

**Reading Race in Children's Literature in English : A Study of J.K.
Rowling's Harry
Potter Series****Jhuma Majumder
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Children's Literature, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, is the body of written works and accompanying illustrations that largely encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories, fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs and other primarily orally transmitted materials in order to entertain or instruct young people. Fantasy Literature consists of imaginative worlds or make-believe. Here the readers must suspend disbelief. Joanne Kathleen Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series is filled with racial imagery and motifs. Race permeates as a major theme in the hugely popular and best-selling series of the world-famous author. As pointed out by Saptarshi Ray, the racial stereotypes and prejudices that are present throughout the series can be seen as those real-life racial insults. Therefore, it would be interesting to see as to how racism, its prejudices and its stereotypes are present in the best-selling books. The main objective of this paper is to detect how race and its bias are present and as a result the magical world of Harry Potter is not so magical after all.

Keywords: *Children's Literature, Joanne Kathleen Rowling, Harry Potter, Race, Stereotypes, Prejudices.*

Children's Literature, is, defined as the material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults. Seth Lerer states:

"Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature". (1)

Fiona McCulloch further describes:

“Children’s Literature is a difficult term to define. Children in the past and in the present, have read books that were not initially intended for them... (29)

According to Krista Brancato, Children’s Literature can be dated back hundreds of years, but has only been fully recognized as a specific genre from around the mid to late eighteenth century. It has been derived from folklore passed down from generation to generation. Previously, because children were more independent and somewhat part of the working class, literature reflected their independence and the world’s harsh realities. In the term Children’s Literature, the most important word is literature. Adults admittedly make up part of its population.

“Children’s Literature is a construct, something that is given shape through various sets of interactions between a great variety of influencing parameters”.

(Sebastien Chapleau, *New Voices in Children’s Literary Criticism*).

According to Karin-Lesnik Oberstein,

“The definition of ‘Children’s Literature’ lies at the heart of its endeavour : it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience : children. The definition of ‘Children’s Literature’ therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this is supposed to connect it with that reading audience--- ‘children’---with which it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned”. (15)

As the child grows up, it recognizes the ‘other’ in terms of the symbolic, literary or graphic representations catered through literature. “ Racism, as Audrey Smedley defines, is any action, practice or belief that reflects the racial worldview---the ideology that Humans are divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called “ races ”, that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality and other cultural behavioural features and that some “ races ” are innately superior to others ”. Among the means adopted by colonial powers to coerce the hegemonic superiority of themselves, race is a significant construct. Tzvetan Todorov defines that the word ““ Racism ’, in its usual sense, actually designates two very different things. On the one hand, it is a matter of behaviour, usually a manifestation of

hatred or contempt for individuals who have well-defined physical characteristics different from our own ; on the other hand, it is a matter of ideology, a doctrine concerning human races ”. (64)

Children’s Literature consists of various genres ranging from chapter books to picture books, rhymes, poetry, fairy and folk tales, Historical novels, fantasy literature to Biography etc. Author Melissa Thomas in *The English Journal* has described that Fantasy is a metaphor for the Human condition in that it is ripe with mythic structures, heroic cycles and social and religious commentary. Fantasy Literature consists of imaginative worlds or make-believe. The stories are set in places that do not exist, about the people and creatures that could not exist, or events that could not happen. Here the readers must suspend disbelief.

This Paper also looks at Fantasy author Joanne Kathleen Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series where the fantasy world is rife with racial imagery and motifs. (Ray) Rowling uses the series not only to entertain, but to provide readers with a real world moral framework that explicitly encompasses race-related issues. (Lyubansky and Mulholland, 233)

It is through the Second novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* Rowling first addresses issues of racism. The story is about Harry’s second year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where Harry has to face the dreaded “ heir of Slytherin ” who will kill all pupils not belonging to the ancestry of pure blood ones. The book also describes the return of the evil wizard Voldemort in a new form. The word “Muggle” is introduced in this book.

It is in the Seventh Chapter of the book, *Mudbloods and Murmurs* Draco Malfoy, a student belonging to the prestigious Slytherin House calls Hermione Granger a “ Mudblood ”, a word deemed to be offensive in the wizarding world. Pure-blood wizards treat the inferior ones like Hermione with scorn. Thus, according to Lana Whited, J.K. Rowling lays the groundwork for a saga exploring issues of race. Slytherin House, to which students like Draco Malfoy belongs to be named after Salazar Slytherin. Slytherin, as Whited describes, left Hogwarts later on because his proposal was rejected by the school’s other three founders to admit only the children of pure-blood wizarding families and not any Muggle-born descendants.

The evil Lord Voldemort enjoys killing innocent Muggles and envisions a society consisting of pureblood wizards and witches, despite the fact that he is a half-blood himself. The slurs and stereotypes used against Muggle-born wizards, house elves, centaurs and giants---- the minority community in the wizarding world--- such as “ filthy half-breeds ” or “ mudbloods ” can be compared to real-life racial insults. (Ray)“ Although some non-white characters do exist in the series even though the author provides the non-white characters with racial identifiers as for example, Angelina Johnson is described as “ a tall black girl with long, braided hair ” and Dean Thomas as “ a Black boy even taller than Ron ”. (Lyubansky and Mulholland, 234) “ The tendency of some wizards ”, Mikhail Lyubansky and Neil Mulholland further describes, “ to place a premium on pure blood and treating half-bloods and Muggles as second-class citizens is an obvious parallel to the society’s history of oppression of Blacks. A number of characters, including Draco and Lucius Malfoy, explicitly espouse the superiority of pure blood, but this racist attitude may be best personified by the portrait of Sirius’s mother. Half-bloods, that is, those of both Muggle and wizard parentage are subhuman and undesirable. And that their very presence threatens the purity and cleanliness of both their surroundings and their selves. Thus, her disgust extends to her son, who befriends and invites the half-blood members of the Order into his house, and by doing so contaminates not only the house but himself” (237).

Dana Goldstein explains,
“The ‘Deathly Hallows’ referred to in the title of the seventh book are medieval magical objects made by pureblood brothers and thought to allow their owners to avoid death. Toward the end of the book, Harry learns he is the rightful heir to one of the hallows and can access the two others as well. So the boy wizard tasked with fighting the pureblood ideology is himself a descendant of one of the most prestigious families in magical history. Over the course of the books, the young wizards do learn to respect house elves, a species in slavery to human masters. Yet even in freedom, the elves’ personalities are depicted as fundamentally servile. A rather pathetic elf named Kreacher feels his subordination so keenly that when he fails in tasks assigned to him by Harry, he beats

himself to a pulp. We are meant to feel sorry for Kreacher, but elves have no agency—they owe even their liberation movement to humans”. (10)

The books belong to the Fantasy genre and overall giving the readers both children and even adults alike a delightful reading, but it cannot be altogether avoided that there do exist racial bias in this magical world. Harry, for the first time while at his second year in school comes to realise that there in fact racial bias and prejudice exist. This racial bias or inequality is reflected into the two divisions of society---the pure blood and the Muggle world in the magical and the fictional world of Harry Potter. The theme of racial superiority is a pervading theme that exists throughout the series. The fact that Draco Malfoy and his friends at the Slytherin House take pride in their pure blood ancestry is an eye-opener. When Draco says,

“No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood. Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words...” (86).

Ron Weasley explains later:

“It’s about the most insulting thing he could think of. Mudblood’s a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born---you know, non-magic parents. There are some wizards---like Malfoy’s family---who think they’re better than everyone else because they’re what people call pure-blood...” (89).

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