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Myths, Magic and Politics in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* by J.K. Rowling

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Abstract: *Fantasy has always been subjected to prejudice and equated with the literature of illusion. It is considered to be a world constructed on unfounded and unsubstantial assumptions. Harry Potter hepatology by British author J.K.Rowling is one such fantasy that takes place in the magical world of Hogwarts.*

*This paper has examined and investigated Rowling's cultural and political engagements in **Harry Potter and***

the Order of the Phoenix. Rowling through her magical and mythical surroundings of Hogwarts explores some fundamental concerns of rebellion, resistance and other cultural issues which deserve much-needed attention.

Keywords: *fantasy, mythology, politics, culture, rebellion, resistance.*

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Introduction:

The presence of magic and mythical tales in storybooks makes them equally interesting and important for children as well as adults. The *Harry Potter* series written by the British author Joanne Kathleen Rowling has been popular worldwide for more than a decade. Considered to be a 'quest fantasy' that abounds in myths and folklore, it is modeled on British boarding school stories. Following the trajectory of an epic, the *Harry Potter* series is all about the triumph of Harry over the evil symbolized by Voldemort. Like heroes from epic, Harry experiences anguish, frustration, loss of his loved ones and isolation before emerging victorious in a prolonged conflict that runs up to seven volumes. Though hugely popular the series has been accused of leading children towards satanism and occultism. It also battles charges of infantilism among adults, apparently ratifying the worst fear of the Frankfurt School theorist who argued that popular culture artifacts turn adults into children who become a regressive audience in the culture industry. Despite these accusations, *Potter* hepatology continued to grow and has been adapted into movies and has inspired numerous spin-offs and merchandise, which again echoes Horkheimer's thoughts of a

thriving 'culture industry' that has a fetish for and is absorbed in the consumption of homogenous and standardized cultural products.

Objectives:

This research paper aims to examine *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* through its textual and thematic structure to identify various socio-political concerns such as racism, resistance, and rebellion along with other cultural issues. Since the *Harry Potter* series is a hepatology and the entire series deals with a host of other issues, my research is restricted to an examination of mythical and political aspects present in the fifth installment.

Methodology:

For the purpose of undertaking this research, the following methodologies have been adopted:

1. A detailed reading of the text along with background reading of sources and influences which have gone into the writing of the novel.
2. Incorporating insights from critical perspectives offered by critics and academics.
3. Applying a new historic and cultural material lens to uncover social and cultural parallels between the text and the society.

Review of Literature:

Defense against the Dark Arts (2021) by John S. Nelson has been named after one of the subjects in the Hogwarts curricula and engages with provocative politics and ideologies present in the *Harry Potter* books through the medium of fantasy crafted by J.K. Rowling. It also deals with philosophical complications such as death and loyalty and philosophies like stoicism and perfectionism determined through the actions and behaviours of its prominent characters. *The Politics of Harry Potter* (2011) by Bethany Barratt is a useful guide on the politics and political institutions such as prisons, judiciary, government, human rights, and international relations in the fantasy world of *Harry Potter* and how these have a direct bearing on the politics of contemporary times. *The Magical World of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends and Fascinating Facts* (2008) by David Colbert is an illuminating resource for anyone looking to discover the sources and meanings of the fantastical creatures,

magic spells, and unique names which feature in the *Harry Potter* series. *Harry Potter's Bookshelf: The Great Books behind the Hogwarts Adventures* (2009) by John Granger provides a kind of list of various genres and books which apparently influenced the production of the *Harry Potter* series. *Heroism in the Harry Potter Series* (2011) is a motley collection of literary and critical essays edited by Katrin Berndt and Lena Steveker. These essays deal with a wide range of subjects such as gender, Christian motifs and morality and movie adaptations of the series. *The Ultimate Harry Potter and the Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles* (2010) by Gregory Bassham as the name suggests explores some of the deeper issues and subtleties found in the Potter books. The book uses Harry Potter as a medium to introduce and popularize some of the ideas of the great philosophers and thinkers.

