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# Magic, Mainstream and Marginal: The Representation of Racial Othering in J.K. Rowling's Potterverse

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The magical universe of Harry Potter, commonly known as 'Potterverse' among the fans of the *Harry Potter* saga by Joan Kathleen Rowling, has undisputedly carved a niche for itself in the universe of fantasy literature. In this series (which consists of the seven *Harry Potter* titles as well as three other books, namely *Quidditch through the Ages*, *Fantastic Beasts and where to Find them* and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, associated with the saga and later published by Rowling as separate volumes) Rowling deals with a number of themes and draws heavily from a myriad of aspects of life and literature ranging from ancient mythologies and romances to contemporary socio-political contexts. This paper strives to explore how Rowling has dealt with the issues of socio-political marginalisation and how different facets of marginalisation have been represented in the series.

A deeper layer of symbolism arguably runs throughout the novels. Although Rowling's works contain a host of influences, the core of *Harry Potter* is inescapably mythic. Rowling refashions her modern fantasies with curious amalgamations of heterogeneous mythologies in order to furnish her magical universe. But she does not weave a Tolkien-esque secondary world with the help of these mythological and folk fibres. Harry Potter's Wizarding World is no Rowling-esque

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counterpart of the Middle Earth where the protagonists as well as the readers encounter mystic truths. Rather it is a universe parallel to the non-magic “Muggle” world, a world putting up a mirror in front of the human “Muggle” idiosyncrasies. This we must understand because Rowling’s narrative is not merely a story of good versus evil, but functionally serves to highlight various predicaments of human existence in a mythical trope. Rowling herself admitted in an interactive session at the Carnegie Hall:

I wanted Harry to leave our world and find exactly the same problems in the Wizarding World. (Interactive session)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “marginalise” as a word of twofold meaning, both of which are not entirely unrelated. They are: i) “to make original notes upon and” ii) “to render or treat as marginal; to remove from the centre or mainstream; to force (an individual, minority group, etc.) to the periphery of a dominant social group; (gen.) to belittle, depreciate, discount, or dismiss” (OED). In *Harry Potter* we find both definitions in operation. But before going into the analyses of marginalisation we must recognise the subjects and objects of marginalisation in Potterverse.

As we have mentioned earlier, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter is essentially a reflection of the real, pedestrian world in which we belong with all our happiness and sorrows. In this everyday world commonness is mainstream, whereas the uncommon is the thing most strangely looked upon, most radically reacted at, and therefore also most feared. Consequently a process of Othering (to borrow the term from Edward Said) inevitably takes place, where the so-called mainstream non-magic people, the Muggles, develop a set of beliefs based partially on reality and partially on their own prejudices. But if the perspective is changed and the eye-glasses of the Wizarding World are put on, it would be seen that the same deep set beliefs are at work among Wizardkind as well – beliefs that objectify Muggles to

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the Wizard subject. So here we see that the construction of the identities of both Muggles and Wizards is essentially discursive in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Foucault's term "discourse" has been interpreted as:

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (Weedon 108)

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... a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance. (Diamond and Quinby 185)

From Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* I largely draw the parentheses of the concepts of Othering and marginalisation. While marking the nature of Orientalism and thereby the initiation point of the process of Othering, Said remarks:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and... "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers... have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on. (Said 2-3)

The interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meanings of Orientalism is a constant one, and... there [is] a considerable, quite disciplined—perhaps

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even regulated—traffic between the two. (Said 3)

...without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient... (Said 3)

This nature of discourse is applicable to the sharers of Pottermore as well – namely the Muggles and the Wizards, who constantly construct each other’s identities by means of objectifying the Other. This process of Othering inevitably leads to marginalisation of the Other in both meanings of the term, as defined by OED: the object, be it Muggles or Wizards, is made original notes upon them (everything about them is systematically, academically documented, creating the ‘epistemological difference’ of which Said speaks), and this eventually produces the historic knowledge which aids the subject to relegate or force the object to the periphery, to belittle and even dismiss the object.

