in ambush the king Cynewulf and killed him in the room where he was with his women. The thanes that were with the king, though small in number, fought to their last breath by their slain lord, and some were captured. The following day a larger army, hearing of the murder of their king, arrived and besieged Cyneheard. Cyneheard cunningly informed the king's thanes that several of their kinsmen had already joined him and would not desert him (actually they were taken prisoners). Then came the heroic reply from the king's warriors who had just arrived, and from those who were under Cyneheard's stronghold:

“...no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never serve his slayer; and they offered their kinsmen that they might go away unharmed. Their kinsmen said that the same offer had been made to their comrades who had been with the king. Moreover they said that they would pay no regard to it”².

This is a picture of loyalty proved at the cost of embracing death: among Cynewulf's thanes, those who were taken prisoners and were under the enemy's power, would not be spared by their own kinsmen who had come to take revenge, and they would rather prove their loyalty to their dead king, whom they had failed to protect, by getting killed now by their own kinsmen.

In *Beowulf*, there are several instances of the virtue of thaneship in service to the lord, however, the most striking manifestation of this kinship-bond can be seen in the final battle-sequence with the fire-dragon. Wiglaf embodies the friendship, loyalty and courage of the perfect thane when he comes to Beowulf's aid, when the old fighter-king is almost exhausted and on the verge of disappointment. Chiding the other cowardly thanes to assist their lord, he reminds them of the promises they made while receiving gifts from him. Now it is their turn to repay the lord:

I recall the time, when taking the mead
in the great hall, we promised our chief
who gave us these rings these very armlets,
that we would repay him for these war-helmets,
tempered edges, if he ever needed us.³ (*Beowulf* lines 2332-36)

Wiglaf thus recalls the kindness and generosity of Beowulf and the oaths sworn in the mead hall, which other thanes do not seem to translate into action at the time of need. Thomas Roe is right to point out that this pattern of contrast between boasts in mead-hall and action when required echoes the earlier *beot* between Beowulf and Unferth, underscoring the Anglo-Saxon importance of oath-keeping⁴. For Wiglaf, however, it is not only his oath that binds him to Beowulf, it is a bond of kinship and ultimately, of the virtue called 'love' or 'friendship'. As he rushes into the dragon's cavern to stand beside his lord, Wiglaf gives a call "Lēofa Bīowulf!" ["Beloved Beowulf!"] Beowulf is of course a ring-giver, protector and a lord, but above all 'beloved'. Wiglaf's friendship with Beowulf drives him to risk his own life for that of his lord. Apt is the poet's statement: "Swylc sceolde secg wesan, / þegn æt dearfe!" ["Such should be one(man), / a thane at need!"] (lines 2708-09). Similar images of loyalty are there in historically true accounts like the Battle of Maldon (991 AD), eventually set to verse.

Coming to literary representations, one finds that the Old English heroic poetry does provide several close examples to historical events, yet one is to be careful in reading historical incidents in relation to literary works. *Beowulf* is to be read by a modern reader without looking for factuality, whereas pieces like *The Battle of Maldon* are quasi-historical, where truth and heroic imagination blend together. *Beowulf* as an epic includes the supernatural elements such as dragons, monsters, and almost miraculous feats of human strength, which a modern realist may dismiss on the ground of unreal and fantastic musings. Such a view, unfortunately, ignores the very essence of the ancient heroic literature. In his 1936 lecture on "Beowulf:

the Monsters and the Critics” Tolkien counter-critiques the general tendency of realistic criticism that plays down the fantastic elements of the poem, for the sake of using *Beowulf* solely as a source for Anglo-Saxon history.