The Premise in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth installment in hepatology was published on 21st June 2003 and is considered to be the most important in terms of plot in the series. The book follows the struggle of Harry in his fifth year at Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft that includes the surreptitious return of the Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, the Ministry of Magic's vehement denials, and OWL (Ordinary Wizarding Level) exams conducted under the new management of Dolores Umbridge. The important themes explored in this book are practical knowledge versus theoretical knowledge as depicted through defense against arts classes, rebellion and resistance, racism, and an attempt to treat human and non-human creatures equally.

The book begins with the scorching heat of summer and the entry of evil spirits named dementors who launch an unexpected attack on Harry's Muggle (non-magical) Cousin Dudley Dursley and also on Harry when he tries to save his cousin. It is worthwhile to point out that Dursleys are Harry's guardians after his parents' death and are offered as caricatures of bourgeois consumerism who are interested in material wealth which is further used as a yardstick of personal worth and merit. Due to his use of magic spells outside the wizarding world, Harry was accused of performing underage magic in a Muggle-dominated society and hence was asked to appear before a jury to defend himself. The summoning of Harry in the case of underage

magic in the presence of a muggle reminds the reader of the wizarding government's constant surveillance of its citizens (or how else do they know that magic was performed in a particular time and place) raising issues of civil liberties among the wizarding public. Harry was, however, vindicated and he joined Hogwarts but the situation in the magical school was equally trying and enigmatic for Harry with him sharing visions with arch-nemesis Voldemort, an extremely claustrophobic and repressive defense against the dark arts classes by Umbridge with an emphasis on the ministry-approved syllabus which hardly contained any practical knowledge and the revelation of the prophecy which would ultimately decide the fate of Harry in the magical world. In fact, not only Harry and his friends but the entire school experiences great pressure and the politics of the Ministry of Magic under the regime of Dolores Umbridge. The book ends with a dramatic climax featuring a showdown between Harry and Voldemort to get hold of the age-old prophecy that could either break or make the fate of both of them in which Harry emerges victorious.

Myths and Magic in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: Rowling, in many of her interviews, has asserted that she has been quite liberal with her borrowings from myths and folklore. While some of the mythical elements have been projected in toto some are a cross-creation between mythical creatures and Rowling's imagination. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the magical and mythical creatures presented are boggarts, giants, dementors, thestrals, and Nagini (snake).

Boggarts: Boggarts come from English folklore. They are mischievous beings and can be found in houses, marshes, and fields. They look like humans but are ugly and uncouth. Rowling's boggarts are different because they are shape shifters and are frightening and are driven away by laughter.

Giants: Grawp is the giant and the half-brother of Hagrid and is sixteen feet tall but short in terms of giant standards. Giants in Greek mythology were supposedly born when Uranus's blood fell on Gaea and was called Gigantes. Giants were considered cannibals and vicious. Grawp is aggressive in nature as it was the common trait of giants. Grawp was bullied by the other giants because of his size, which is why

Hagrid brought him back to Hogwarts with him. Despite Grawp's repeated requests to go home, Hagrid insisted on dragging his half-brother along. In English, Grawp sounds more like a grunt than a name which is a pictorial demonstration of more than one syllable. He mispronounces words and has issues in speaking English such as Hermione as Hermy.

Dementors: First introduced in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, dementors are terrifying creatures who guard the magical prison Azkaban and are notorious for their 'soul-sucking kiss.' Dementors suck the life and hope from a person and the affected person experiences an inability to be happy ever again. Dementors are in fact psycho fictional projections of depression, a mental illness that is also accompanied by the same symptoms and something which Rowling herself battled with. The remedy to ward off a dementor lies in a spell called 'Expecto Patronum' and also by eating chocolates.

Thestrals: Thestrals are a crossbreed between a dragon and a horse. In the book, they are presented as peculiar horses having wings and skinny bodies. However, the appearance of this creature is rather scary and frightening as its structure is dark, skeletal, and black. It has wings to fly like that of bats and only those who have witnessed death can see this creature hence only Harry and Luna Lovegood are able to see and touch these creatures. They have an exceptional sense of direction that proves helpful in travelling through the air without getting lost. Even though thestrals have an ugly appearance and a bad reputation among magical creatures, these are known to be benevolent.

