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The Heart of Dark Elves: Orientalism, and Manifestations of Asian Cultures in Tabletop Games and Western Fantasy

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Abstract

There are countless depictions of elves in media, many of which are not simple fresh iterations of those designed by Tolkien and his contemporaries. Dungeons and Dragons, a table-top role-playing game on the rise since its inception in the 1980s, contains the interpretation of the Tolkien elf doctored by the creators of the game – Arneson and Gygax – to fit their needs and perceptions of something that was the “Other”. Today, our world is different, and these studies of cultural properties have spread from academia alone into the view of the general populace. The importance of origins for and prejudices involved during the creation of the realms of fantasy we escape to for a handful of hours each week grows with each passing day and each new voice adding to that clamouring vox populi. This paper seeks to recontextualise the issue of the orientalism that wormed its way into the origins of Dungeons and Dragons, and package it in a more digestible fashion for a wider audience. In fashioning the arguments included in this article, we may explore the way that the elves of Dungeons and Dragons reflect the Hindu diaspora, and the manner in which the biases and opinions of Gygax and the writers for the games since then have infiltrated aspects of our popular culture.

Keywords: Hinduism, Orientalism, Religious Philosophy, Fantasy, Allegory