An Overview of Arthurian Literature

SHINNY MIYOLAA SRK
Research Scholar, Bharathidasan University
Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy

Dr. SURESH FREDERICK
Associate Professor and UG Head, Department of English
Bishop Heber College, Trichy

Arthurian Literature refers to the works based on Arthur and Arthurian legends almost in all the language especially in English and French. King Arthur was a legendary British leader who according to medieval histories led the British army against the Saxons in the late 5th and 6th centuries. The writings under Arthurian literature include poetry, prose, drama and novels. The works that come under this category usually had similar themes such as legendary history of Britain, love, intrigue, chivalry, might and courage of Arthur as well as the other knights.

Barron in "Arthurian Romance" stated that "Of all the evocative names of romance, none is more charismatic than Arthur – king, conqueror, liege, lord, lover, knight, fountain of nobility, Hope of Britons, England's Messiah, icon of evolving nationhood over many centuries" (4). From the medieval period until the present era there are many works written about Arthurian legends and he has become a source of inspiration to many writers across countries. This fascination and adoration for King Arthur led to the culmination of Arthurian Literature.

Arthur became the hero in an embryonic epic of the great psychological significance for the defeated Celts and the central figure in the legends which contributed in the making of Matter of Britain. Arthur's depiction as a brave and successful warrior who withstood the Saxons and his memory was held in the highest estimation by his countrymen. "Within the limited Arthurian corpus in English, his protean image is mirrored in a bewildering variety of forms: texts in prose and verse in a few dozen lines and in many thousands, some in simple linear structure of folktales" (Arthurian Romance 4).

The earliest writing about King Arthur in Britain was *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. He "blended quasi-historical fact gathered from the British chronicles with a mass of convincingly contrived fiction in a prose epic which gave Arthur the legendary stature of Aenas or Charlemagne" (Barron 30). Within the historical framework of Arthur's reign there is a king identified with heroic ideal of national freedom, defending people by personal powers, a brotherhood of charismatic companions engaged in adventurous quests, a queen involved, willingly or not with other man, an epic end in mystery and ambiguity. This work led to the immense popularity and lent historical respectability to other Arthurian tales.

Layamon, yet another writer who belonged to the twelfth century, wrote a poem *Brut* also known as *The Chronicles of Britain.* "Layamon's poem is of great significance because it is often lively, sometimes dramatic, and wonderfully descriptive version of Arthurian story…. Layamon made the story of Arthur as king and emperor available for the first time in (surviving) English verse" (Lupack 31). Writers such as Robert of Gloucester, Robert Mannyng and Thomas Castleford followed this tradition of writing about King Arthur during the early age.

The poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson are considered to be the best rendition after Thomas Malory's. His *Idylls of the King* is a collection of poems published in 1859 that retold the legend of King Arthur. He has also written a lyrical ballad titled *The Lady of Shallot* in 1833 along with other short poems such as *Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* and *Merlin and the Gleam*. Tennyson's poems on Arthur are still found to be interesting and are widely read even today. Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's *King Arthur* (1848) and William Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* (1858) are some of the minor poems written during the Victorian era.

Historical novels became a part of Arthurian literature and *The Count of Saxon Shore* (1887) by Alfred J. Church is considered to be the earliest one with connection to Arthur. Warwick Deeping's *Uther and Igraine* (1903), Edward Frankland's *Arthur, the Bear of Britiain* (1944) and Alfred Duggan's Conscience of a King (1951) are the most read historical novels. The historians pull in the direction of a realistic Arthur without magic and portray more about the war and chivalry that was predominant. Roy Turner's *King of the Lordless Country* (1971), Jayne Viney's *The Bright-Helmed One* (1975) and Victor Canning's *The Crimson Chalice* (1976), *The Circle of Gods* (1977) are some of the popular historical novels that presented a faithful picture of Arthur.

All these texts about the Arthurian legends gave the opportunity for many scrutinises and was open to huge number of critical receptions. Many researchers were interested to investigate the historicity of King Arthur and contrasted it with the literature. They were interested to find out if Arthur was real and his adventures were true. Many are still in the process of analysing the same with archaeology as a tool. "The Legendary King: How the Figure of King Arthur Shaped a National Identity" is one such research work that analyses Arthur as a symbol of Britishness and discusses the relationship between archaeology of Arthur and the reality of his story. This idea has been instrumental in many scholarly researches and have ruminated the identity of Arthur and his knights.

"Commodification of Arthurian Legend in the 20th Century" discusses Arthur as a Monarch who later becomes Super hero and then a modern politician. It focuses on how the age old Arthurian legends have been retold in the contemporary fiction so as to feed the 20st century reader's appetite. Arthur is discussed as a commodity that gets refurbished just like other goods according to the want and need of the customers. This research also examines how Arthur has been portrayed as a fighter in World War II, a battler of aliens and even as a teenage boy to attract the young readers. This research looks at Arthur as a product and refuses acknowledge him as neither a legendary king nor a famous literary persona who is still haunting literary texts with his presence from the middle ages till now.