Nagini (snake): Nagini is considered to be a human female Maledictus with the ability to transform into a snake. Nagini is known as Voldemort's snake and an important threat to Harry Potter and his closest allies. She is one of the Horcruxes (the artifacts which store a fragment of Voldemort's soul and there are seven of them). The mythical and fictional creature in the novel is actually a python. In fact, it is Nagini who attacks Arthur Weasley in the Department of Mysteries.

Phoenix: The phoenix in the novel is named Fawkes. It is Dumbledore's bird and is symbolic of loyalty. The phoenix is a mythical bird from Egypt and is considered to be sacred and influential in

other Asian mythologies as well. Phoenix often depicted in shades of red and gold is a symbol of resilience and immortality as it is believed that they are reborn from their own ashes.

Centaurs: Centaurs are mythical creatures who have the torso of a human and the legs and bodies resemble a horse and who supposedly come from the mountains in Greece. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Firenze is a centaur who replaces Professor Trelawney as a professor of Divination. But it is worth noting that wizards and centaurs are at odds with each other and are not allowed to enter into each other's territory.

Elves : Elves originate from Norse mythology and are also a part of North European folklore. They are supposed to possess supernatural abilities of either healing or sickness. They have been depicted diversely in shapes and sizes and their relationship with humans. In Rowling's world, they are presented as slaves to the wizards.

Apart from her love for myths and folklore, Rowling has borrowed a lot from Latin and Greek, especially in the names of her characters and magical spells. The name of the headmaster Albus means white in Latin and is reflected through his white hair and long, white beard while his surname Dumbledore is an old English word for bumblebee. Professor McGonagall's first name Minerva is the name of the Roman goddess of wisdom and Hermione comes from Hermes, who was the Greek god of eloquence and communication. Harry's godfather Sirius Black has been named after Sirius the brightest star in the galaxy and the word originates from the Greek 'seirios' which means to burn. The various spells and charms used by the students are in fact derived from Latin. The most prominent example from the book, the Occlumency tutorials taken by Harry to shut his mind from Voldemort's invasion actually comes from the Latin 'occlude' which means 'to close down.' The charm used to repel a dementor 'Expecto Patronum' comes from the Latin 'Especto' meaning 'I await' and 'Patronus' meaning 'a guardian.'

Politics in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: The core conflict in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is that the Ministry of Magic refuses to believe that Voldemort has returned, which drives the plot and narrative in the novel. Ideally, such a piece of alarming news

should have merited some serious attention on the part of the government and adequate safety measures should have been implemented for the wizarding public. The Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge not only refuses to acknowledge Voldemort's return but also downplays Harry by calling him an attention-seeking disturbed teenager. Fudge's views on Harry are further fortified by the wizarding media through its mouthpiece *The Daily Prophet* which reflects the control of the government over the media and its correspondents. The policy of indifference and non-resistance on the part of Fudge provides indirect protection to Voldemort and his supporters thus jeopardizing the safety of the wizarding public. To maintain his position in the ministry Fudge goes to every extent possible, intervening and tampering with every branch of the government beginning with the Wizengamot (the judiciary). He removes Dumbledore from the jury and almost denies Harry a fair trial by changing the time and venue of the hearing at the last moment, though committing underage magic is not such an offense that deserves a trial, to begin with. Next, he tries to control *The Daily Prophet* (the press) as Hermione says the press intends to sell itself and not inform, and lastly the educational system (Hogwarts). By appointing Dolores Umbridge as the 'Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and the 'High Inquisitor', Fudge causes direct and damaging institutionalized oppression in the wizarding world. Fudge and Umbridge distort reality as she says in her class "there is nothing waiting out there Mr. Potter" (Rowling, 2014). It is evident that Rowling is not only concerned with justice alone. She is concerned with the whole legal-political system in the wizarding world where the ministry officials enjoy an incredible amount of power which is concentrated in the hand of Minister of Magic Fudge, who is the senior-most representative. There is no separation of powers between legislative, executive, and judiciary as exemplified in Harry's trial. There is no Rule of Law and this deficiency in the system is exploited by power-hungry dark wizards like Voldemort who infiltrate through these weaknesses and lapses in the system.