Tolkien argues that the fantastical aspects are not to be taken as merely extraneous, rather these provide a new key to the understanding of the verse-narrative *Beowulf*. Drawing attention to the literary and artistic qualities of the text, he argued that heroic or epic literature has no obligation to mirror the mere truth of history, yet it explores the ideas, attitudes, ways of living and believing in an aesthetically elevated form which speaks the greatness of an ancient culture, the basis of which was their society itself. Dragons and monsters are important as they are part of the grand imaginative backdrop of the epic-heroic tradition, but the core of such epic poetry lies in the representation of heroes placed within a specific cultural frame and struggling to eminence through similar tensions faced in reality. Beowulf fights Grendel, his mother and the fire-dragon, but the different strategies and ethics behind these three battle-sequences are real and convincing military affair, which speaks volumes about the war-culture to which the Anglo-Saxons actually belonged. Beowulf’s greatness as a hero and a dutiful king may be wonderful to the extent of super-humanity: yet the basic virtues that are exaggerated and elevated in the character, were real and respectable in actuality, for the Anglo-Saxon race and its socio-cultural ideals. He represents a cultural hero of the Geats(also admired by the Danes and other neighbouring tribes) who does noble deeds of valour throughout his life, and also sacrifices his life in the act of defending his people. Slaying the dragon, he also recovers the treasure-hoard for the benefit of his people. As he says before his death, in satisfaction : “I was able to gain such riches for my people before my death day. Now for this treasure-hoard I have paid with my old life. Attend (now) to the need of the land(nation)”. [lines 2997-2800, translation mine]

Even so, a Tolkienian approach would be disturbed by the penultimate ‘scene’ of *Beowulf*: the picture of only one thane standing by the old king in his last battle, raises a doubt. After the fall of Beowulf, what will become of the kingdom, since there are not many brave warriors to defend the land? Wiglaf is an exception, and he is young, too, but what of the others? Is it a failure of Beowulf to leave his land to many able hands, by founding a good army? The soldiers’ lack of courage towards the end of Beowulf’s heroic career is to be contrasted to the spontaneous support the soldiers tried to give to a young Beowulf, fighting Grendel. They could not do much, and a young Beowulf did not need much help, yet they tried their best. Why this decline of courage among the common soldiers in some fifty or sixty years, so to say? And it is at this point that J.R.R. Tolkien’s intervention becomes important:

for all his devotion to Anglo-Saxon literature, he did not hesitate to critique the heroes' *ofermod* or overmastering pride, which often leads to the danger of exposing the community to a greater crisis. Beowulf's pride and desire for winning personal glory(though all he did was for the protection of his people), makes him refuse co-operation: he enters the dragon's cave, saying to his thanes, "Nis þæt cower sið, / ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes" ["This is not your undertaking, nor of any other man, except mine alone] (2532b-33). Tolkien aptly quotes Wiglaf's lament to support his critique of the Anglo-Saxon *ofermod*: "Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan wraec adreogan [For one earl's will(or, pride), often many have to endure suffering"]⁵.

A similar critique is due to Bryhtnoth, the hero of 'The Battle of Maldon'. The battle was being fought on the two sides of the river. Bryhtnoth's army was holding a crucially favourable position, from where it was easy to resist the Danes' attempt to cross the river. The Danes then began to tease and tempt Bryhtnoth, saying that if he was truly a hero he would let them cross the river, and let the fight be equal. Provoked and overcome by pride, or *ofermod*, Bryhtnoth allowed the enemy to enter his own stronghold, which was a suicidal strategic error. Bryhtnoth and his men fought valiantly, but there was no way they could make amend for this flaw. The poet celebrates the action of the loyal thanes who die by Bryhtnoth's side, condemns the cowardly Godric who escapes taking away Bryhtnoth's horse, and also laments Bryhtnoth's pride-driven fault. On the whole, however, the poetic account paints the battle as a glorious defeat, illustrating the Anglo-Saxon ideal of friendship between a lord and his thanes.

The culture of gift-giving that bound together a king and his thanes in the Anglo-Saxon war-community, is also evidenced in both *Beowulf* and 'The Battle of Maldon'. Hrothgar is the generous 'ring-bestower', and Beowulf, upon receiving gifts from him, declares that his duty is to hand them over to his own master, Hygelac. The importance of ring-giving, highlighting the honour attributed to the gift-culture, is again cited when the loyal Offa meets his death in "The Battle of Maldon". He dies, but "he had accomplished what he had promised his lord, according as he had previously pledged to his ring-giving master that they should both ride home sound to the manor or else both perish in war"⁶.

