

## MULTICULTURALISM IN J. K. ROWLING'S *HARRY POTTER*: ANALYZING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS OF CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER ISSUES IN THE SERIES

**Dr. Yashomana Choudhury**

### **Abstract**

The Harry Potter series is mostly a young adult fantasy series showcasing the present dealing with all the classism, racial ideologies, alienation, and threats to disrupt the peace of society. Author J.K. Rowling also subtly focuses on the issues of class discrimination in society, and racial purification which pose a threat to the magical society. This paper also analyses the intricacies and grimness of the class and racial ideologies introduced in the seven books and how they can be equated with historical and real-world problems

J.K. Rowling dwells on the idea of a multicultural society and presents us with a 'seemingly' multicultural blend of wizards and witches training in Hogwarts. But how multicultural is Rowling's sense of multiculturalism? We do find multiculturalism in the books or rather traces of it and a social justice approach which also instigates conflicts between the characters. On the one hand, we have a 'seemingly' multicultural and homogenous magical society, and on the other hand the demarcation between magical humans, non-magical humans (muggle), and non-human magical beings. Rowling also demonstrates through certain characters how the institutionalized preconceived notions that the main characters struggle against are supported by a section of traditional society rigidly governed by conventional principles. Throughout the series, J.K. Rowling deploys a multicultural touch by introducing diversity among the Wizarding communities and encouraging tolerance, understanding, and cooperation.

*Keywords: race, magic-realism, fantasy literature, wizarding world.*

"The readers were hooked on to such an enchanting terrain that quite a number of them had been waiting for *the letter* on their eleventh birthday and were disappointed when it failed to arrive" (Sujlic 71). Such was the magnanimous popularity of the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling and has now evolved as a global phenomenon with the ability to transcend and influence different cultures all over. But why is it so popular? Perhaps it caresses and nurtures the sense of adventure we all long for or cherishes the fancy and imagination in children as well as adults. Fantasy Literature is often put in a corner and labeled as Children's Literature. In most cases, Fantasy literature can be pictured as escapist literature offering an escape to a secondary world where problems can be confronted and solved. It offered a chance to recreate existence and, in some sense, discover ways to make the present or the future better.

Earlier, fantasy literature as a distinctive genre remained rather obscure against the prevalence of mythical tales, legends, etc., and most importantly, there was substantial confusion as regards the generic differences between fantasy and fairytales. In the contemporary literary scenario, fantasy is a flourishing genre and is gaining distinctive visibility in the literary realm and not just a term attached to Children's Literature. Harrison Smith in his article, "The Rise of Fantasy", published in *The American Scholar* (1948), while speaking about the popularity of fantasy literature writes:

"Fantasy deserves more general attention than it gets. The Oxford Dictionary has a good deal of trouble in defining fantasy. It calls it irregular or erratic fancy in thought or action unrestrained imagination; whim; caprice; vagary... the forming of unreal, chimerical, or grotesque images in the mind; a mingling of incongruous or unfounded ideas or notion; disordered or distorted fancy; fantastic imagination; fantasia." (305).

The imagination of the postmodern writers expanded the definitions of fantasy still further by bringing magic in the urban settings. Instead of just spotlighting the medieval settings they put the magic and supernatural in our cities. That is why Harry Potter is so popular, it happens with us, in the present dealing with all the classism, racial ideologies, alienation, and threats to disrupt the peace of society.

Vesna Suljic in her article “Cross Culturalism of Harry Potter” writes about society being technologically advanced and globally interconnected but the individual was becoming more and more alienated from the society, from themselves. The adult reader can relate more to the situations presented in the books or identify with the characters with magical powers and the world of common humans, the muggle world which is metaphorical and realistic. Though the books were written from a young boy’s perception the characters gradually transcend through adolescence and maturity. The young and the adult enjoy their friendship, and adventures, suffer in their hardships, and rejoice in their victory.

Although the Harry Potter series is mostly a young adult fantasy series Rowling also subtly focuses on the issues of class discrimination in society, and racial purification which pose a threat to the magical society. This paper also analyses the intricacies and grimness of the class and racial ideologies introduced in the seven books and how they can be equated with historical and real-world problems.