Women began to approach to Arthurian texts with different perspective and looked at legends from a female point of view. This gave a spark to women writers who started to write novels that focus on the female characters bring them into the lime light who were so far hidden behind the men. "Perception of Women of the Arthurian Legends in the Middle Ages and in the Twentieth Century" delineates how Arthurian woman started to play active role only in 20th century when women were recognised to be equal to men and when people started to search for an alternative Christianity.

Most of these stories and characters, which have been connected with the Arthurian legend ever since, are inventions of that period. Arthurian women came to the forefront and became integral part in the story. The female characters like Guinevere, Morgan le Fay, Vivian and Igraine play a large in modern novels. Alan Lupack says "This prominence is consistent with a trend in modern Arthurian fiction to emphasize the women and to retell the legend through them or from their perspectives (202)". Thus many scholars started to inspect Arthurian legends from feminist viewpoint and examine how women were only considered as other in the ancient Arthurian tales.

Yet another approach to Arthurian legends is to compare it with legends and myths that existed in other countries. "Two Legends One Story: A Comparison of Arthurian Legend and the Legend of Zelda Franchise" depicts how the stories about King Arthur go hand in hand with that of an action adventure video game developed by Japanese game designers. This research compares and contrasts Arthurian Chivalry and the Japanese Bushido. King Arthur's adventures have been compared and contrasted with that of Charlemagne, the king of Franks who ruled France.

Arthur became a popular subject in children literature and teenage fiction. Writers wrote many such novels that could mesmerise the children with much of fantasy and chivalry instead of adultery, love and intrigue. Many researches were done to psychologically analyse the portrayal of Arthur especially to fulfil the needs of these younger readers. There are stories about Arthur written only for the girls with different themes that would enchant them. For any type of a reader whether a small boy to an

old man there is something to inspire them with the legends of Arthur. "Adapting Arthurian Legends for Children" discusses the different adaptation of the legends such as comics, music, television series and movies for children.

Not only these, Arthurian literature offers enormous possibility for the researchers to ponder upon. Arthurian legends can be looked from new historicist perspective which discusses the past from the present viewpoint. Likewise, Arthurian tales could also be scrutinised in such way so as to identify the hidden agenda behind such myths and legendary stories. This could bring tremendous results and help to view these tales from perspectives that many failed to think.

Cultural Studies is yet another approach to discuss the Arthurian Tales which analyses the culture, the people, the religion and the tradition that was predominant during the middle ages. Arthur could be viewed as the cultural icon of British as many people even from other countries look unto him for the moral values and for the courage that he had. Arthurian tales were not just retold for commercial benefits but many turned back to these medieval chivalric tales as there weren't any order or happiness in the world that they at present live. Many wanted to find out an alternative for Christianity and thus preferred the druidism that the Arthurian characters worshipped. Cultural Studies could help in analysing how Britain was during the Dark Ages and how Christianity peeped in. Many of the Arthurian novels discuss the clash between old religion and Christianity.

Postmodernism gives an array of possibility to delve deep into the Arthurian novels. Postmodern techniques such as in tertextuality can be used to analyse the different Arthurian tales and how all of them are connected in spite of the tremendous variations in the tales across centuries. Postmodernism is actually the reaction against intellectual assumptions and values of the early periods. Postmodernism is "subverting conventions, blurring previously distinct boundaries and rejecting traditional aesthetic values" (Houliang 5). Arthurian legends too have age old conventions and boundaries but these have been altered in the recent works.

Lyotard's "Incredulity towards metanarrative" is an idea that denounces the grand narrative stand by trivializing the significance of monolithic truth and questions its adequacy. Postmodernism captures individual's perception rather than consorted ideas, it deconstructs stereotypes by de-contexualizing and de-homogenizing. Arthurian tales in the early period have been eulogising Arthur for his mighty deeds and never brought the other characters into the forefront. Tales narrated by the varied characters in the legends helps the reader to look at the tales from different perspective rather than adhering to the age old truth.

The varied versions and retellings of the Arthurian tales are mini narratives and can be analysed to eliminate what is meant to be the absolute truth. Linda Hutcheon says that mininarratives distort "centralised, totalized, hierarchized closed systems (41). Mininarratives decline the supremacy of metanarratives and also questions its credulity, authenticity and authority. Thus postmodernism helps to analyse the widening range of interpretations of these pre-existent Arthurian novels. Various research prospects are possible with Arthurian tales and the stories as unwind itself exuberantly to all these literary investigations.

References
1. Barron, W.J. *English Medieval Romance.* Longman, 1987.
2. …, "Arthurian Romance". *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*. Edited by Corinne Saunders, John Wiley & Sons, Incoroporated, 2004.
3. Houliang, Chen. *Theorizing the Postmodern: Towards a Poetics*. Vol. 4, Methuen, 1988.
4. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
5. Lupack, Alan. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford UP, 2005.