Gift-giving, nevertheless, is not all the inspiration behind the fulfillment of vow and duty; it goes deeper, and in this the positive aspects of Bryhtnoth's character, other than his *ofermod*, are visible. During the preparation for battle, Bryhtnoth "beornas trymian" ["exhorted the brave men"]. The word *trymian* in Old English carried connotations ranging from exhortation, command to encouragement and

comfort⁷. The instruction is given in a way that shows a personal bond, of almost paternal care that Brythnoth has towards his men. Like a fatherly leader who cares for his men, he tells them to hold a line and stay together, so that they do not get frightened [“ne forhtedon na”, (“might not fear”)]⁸. Like Wiglaf, Brythnoth’s men also use the word *leofne* (beloved) for their lord—Roe, too, has emphasised this. The passion of love and desperate courage growing more and more with the sense of inevitable doom becomes eloquent towards the end, when the old retainer Byrthwold utters:

Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
mood shall be the more, as our might lessens.
Here lies our earl, all hewn to earth,
The good one, on the ground. He will regret it always
The one who thinks to turn from this war-play now.
My life has been long. Leave I will not,
But beside my lord I will sink to earth,
I am minded to die by the man so dear⁹. (lines 312-19)

And this is also representative of the swan-song of the Anglo-Saxon warrior-culture. In the Battle of Hastings in AD 1066 William, Duke of Normandy defeated the last Saxon king Harold. By the 12th century, the Anglo-Saxon ideal based on a personal bond of friendship between a lord and his thanes was faded, giving way to a new mode of war-culture brought by the Normans, which was based on chivalry and knighthood. Though it bore some similarities regarding the ethics of loyalty and relationship between the king and his knights, to the earlier structure between thanes and lords, the Norman ideal or the warrior was different. The Christian chivalric ideal pursued by the knights, came to sway the literary representations in the 13th and 14th centuries. For an Anglo-Norman knight, personal loyalty to a lord and fellow-knights was good, but it was even more important to hold his worth in accordance with the standards of chivalry, living up to the Christian military virtues which inspired them to represent the holy, the good, and fight against the evil. Thus, while kinship-bond and the lord-warrior relationship were still there, these were no longer the ultimate goals for a warrior, these virtues can rather be taken care of only to the extent that they correspond to the individual knight’s pursuit of honour, justness, propriety and chivalry, in a religious sense. Then came new concepts of national and international politics, ideals of proto-utilitarian ethics

and counter-ideals to them, which started dominating the literature of war till the early-Renaissance, and the Anglo-Saxon culture of war was almost forgotten.

Within this steady process of forgetting the Old English war-culture till today, J.R.R. Tolkien stands as one of the few exceptions. His fictional works revisit a world of myth, fantasy and romance. His critical works are on both the Old English and the Middle English periods, and both have helped to create the backdrop of his imaginary 'Middle Earth'. Nevertheless, a reader who has some familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon history and literature, will understand the extent of the author's 'partiality' to the former. There are some portions reminiscent of the Arthurian legends of quest, but the essential ethos seems to be more Anglo-Saxonic than medieval. The central image of the warrior in *The Lord of the Rings* takes shape from the kins' community. The difference of the Tolkein-heroes from the Arthurian knights is not far to seek: a Launcelot or a Gawain ventures out alone on sacred quests or aspires to an abstract standard of chivalric virtue on his own, but Tolkein's warriors strive for the ideal of a 'fellowship', alongside serving their lords. The quest of the Ring is undertaken by nine heroes called the *fellowship* of the Ring. Even when the fellowship is disrupted, Frodo is not alone when he sets out to Mordor, Sam accompanies him, willingly acting as the bearer of the Ring whenever necessary, even at high risk. This is Tolkien's concept of heroism-in-fellowship-bond which develops from its rudimentary and episodic forms in since his early text, *The Hobbit*, and the idea can be said to have come directly from the Anglo-Saxon ideal of a homosocial community of warriors .

The homosocial bond of love is shown at its strongest in the relationship between Frodo and Sam. In some sense, it bears similarity with the Beowulf-Wiglaf bond of love and service within a master-subordinate frame. However, Wiglaf is also noble-born and Beowulf's kinsman, not merely a subject, whereas Sam is officially no more than a servant. Yet their relationship has great degree of mutual affection and friendship, in which Sam is given more central a role than that of Wiglaf. Reconstructing the Anglo-Saxon world into his 'Middle Earth', Tolkien shows a fondness for bringing characters of lesser importance in an Old English text, to centrality in his own work. So Bilbo comes from the peripheral burgler-figure in *Beowulf*, and assumes the status of the protagonist in *The Hobbit*. Sam, if taken as the reincarnation of a minor hero like Wiglaf, is given power to take control of odd situations, rescuing Frodo, who becomes dependent on the servant-turned-saviour. It is Sam who saves Frodo from the web of the giant she-spider; and just as Wiglaf comes to help an exhausted Beowulf, it is Sam's turn to come and charge against the orcs, and carry Frodo up the hill when he is too fatigued to move. Again,