J.K. Rowling dwells on the idea of a multicultural society and presents us with a ‘seemingly’ multicultural blend of wizards and witches training in Hogwarts. But how multicultural is Rowling’s sense of multiculturalism? We do find multiculturalism in the books or rather traces of it and a social justice approach which also instigates conflicts between the characters. On the one hand, we have a ‘seemingly’ multicultural and homogenous magical society, and on the other hand the demarcation between magical humans, non-magical humans (muggle), and non-human magical beings. Rowling also demonstrates through certain characters how the institutionalized preconceived notions that the main characters struggle against are supported by a section of traditional society rigidly governed by conventional principles.

J.K. Rowling has been criticized for a limited multicultural approach to her character descriptions. Jenny Korhonen in her article “Racism and Multiculturalism in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels” states that,

“Hogwarts is supposed to be multi-racial, even though it appears predominantly white. Rowling has been criticized for having brief or nonexistent descriptions of people, who according to their descriptions, are not white. Lee Jordan is only described as a boy with dreadlocks “a black boy even taller than Ron” (Philosopher 94,122). The Patil twins, who have Indian origin in the movie adaptations, are not described as such in the novels. Cho Chang, a girl in Ravenclaw that Harry finds attractive, is described as “very pretty” in the novels (Goblet 78). It does not say anything about her foreign-sounding name, or that she looks different from others due to her Asian origin. Here race is mentioned, but not made issue. These characters ought to stand out from the crowd based on their appearances or names, but instead of putting weight in it at all. Rowling instead lets it pass by, making it look like a stereotypical description (Hunziker 57)”.

Jenny Korhonen further argues that Rowling was trying to create an appearance of diversity in keeping with the present times, but she created what can be called as the optimistic or utopic version of multicultural Britain. All the non-white and non-British characters are rather marginalized throughout the seven books. We only see the white teachers in action; there is no diversity of race and culture in the teachers’ representation. Rowling nonchalantly mentions one or two black teachers but we never see them in action. There was also no representation of an Asian teacher. We just see a handful of Asian students who are not given any significant role in the series. Though there is no blatant stereotyping of any Asian or non-British characters, Rowling, however, are not inclusive of the cultures around the world, especially Asian cultures. Asia is the hub of magic and mysticism and India is the major practitioner of black magic yet we get minuscule inclusion throughout the series.

In the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* Rowling introduces the Quidditch World Cup where we get a glimpse of different countries participating in the International Sporting event. The countries fleetingly mentioned England, Transylvania, Scotland, Luxemburg, Wales, Uganda, Ireland, Peru, and Bulgaria. There is no Asian representative in the Quidditch World Cup. In the same book, Rowling commenced another

THE QUILL-An Inter-disciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences // Vol. 01, June, 2024// big event the Triwizard Tournament which is an interschool competition. We are introduced to two schools Beauxbatons Academy of Magic which is in French and Durmstrang Institute which is in Northern Europe. Though there are casual mentions of other schools none other schools are mentioned. Rowling later reveals on the fan site pottermore.com that there are eleven wizarding schools. Some of them are Castelobruxo (Central Brazil), Ilvermorny (Eastern North America), Mahoutokoro School of Magic (Japan), Uagadou School of Magic (Uganda), Koldovstoretz (Russia). There is only one school for Asia and no schools for Australia or New Zealand. The magical history of Asia, especially south-east Asia and India is rich and ancient but is not much talked about in the series. This maybe because Rowling had limited knowledge of the history of magic in Asia or maybe she was just trying to appeal to the British audience.

The *Harry Potter* series gives a notion of a world that is clearly defined by the good and the evil. The young protagonist Harry confronts and ultimately defeats the dark wizard Voldemort. As the story progresses, it evolves from a good over evil-theme to something much more intricate and darker. There are now no clear demarcations between good and evil giving ample opportunities for the growth of the characters and the story. The parallel world like the real world is filled with prejudices. Rowling gives us glimpses of the contradictions and ambiguities present in the Wizarding world's social and cultural traditions. Since it is a parallel, magical world the prejudices and the social demarcations involve not just human races but also incorporate complex relations with other magical creatures.

'Race' here implies the following sections; Magical people and non-magical population (Muggles), purebloods (those who have a magical ancestry) the muggle-born (witches and wizards born to non-magical parents), half-bloods (witches/wizards who are not pure blood and one set of parents is muggle-born/ muggle), Squibs (a non-magical human born to magical parents). We also have to consider the other magical beings like house elves, goblins, centaurs, giants, dragons, hippogriffs etc.

