

The Harry Potter Series: A Parallel World That Addresses the Central Concerns of Our Era; Racial and Cultural Discrimination and Associated Violence

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Abstract

The paper tries to identify the parallels between the magical world portrayed by J. K. Rowling in Harry Potter and the world that we live in. The world of Harry Potter is divided into magical and muggle worlds. The tension between the two factions within the magical world arises due to a difference of opinion regarding the relationship between muggles (non-magical folk) and wizards. In our world the tension is between different races and castes. A similar difference in status and privileges is also observable in the case of men and women in both the real and the imagined world. The treatment of muggles by wizards tells us a lot about the treatment of the blacks in the hands of the white Europeans. The difference of opinion between the whites finally resulted in the liberation of the blacks. Similarly, the fight between the muggle lovers and pure-blood fanatics ensure the safety of the ordinary folks.

Keywords: Rowling, Potter, Muggles, Parallels, Magic, Wizards

The books discussed in this paper are from the Harry Potter series of books by J. K. Rowling. The Harry Potter series cannot be considered science fiction as the author does not provide any scientific explanation to the story. Also the stories have more to do with the past rather than the future. The protagonist is engaged in a battle with the antagonist who terrorized the people who lived before his time. As the series ends the antagonist is defeated and the threat is eliminated. Also the movies and books portray a magical world which is much more familiar to the past rather than the future. The use of quills for writing and elements like owl post talk to us about life in the bygone era. However the series of books and movies talk about a magical world parallel to the world of muggles or non-magical people. As fantasy literature Harry Potter does offer us a lot to think about and contemplate. It cannot be considered as simplistic children's literature that is not meant for serious reading. The Harry Potter series of books and movies portray a magical world which addresses some of the central concerns of the modern human

society including problems like racial hatred and contempt and hate for anybody whose culture and belief system is different from our own.

Andrew Slack says about the books, “While Harry Potter is filled with a childlike magic, that magic plays out in a world whose “dark and difficult times” often mirror those of our society. The heroes that emerge from the struggles of this fantasy world can teach us something” (“Harry Potter and the Muggle Activists”). Harry Potter stories do not portray characters as completely good or bad. An excellent example of this is the character Albus Dumbledore. He is one of the most influential characters in the entire series. At the same time he had a serious flaw which was his intense desire for power. A powerful wizard and talented man he once believed that the non-magical community should be dominated or ruled over for everyone’s good. In the novel *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J. K. Rowling, Dumbledore tells Harry about the mistake he committed in the past, “You cannot imagine how his ideas caught me, Harry, inflamed me. Muggles forced into subservience. We wizards triumphant. Grindelwald and I, the glorious young leaders of the revolution” (716). Grindelwald and Dumbledore were two young wizards at that time and they were planning to take over absolute power and give everyone a glorious future. Their thrust is on the welfare and superiority of the wizards. “It would all be for the greater good, and any harm done would be repaid a hundredfold in benefits for wizards” (716). Naturally this meant that these wizards saw themselves as superior to the non-magical folk, and believed their submission and lack of freedom would be good for them.

This represents the mindset of colonial Europe which denied freedom to colonies saying they were uncultured and unable to administer themselves. They saw themselves as advanced and cultured in comparison to other cultures. Simon Glendinning says, “For a Eurocentric thinker Europe is not just one sample of human culture among others, not just one regional culture among others – but is the best example, the head of the pack: the avant-garde for the whole of humanity in its history and its development” (“Derrida and Europe beyond Eurocentrism and Anti-Eurocentrism”). It is also true that the Europeans had better technology with regard to warfare. This advantage gave the Europeans an easy victory over their enemies. Two young wizards, well versed in magical skills also believed that non-magic folk stood no chance before their powerful wizardry. Their plans are spoilt when a fight ensues between them and Grindelwald flees to pursue his destructive plan alone elsewhere. To a certain extent it can be observed that the fight between the colonial powers weakened colonialism to a great extent.

The antagonist of the stories, Lord Voldemort is presented as a follower of Salazar Slytherin who believed that muggles or non-magical people should not be given magical education. It is for this precise reason that Slytherin leaves the magical school that he founded along with three others. This reminds us of our own world which has denied education to different sections of the society based on their caste, race and gender at different points of time in history. The next thing we need to focus on is the fact that Slytherin does not simply leave the school, but works out a plan to kill the muggles or non-magic students who attend the school. Unable to resist the three other founders of the school he has to do this in utmost secrecy and yet the hatred for a group of people who are different from him is complete in the sense that he wants them killed. In Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* it clearly says that the plan by Slytherin can be used

“to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic” (151). The intolerance shown by religious and caste fanatics have resulted in murder and violence in many places. An example from India is the case of Mohammad Akhlaq and family who were attacked by a mob which believed that cattle should not be slaughtered or consumed. On 25/12/2015 The Indian Express reported, “A 50-year-old man, Mohammad Akhlaq, was beaten to death and his 22-year-old son severely injured on Monday night in UP’s Dadri, allegedly by residents of Bisara village, after rumours spread in the area about the family storing and consuming beef” (“Dadri: Mob kills man, injures son over ‘rumours’ that they ate beef”).