the very fact that Sam bears the great Ring without falling into any temptation or corruption, shows the great moral heroism he possesses.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents a fictional-mythical land of Rohan, peopled by the Rohirrim who resemble the Anglo-Saxons in many aspects: ethics, codes of living, customs and culture. Names like 'Théoden', 'Edoras', 'Éowyn' sound typically Old English, even Teutonic. Consistent parallels can be drawn between Tolkien's text and the Anglo-Saxon cultural motifs, evident in several Old English texts. Thomas Roe's dissertation lists a number of such parallels. However, it is not simply in finding parallels that the re-creative (or, 'sub-creative') mastery of Tolkien is to be fully appreciated. One should rather try to investigate what symbolic or structural significance these parallels hold in relevance to Tolkien's fictional world, presented to a modern readership's restored taste in fantasy-literature, taking them back to an Anglo-Saxon and Celtic past.

The royal line of Rohan owns a golden hall named 'Meduseld' which is of central importance to their culture. As Aragorn recalls with fondness and respect, "Many long lives of man it is since the golden hall was built"¹⁰ This underscores the Anglo-Saxon warriors' cultural practice of holding the banquet in the mead hall, indicating that the Rohirrim's have some kind of lineage dating from the Anglo-Saxon times. The structural importance of the mead-hall is to be underlined both in terms of the narrative, and in the cultural context that refer back to the Anglo-Saxon world, in which the mead hall was the space for the thanes' assembly, a literal space as well as a metaphoric one for reaffirming their kinship-bond, their vows and promises of service to the lord—it was a community place held in high regards in their war-culture. So too do the warriors of Rohan, gather in 'Meduseld', the golden hall which is very like modeled on Heorot, the hall of King Hrothgar in *Beowulf*. The description of Heorot goes like this:

The gold-laced hall, the high timbers,
Most splendid building among earth-dwellers
Under the heavens —the king lived there—
Its gold-hammered roofs shone over the land.¹¹

Tolkien's description of Meduseld at once places him in connection to the imagination of the Beowulf-poet:

There stands aloft a great hall of Men. And it seems to my eyes that it is thatched with gold. The light of it shines far over the land. Golden, too, are the posts of its doors.¹²

Other similarities would follow, no less striking than this one: One may feel tempted to add on to Roe's list of parallels. For instance, As Aragorn and his men reach the land of Rohan, the Rohirrim riders ask who they are, and what they are doing in their land. At first the riders thought that the strangers were enemies, or orcs, but later, Aragorn's noble stature and speech, made them believe otherwise. The same thing happened as Beowulf and his thanes arrived in the Danes' land: the coast-guard, at first suspicious, asked them similar questions. Aragorn and Beowulf bear further resemblance: both are great warriors, but not sons of kings. They ascended the throne later in their career not by heredity, but they were implored by their people to take the responsibility at a time of crisis.

The culture of gift-giving is as important in the Anglo-Saxon world as in Tolkien's fictional realm of 'the Middle Earth', and especially in the land of Rohan. Gandalf the wizard restores Théoden to health, and the healed king declares, 'I would give you a gift ... at your own choosing. You have only to name aught that is mine. I reserve now only my sword!'¹³ The dignity and generosity of the king, though he has been in ill-health, is not less than that of Hrothgar, who was also under trouble, and gratefully accepted the aid of Beowulf, subsequently rewarding him with rich gifts. Gandalf's restoration of 'health' to the trouble-wrought king can be read in a symbolic comparison to the act of Beowulf as well. Beowulf restored 'health' and good cheer to Hrothgar, sick with the attacks of Grendel which loomed over his people like a disease. Beowulf removed the 'disease' and cured the land, and his sick Théoden, like the old Hrothgar, is unable to free himself from the power of the evil Gríma Wormtongue, so he needs Gandalf's aid, and he rewards the benefactor with gifts.