According to the archaic beliefs of the wizarding society, a pure blood is considered the highest of the breeds for Wizards above all magical beings; a belief which is strongly upheld by Salazar Slytherin and his descendants the Gaunts along with a few other old wizarding families like the Malfoys, The Blacks, The Lestranges. Ironically Voldemort being a half- blood was the fiercest upholder of this belief and fanatically strove to make the magical community free of contamination and ensure the superiority of the pure-bloods.

But contrary to the prevailing stereotype being pureblood will not make someone good at magic as it is clearly outlined in the books. A clear example is shown through Neville Longbottom who belongs to the highest pedigree of wizards but is at the bottom of his class always asking help from the muggle-born Hermione Granger who is at the top of the class. Though Neville is poor at his training his character evolves into a courageous young adult who later goes on to teach at Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy and his cronies Crabbe and Goyle are also purebloods and none of them excel at anything, in fact Crabbe and Goyle are even worse than Neville. Ron Weasley and all his other siblings are pureblood and it is interesting to see their character growth from some being born achievers and other struggling to rise above mediocrity.

Being a pureblood also comes with privilege and expectations to excel which was a psychological pressure on Neville, Ron to some extent and later we can see in case of Draco Malfoy. It should be mentioned that pure blooded families may have children or blood relatives with no magical abilities. They are called 'Squibs' a derogatory term which is often used also as an insult to someone. The Squibs are 'often hushed up' or 'shipped off' to Muggle schools and encouraged to assimilate within the Muggle community rather than trying them to fit in the Wizarding community where they will always be considered 'second class'. The Squibs mentioned throughout the series Argus Filch the bitter Hogwarts caretaker always having a vendetta against the students and Arabella Figg, Harry's neighbor. Dumbledore's sister was also rumoured to be a Squib as she was always locked up.

There is also an underlying discrimination against the Muggles throughout the series. Most of the wizarding community looks down upon people with no magical abilities and considers any association especially marriage a blatant insult to their families. However, there are also families like the Weasleys who encourage and treat the Muggles with equal respect. Even in the Muggle communities, there are families like the Dursleys who look down upon people like Harry and call them freaks. The Dursleys are shown, living in constant

THE QUILL-An Inter-disciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences // Vol. 01, June, 2024//  
fear that their neighbours might find out that Harry is a wizard and which leads them to create a false narrative that Harry is deranged.

There is also a parallel narrative of how other intelligent magical creatures like Goblins and the Centaurs have an unpleasant attitude towards the Magical Humans throughout the books Rowling gives us instances in form of historical accounts as how there was vicious war between the Goblins and the Wizarding Community.

A lot has been spoken about the feminist nature of Harry Potter series and representations of strong female characters like that of Hermione Granger, Prof McGonagall, Molly Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Tonks. They are some of the most powerful figures in the books. Even on the other side, the Dark side we see Bellatrix who is the most dominant ally of Voldemort and Prof Umbridge for whom evil and cruelty are the power. Though the latter two are debatable as female role models nonetheless they are two strong figures. The gender roles portrayed in the books, especially the major characters display both feminine and masculine characteristics. However, among the other magical beings not much narrative has been given to the 'female' creatures. We only have 'Winky' the house elf who is often signified as having a high-pitched voice.

Throughout the series J.K. Rowling deploys a multicultural touch by introducing diversity among the Wizarding communities and encourages tolerance, understanding, and co-operation. Rowling sets up opportunities for the characters to fight inequality and discrimination and as the series reaches its end the idea looks optimistic if not idealistic hinting that an egalitarian society is possible.

#### **Works cited:**

Aichele, G. "Literary Fantasy and Postmodern Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.2 (1991):323-37. Scopus. Web. 27 Dec 2015.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1465499.pdf>

Jackson, Rosemary. 1998. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Routledge.

Mendlesohn, Farah and Edward James. 2012: *A Short History of Fantasy*. Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

Rowling, J. K. 1997: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 1998: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 1999: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 2000: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 2003: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 2005: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. London, Bloomsbury.

---. 2007: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. London, Bloomsbury,.

Smith, Harrison. "The Rise of Fantasy in literature." *The American Scholar* 17.3 (1948): 305-312. Web. 26 June 2015.

Sullivan III, C.W. "Folklore and Fantastic Literature." *Western Folklore* Vol 60 No. 4 (2001): pp 279-296  
*Western Folklore Society*. Web 14<sup>th</sup> March 2015 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1500409>

\*\*\*\*\*