Lord Voldemort takes up Slytherin’s idea and takes it to its extreme and finds pleasure in exterminating the non-magic community. However for Voldemort it is not simply the hatred for non-magic community that drives his violent acts, it is also the thirst for power and ultimate superiority over others. He considered the non-magic community and its supporters among the magic community as enemies and found like-minded people as his followers. His plan to achieve power was always through that of hatred towards the non-magic community. His followers were known as death-eaters and they found it justifiable to kill anyone who did not believe in their principles. The same thing is happening in many parts of the world now, where religious sects are giving people the option of conforming to their beliefs or dying.

In the Reuters website Ahmed Rasheed wrote, “Sinjar is the ancient home of the Yazidis, one of the towns captured by the Sunni militants who view the community as "devil worshipers" and tell them to convert to Islam or face death” (“Islamic State killed 500 Yazidis, buried some victims alive”). Non-believers are also treated as slaves and are stripped of their basic humanity. The violence is not restricted to one religion alone. In the old testament of the Bible, the fate that awaits anyone who wishes to believe in a different God is this, “Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them. You must certainly put them to death” (Deuteronomy 13:8,9). It must be noted that the Bible is considered as a holy text by a large section of the human population who believe in Christianity.

Another important aspect of the novel is Voldemort’s effort to conquer death and become immortal. For this he creates horcruxes which carry pieces of his soul. Even if he is physically killed his life can be brought back using any piece of his soul. The splitting of the soul happens when a person commits murder. Thus in order to conquer death Voldemort decides to kill others. This is similar to the philosophy of some of the religious fundamentalists who claim that God will provide afterlife to those who kill people who do not believe in him.

It is evident that for Rowling dark magic was often linked with a hate for the non-magical muggle community. For instance in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry visits a dark magic shop, a dark magic object has the following description “Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed — Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date” (Rowling 52). Similarly Lucius Malfoy, a follower of the Dark Wizard Voldemort, tells his son Draco, “I would have thought you’d be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam” (52). The contempt for students of magic whose parents are muggles is quite evident in his words and a trace of misogyny can also be sensed. At the same time Harry’s friend Ron and his family are

depicted as people who are open to muggles. To a great extent, we can say that Rowling has depicted the evils of our world in her own fantasy world. She has also depicted characters who try to oppose these issues. Ron married Hermione who is a muggle born. Similarly Harry's mother Lily also was born to muggle parents. Rowling has depicted both of them as exceptional witches. Hagrid describes Hermione with the words, "And they haven't invented a spell our Hermionee can't do" (116). By portraying two muggle-borns as great witches, Rowling tries to break the stereotyping associated with racial qualities and demerits. It is important to note that Professor Dumbledore is in charge of admissions at the Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Andrew Slack says, "Dumbledore discusses how prevailing ideas of racial superiority for full-blood wizards must be transformed into curiosity and interest in people's differences" ("Harry Potter and the Muggle Activists").

Similarly the stories also portray the relationship between magical people and other creatures, some of them half-human like the elves, and how they are exploited by the wizarding (magical) community. This can be read as man's treatment of nature and other creatures for his own benefit. In Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Ron, who is Harry's best friend tells Hermione, "What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I'm not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I'm not doing it" (374). Hermione who is Harry and Ron's close friend is worried about the fact that the elves are working without any payment in the school kitchen as well as in other wizarding families. These are not animals but intelligent creatures just like human beings. In the book it can be seen that, "Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off" (379). Dobby was an elf who demanded freedom and the Hogwarts headmaster had no issues with granting him the same. Andrew Slack observes that Dumbledore believed that "House elves in servile positions must be allowed freedom and respect" ("Harry Potter and the Muggle Activists"). Similarly Dumbledore has no problems with admitting the half-giant Hagrid or the werewolf Remus Lupin in Hogwarts as teachers. Slack says that according to Dumbledore, "Half-giants, like Harry's friend Hagrid, shouldn't have to hide their identities. Indigenous populations, like the Centaurs and Merpeople, must be treated with the reverence and fairness they deserve" ("Harry Potter and the Muggle Activists"). Some of the characters in these books are depicted as persons trying to fight against these evils. In the Harry Potter world the right party wins the battle. But in our real world the fight is still being fought and the wrong party has gained much ground. These books and movies remind us of our worst fears and prepare us for the fight against discrimination and hatred.

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