More interestingly, the relationship of Théoden with his men, is drawn upon that of an Anglo-Saxon lord and his thanes, as Roe insists as well. Merry, though a hobbit and not a man of Rohan, bears a relationship to Théoden which commits a thane to his lord. At the critical moment when the war is about to break out, Merry, laying his sword at Théoden's feet, wishes to be in his service, and Théoden entitles him "esquire of Rohan of the household of Meduseld"¹⁴ By this act, Merry is taken in as a part of Théoden's household, a thane or kinsman, even a 'son'¹⁵. In this case, thaneship is not only a contract or a loyalty of obligation, but a relation of affect, an adoption. As Théoden lies awaiting death, Merry's reaction reaffirms the relation

between a paternal lord and a young thane. Théoden said farewell to Merry, and he is satisfied to go to his forefathers, after killing the black serpent:

Merry could not speak, but wept anew. 'Forgive me, lord,' he said at last, 'if I broke your command, and yet have done no more in your service than to weep at our parting.'

The old king smiled. 'Grieve not! It is forgiven. Great heart will not be denied. Live now in blessedness; and when you sit in peace with your pipe, think of me! For never now shall I sit with you in Meduseld, as I promised, or listen to your herb-lore.'¹⁶

Some resonance of the last words of Beowulf to a grieved Wiglaf is not too difficult to find in the passage. The tone of Théoden is that of an old king who dies in glory, after killing the 'serpent'. In *Beowulf*, 'wyrm' or serpent is the word to describe the dragon. However, the invocation of a peaceful life of 'blessedness' is something new, it resorts to a Christian idea of serenity and satisfaction which was unknown to a basically pagan Anglo-Saxon culture.

The relationship of harmony and concord between the king of Rohan and his men is so great that one exceptionally alien and hated character like Gríma Wormtongue can work successfully for a negative presence. Structurally, his presence corresponds to that of one like Unferth in *Beowulf*, —one who is a thane by office but disrespectful of the banquet-bond, one who mars the pleasure by seeking a quarrel, and relies more on the valour of his chiding tongue than real virtues of warrior-like action. The very name of Gríma Wormtongue is symbolic, he is grim—a spoiler of happiness, and his tongue like that of a serpent (worm). Just as Unferth's unworthiness and negative qualities paradoxically highlight the virtues of the other thanes, and especially of Beowulf, Gríma's negative role is a cornerstone against which the virtues of loyal thanes like Merry and Éomer are to be reinforced. However, there is no evidence of Unferth's disloyalty, however unbearable he may be otherwise. Gríma is without loyalty, yet he manages to gain influence over the king. Tolkien's critical reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon worldview, however, retains and remoulds its basic ideals, though often giving them a new significance within the ethics and ethos of his 'Middle-Earth'. Beowulf has no son to wear his armour, so it goes to Wiglaf, the young warrior-hero who is supposed to take up Beowulf's responsibility. This passing on of armours or weapons from father to son, or from an old warrior to a young one, was a theme of great importance that

ideally bound together the generations in a heroic culture, and kept the virtue of thaneship-bond intact. In Tolkien's world, Bilbo's 'Sting'¹⁷ passes on to Frodo, almost echoing the Beowulf-Wiglaf continuity of heroic virtues. Bilbo and Frodo, however, are not warlike heroes with great physical strength, rather they represent a neo-heroic ethics embodied in their lovably small physique, their basic goodness, moral courage and resourcefulness that help the plot's movement towards the good of the community—the 'Fellowship'. Tolkien's legacy from and reappraisal of the Anglo-Saxon war-culture, thus, develop not only through structural and thematic reconstruction, but also by resignification.

The people of Rohan provide the most prominent and mature example of the Anglo-Saxon ideals of war-culture in Tolkien's oeuvre, but Tolkien's reappraisal of the Anglo-Saxon literary or historical tradition, does also involve his critical self. Several fictional occurrences within his own stories revisits themes of Anglo-Saxon society and recreate them to the purpose of a neo-Anglo-Saxon heroics, the product of Tolkien's own 'sub-creation'. Tolkien employs the term *ofermod* as a criticism of Anglo-Saxon leaders such as Byrhtnoth, and a reflection upon a larger social dilemma plaguing Anglo-Saxon society: that of a heroic code which placed leaders in the centrality of battle, a precarious position which at times unnecessarily endangered the welfare of the entire society. This overmastering pride is depicted in the character of Thorin Oakenside in *The Hobbit*, and continues to be seen, more elaborately in *The Lord Of The Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Robert Rorabeck, in his work *Tolkien's Heroic Criticism: A Developing Application of the Anglo-Saxon Ofermod to the Monsters of Modernity*, argues that Tolkien's social critique, by way of criticising an Anglo-Saxon kind of heroic fault, actually reflects on his own times as he sense the same 'ofermod' at work in the desire for absolute power observed within the 20th century socio-political situation in Europe¹⁸. His answer to such power comes in the form of an ordinary but good humane(or, hobbit) being, embodying his virtuous ideals, such as Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, Merry, Pipin, Frodo and Sam Gamgee in *Lord of the Rings*.