Dolores Umbridge "trades on borrowed legitimacy from Fudge" (Barratt, 2012) and is a nightmare for the students and administration of Hogwarts. Throughout her tenure, Umbridge

supports the narrative perpetuated by Fudge in the ministry and the media. She believes in teaching the ministry-approved syllabus and not what the students actually need to be taught. Her students are not allowed to practice spells against dark arts thus leaving them vulnerable in case of any attack. She further silences students' protests by implementing decree after decree and resorting to corporal punishment. The interference of the Ministry of Magic in the Hogwarts curriculum through Umbridge reflects the British government's worry about providing too much autonomy to public schools but then too much control is not the solution either as shown in the students' rebellion and her ouster. Her dismissal echoes a warning from Machiavelli: not to engender hatred in the public. Her other principles and beliefs include the superiority of the wizards over other non-magical beings such as giants and centaurs and hatred for half-breeds like Hagrid, reflecting issues of bloodlines and race. These issues reflect worrying trends in the post-1930s such as discrimination and persecution of the marginalized and rhetoric of fascism by mainstream parties. As High Inquisitor of Hogwarts and later headmistress, she acquires major powers to set the school rules and guidelines. Though Umbridge holds and enjoys a considerable amount of power, these powers are exercised under the guidance of men. Also, the major portfolios in the ministry are occupied by men which when analyzed from a feminist lens throws questions at women's capabilities and decision-making abilities. As a result of Umbridge's highhandedness, and the ministry's indifference rebellion and resistance come from both the students and wizards who form groups called 'Dumbledore's Army' (DA) (of which Harry becomes the leader by popular mandate) and Order of the Phoenix respectively. The DA served as a platform for the students to conduct practical spells and charms needed to protect themselves against the 'Dark Arts'. This group or the army agreed to maintain the secrecy of this practice because if Umbridge found out about the activity all the members would be punished and the practices would be suspended. But since all the communication channels in and around Hogwarts were being monitored (again a misuse of power and as a means to secure intelligence), 'Dumbledore's Army' (DA) is ultimately exposed but in a dramatic turn of events brings an end to

Umbridge as well and "she leaves as most authoritarian muggle leaders do... violently and no one to support her" (Barratt, 2012).

While the DA was formed by the students of Hogwarts on a smaller scale to rebel against Umbridge and her oppressive policies, 'The Order of the Phoenix' happens to be a secret society of wizards on a larger scale that existed for long and was formed by Dumbledore in order to thwart Voldemort's plan of recruiting an army to promote his agenda of the rule of the purebloods, an idea reminiscent of Third Reich and antisemitic propaganda of Hitler in 1930s in Germany. Voldemort's mania for pure-blood supremacy and muggle hatred can be explained through psychoanalytic theory as propounded by Sigmund Freud. Freud stated that relationships and attachments in childhood affect the behavior of individuals in later life. Since Voldemort had a muggle father who abandoned him at his birth, his hatred is a classic example of displacement where Voldemort's angst and hatred for his father are projected toward the entire muggle and muggle-born community. Both D.A. and the Order of the Phoenix can be taken to be the symbols of counter movements such as the People's Vote in Britain against right-wing nationalism.

The Order was put on hold once it was believed that Voldemort has been vanquished but was reconstituted once the news of Voldemort's return resurfaced. Rowling plays on the mythical and Christian symbol of the phoenix which is associated with rebirth and resilience and also stands as a Christian symbol of the resurrection of Christ, the saviour. In fact, the series as a whole and also the individual volumes are modelled on the principle of psychomachia, which means the battle of the soul. It is a genre with origin in Latin ballads and employs Christian motifs and symbols. In the Order of the Phoenix Harry has recurrent nightmares of him losing his identity and becoming Voldemort and hence he takes occlumency lessons to protect his mind and soul from Voldemort's invasion but eventually he fails and provides Voldemort an opportunity to trick him to the department of mystery which houses the prophecy. Thus, Voldemort can be read as the gothic double of Harry with an uncanny resemblance both being orphans and half-bloods.