In the climactic battle on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, Tolkien reconstructs the notion of *ofermod*, gesturing towards a redemption from its negative effect on the community. Endorsing Roe's argument regarding this episode, it can be said that Gandalf defending the bridge acts as Tolkien's agent of redemption, as if making amends to Bryhtnoth's flaw of 'ofermod'. The fellowship rushes downwards along the lower Moria, to find the eastern gate. They cross over the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, while an army of fearsome orcs is chasing behind. Balrog, the great demon is among the orcs, who steps out and approaches Gandalf, already exhausted in

his battle with the shadow in the Chamber of Mazarbul. The situation is dramatic and a wonderful reconstruction of the flawed war-strategy in *Maldon*. Gandalf and Barlog fight severely until Gandalf breaks the bridge and the demon falls down into the abyss of darkness, taking Gandalf along with him. Looking beyond the fantastical setting, one may be struck by the exact structural similitude between the Bridge at Khazad-dûm and the river that separated the Danes from Bryhtnoth's troop. In both cases, the enemy group is of greater number than the hero's side. Gandalf, much like Bryhtnoth, leads the battle line, controlling a crucial battle-point. The difference comes in the way they make use of it. In contrast to the *ofermod* of Bryhtnoth, Gandalf exemplifies proper wisdom and care for his people. He does not let the orcs cross the bridge for the sake of greater glory: that would jeopardise the lives of the surviving Fellowship. Aragorn and Boromir, like the loyal thanes of Bryhtnoth, display great courage as they jump onto the bridge to aid Gandalf, adding to the similarity with the Anglo-Saxon setting. Bryhtnoth's death, however glorious, is not sacrificial, rather it puts his men to doom. Gandalf's breaking of the bridge causes the fall of himself along with the Barlog, but in the process of self-sacrifice, he does ensure the lives of the men of the Fellowship.

Gandalf's fight with the Balrog also bears resemblance to that of Beowulf with the dragon. As Roe justly points out, both heroes are able but aged warriors. However, Gandalf does not seek his own greatness, but rather declares himself to be a servant of Ilúvatar, the Creator. Interestingly, the surviving text of *Beowulf* shows interpolations or interventions by some Christian clerical hand of the later centuries, with stray references to the Christian God, though this has not dwindled the basic pagan heroism of the original text. It is clear that Beowulf goes out to fight for his own achievements and with a zeal to prove himself again and again. His deeds, in effect, do protect his people, but that aim is secondary to the seeking of personal glory in battle. What is more interesting, for Gandalf the protection of his followers is the ultimate goal, and he represents the good, fighting the evil in an allegorical sense of the Christian militant theme. Gandalf, for all his Anglo-Saxon qualities of heroism, also represents the love of a 'good shepherd' for his flocks¹⁹.

This may be read as an intersection between the Anglo-Saxon heroism and the later medieval Christian ideologies of chivalry, but what is more significant here is the power of Tolkien's 'elvish' craft which he categorises as necessary for a convincing sub-creation of a fantasy-world, mirroring the 'primary creation' by God²⁰. The sub-created world has a different reality than that of the primary world, but it takes its basic qualities from the 'real' and transform it into something 'rich, strange and new'. The mastery with which he blends fantasy and myth with real

war-strategies drawn from historical Anglo-Saxon battle-situations, Christianity with pagan heroism, things believable in the ancient, epic world with the possibilities of making it convincing for the modern readers of ‘popular literature’, with a further potential for being adapted to the powerful technology of cinematic representations.

It is true that for a modern audience *The Lord of the Rings*, has received popularity mostly for reasons other than its Anglo-Saxon legacy, its success in recreating a new mythology referring back to the Celtic and the Anglo-Saxon past. It has rather been hailed as a modern Christian allegory, as a challenge to the demands of quotidian reality, championing the genre of fantasy. The body of critical writings on it continues to harp on its significance in fantasy-genre-criticism, cinematic adaptability and myth-criticism. Thomas Roe and Robert Rorabeck, within the limited scope of their dissertations, have paid good attention to Tolkien’s success in reconstructing the Anglo-Saxon war-culture, though there is a greater need to go deeper into the structural, ideological, metaphorical and cultural relevance of such a critical reappraisal of a forgotten war-culture in modern times. Kim Selling has made a valid point which may be helpful in this regard:

Part of the wonder elicited by *The Lord of the Rings* is not only its strange and beautiful or horrific creatures—elves, dwarves, hobbits, orcs, giant spiders—but also the entire world of Middle-earth, in its verisimilar detail and believable realization. Jackson’s film captures the importance of landscape and setting in Middle-earth both visually and thematically. The air of historical realism, the “lived-in” sets and atmosphere, contribute to the story’s credibility²¹.

This air of ‘lived-in’ experience and realism has its core in Tolkien’s knowledge and appreciation of the sense of reality evident in Anglo-Saxon war-literature. What gives *The Lord of the Rings* its ‘credibility’ is the story’s rootedness in a specific war-culture, bearing its legacy from the valiant Danes and Geats, the Angles and Saxons, the band of warriors and thanes at the mead-hall, bound together by a strong sense of kinship and service. Tolkien’s masterpiece, apart from being a pioneering work in the genre of magic and fantasy, remains a true and honest tribute to and reappraisal of the long-lost war-culture of the Anglo-Saxons.

Notes and References

1. Tacitus, *Tacitus in Five Volumes: Volume One: Germania*. Trans. M. Hutton. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980. p 152, as quoted in Thomas Roe, "A RESPONSE TO ANGLO-SAXON HEROISM AND FOURTEENTH CENTURY CHIVALRY: IDEALS FOR THE WARRIOR IN THE WRITINGS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN", Honours dissertation, Hillsdale College, Michigan, 2011, p.3 (hereafter cited in short as "A Response to Anglo-Saxon Heroism")
2. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Trans. Dorothy Whitelock. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986. p 17.
3. *Beowulf from Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Trans. S.A.J. Bradley. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle publishing, 1995.
4. Thomas Roe, "A Response to Anglo-Saxon Heroism", p. 12.
5. Quoted in J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." (1953), later incorporated in *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine, 1966. p 24. Translation into modern English is mine.
6. "The Battle of Maldon" from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 527.
7. "The Battle of Maldon" line 17. A similar point regarding the word of 'trymian' is made in Thomas Roe, p 16.
8. *Ibid*, line 21, my translation.
9. "The Battle of Maldon", verse-translation by K. Malone, quoted in K. Malone and A. C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* vol. I, London and New York: Routledge, 1967. p 47
10. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991. p 496.
11. *Beowulf*, from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 67
12. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 496
13. *Ibid*, 510
14. *Ibid*, 760
15. "A father shall you be to me", says Merry. *Ibid*, 760
16. *Ibid*, 824
17. *Ibid*, Bilbo's 'Sting', a token of Tolkien's 'neo-heroic' responsibility handed over from one Hobbit-hero to another, also signifies the author's journey and development from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*.
18. Robert Rorabeck, "Tolkien's Heroic Criticism: A Developing Application of Anglo-Saxon Ofermod to the Monsters of Modernity"(2003). *Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations*, Florida State University, paper 1764.
19. The Christ-association suits Gandalf well, for he is resurrected in *The Two Towers*, as a transformed and more powerful being, also signaling a 'second coming'.

20. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories." In *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966, pg. 29-100.

21. Kim Selling, " J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*:The Book, the Film, and Genre Criticism", p 62, downloaded from <http://ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/SSE/article/download/572/541>, on 29. 4. 2013.

Acknowledgement

When I composed the first draft of this paper two-and-a half years back, I was not familiar with Thomas Roe's work, "A RESPONSE TO ANGLO-SAXON HEROISM AND FOURTEENTH CENTURY CHIVALRY: IDEALS FOR THE WARRIOR IN THE WRITINGS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN"(2011). Later I have found that some of his observations are closely similar to mine, so I have duly referred to his work and cited it while revising my paper.

PRITHA KUNDU is an independent researcher, translator and creative writer. Areas of interest are Epic and ancient war-literature, nineteenth century literary studies and comparative literature.