The other conflict in the novel is between wizards i.e., magical human beings, and

non-human magical creatures such as house elves, centaurs, giants, and other magical beasts. In the wizarding world the culture and the manner of the wizards dominate, and it often happens at the expense and exploitation of non-human magical creatures, thus bringing to the fore the power structure operating in a “magical world that is no less political than our own” (Barratt, 2012). Since wizards are at the top, they not only make laws for wizards but also for the magical creatures through the department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. The equation between wizards and non-human magical creatures is complex and thrives on power because most of these non-human magical creatures like elves, giants, werewolves, goblins, and centaurs have their own culture and abilities, intelligence, and when denied, amounts to gross neglect of their civil and fundamental rights. This denial is perpetuated by twin factors of power and “at least in part on threat” (Barratt, 2012). The threat of being overpowered or taken down by these assumed second-class creatures. Rowling insinuates that these creatures are irrational, unintelligent, impulsive, and hence in need of control and regulation. These opinions reveal the Foucauldian concept of power as to how a certain section of the population is classified as either criminal or sick and needs constant surveillance by the authorities. It highlights the notion of ‘power is knowledge’ where knowledge is both produced and suppressed by power. This Foucauldian insight also happens to be the base for Edward Said’s orientalism which propounded that the West produced and circulated certain ‘knowledge’ about the Orient, categorizing them as the Others through colonial power. In the wizarding world, these non-human magical creatures act as a stand-in for the Others which is primitive and irrational, isolated, and must be kept in check while the wizards are at the center and superior. The house elves are enslaved to serve their masters and their condition is pathetic as Dumbledore remarks “they are what he (Kreacher) has been made by wizards...miserable. Sirius did nothing to make Kreacher’s lot easier” (Rowling, 2014). Though Hermione tries her best to free these house elves and forms S.P.E.W (Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare), which reflects parallels with the slavery abolition movement in the United States she hardly succeeds because like most non-political organizations her efforts are

a top-down approach and do not focus on the grass root level. The exploitation of house elves for their labour by developing a false consciousness to please their master reflects the Marxist critique of labour exploitation at the hands of those who are powerful. Similarly, the case of giants is portrayed as wizard-hating savages who “kill each other every few weeks...the remnants of the old tribes fight each other” (Rowling, 2014). Centaurs too raise their voices against discrimination because they are part human and part horse when Firenze argues “centaurs are not the servants or playthings of humans” (Rowling, 2014). It is surprising though that those who are fighting to fend off the impending oppression from Voldemort themselves become oppressors when it comes to the treatment of non-human magical creatures thereby projecting the moral ambiguities in the wizarding world.

Conclusion:

An analysis of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* reveals that Rowling’s work deals with subjects that are socio-political in nature. It portrays the experiences of the past culture in the west such as Nazism in Germany and slavery and anti-slavery movements in the U.S. in tune with the practices of new historicism and cultural materialism which believes that a literary work is inseparable from history where “the historical period in question is seen as a remote culture whose discursive manifestations...need detailed attention” (Bertens, 2008). It foregrounds cultural and social practices that are recorded in detail. Both new historicism and cultural materialism bring to the fore the power relations operating in a culture not only in the past but in the present which is presented in a literary text as well which gets reflected in a literary text. Portraying Voldemort and his ideas as loathsome and discrimination based on racial and class hierarchy as deplorable and problematic, Rowling allows the readers to deduce that totalitarianism and discrimination are unacceptable. She simultaneously hints at the worth and value of democracy and tolerance in the political system and that’s how fiction informs culture according to new historicism. “By grounding the fantastical world of Harry Potter in commonly understood historical reality, Rowling creates a common frame of reference against which readers can compare their own worlds with...the wizarding world...” (King and Thompson, 2017). *Harry Potter and the*

Order of the Phoenix together with the entire series also vindicates popular culture and its products from brutal remarks offered by Theodore Adorno and other high-brow critics. Products of popular culture are often at odds with the message they carry but the discourses in *Harry Potter* dispel the notion that these products are crass and their sole worth is entertainment alone. Though magical in nature and setting, the wizarding world resembles the muggle world in everything including its dangers and discrimination. Power matters in both worlds and there is a constant conflict between those using power judiciously and those who do it arbitrarily. "J.K. Rowling uses her fictional world to address life's enduring questions with stark images, strong

contrasts, dark themes, and powerful character development" (Barratt, 2012).

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