This kind of formal documentation of the Other is not conspicuous among Muggles, because first of all the non-magic people are not aware of the existence of the Wizarding World, and secondly, the primary job of the Ministry of Magic is to keep the existence of the magical community secret from the non-magic people (SS 65). But whenever the two binary opposite communities come into contact, the response on the Muggles’ part is in general reactionary and dismissive. Of course there are exceptional Muggle families like the Evans and the Grangers (parents of Lily Potter and Hermione Granger) take a friendly approach towards the Wizarding community and look upon their children appreciatively for being a part of it. But the majority of Muggles is like Seamus Finnigan’s father who discovered his wife to be a witch only after marriage and it was a “nasty shock for him” (SS 125), or Mr Angus Fleet of Peebles who, upon seeing the flying Ford Anglia driven by Ron, went straight up to

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the police to file a report of the bizarre occurrence (CS 79). To be specific, it is the Dursleys who exemplify this apathetic, abhorrent, marginalising attitude. To them the magical abilities of Harry is nothing more than abnormality, which Uncle Vernon assumes “probably a good beating [would] have cured” (SS 56); anything related to magic is intolerable to them, but at the same time the very existence, even any mention, of magic is absolutely scary for them. A common non-magic folk’s vehement reaction to the magical world is epitomised in this blurt-out of Vernon Dursley, in which he condemns the very existence of magic, Wizards as well as Harry’s parents:

...and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion... asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these Wizarding types... just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end... (SS 56)

Leaving the discussion of the Muggle gaze towards the Wizarding world here, we shall now turn our attention to the opposite gaze: the Muggle world from the perspective of the Wizardkind. It is here that we encounter the systematic, academic study of Muggles, the Others, which objectifies Muggles seemingly as an anthropological species completely separate and different from the Wizards. In Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry “Muggle Studies” is introduced as a discipline in the third year, which somewhat marks the beginning of the intermediate years of Hogwarts’ seven years educational course.

One wonders about the reason behind studying Muggles as a different discipline altogether. According to the saga, the magical and non-magical communities have been coexisting under the sun since long, and therefore it is very much natural that the magical community, well aware of the existence of the other sharer of the earth, namely Muggles, would want to know as much as possible

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about this other entity. The attitudes in their discourse on Muggles are of monumental importance here. Primarily there is an academic, scientific, enthusiastic attitude – which results into the establishment of an impartial, scientific study of Muggles or manifests in some (like Arthur Weasley) in the form of a romantic fascination; and on the other hand there exists an apathetic, hateful attitude towards the Muggles, which a major chunk of the Wizarding community indulges in. This second type of attitude, needless to say, becomes the principal antagonist in the *Harry Potter* saga in the form of Lord Voldemort.

The entire series by Rowling celebrates the holistic, tolerant first kind of attitude that speaks of peace and harmony between the two ‘races’ – magical and non-magical. In the magical educational system the scientific subject of Muggle Studies is introduced in order to promote this attitude of harmony, but alongside it produces and reproduces certain knowledge about Muggles too. In *Orientalism*, while commenting on Arthur James Balfour’s remarks on the British-Egyptian relation, Said observes:

Knowledge to Balfour means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline—and of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a “fact” which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it. (Said 32)

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The same kind of knowledge is produced by the scientific studies about the Muggles, which, primarily and definitely, Otherise the Muggles from the Wizards, if not directly marginalise them (from the third year Muggle Studies essay “Explain why Muggles need Electricity” [PS 250] to Mr Weasley’s eccentric fascination with every Muggle-related thing like plugs, postal service and telephone corroborate this). This is precisely the reason why such studies could be instrumental in preaching racial distinction and supremacy, as it does prove to be in the regime of Voldemort. After all such studies are interfaces of the opposite Gaze, precisely which Hermione Granger, and exceptionally brilliant student, wished to explore in her third year despite being a Muggle-born witch herself – she thought it would be “fascinating to study [Muggles] from the Wizarding point of view.” (PS 57)

The second type of attitude – the attitude of apathy and hatred towards Muggles – plays a crucial role in bestowing a shade of Manichaeian struggle upon the saga, and it is here that the issue of not only Muggles but other magical ‘creatures’ being inferior to, and therefore marginalised by, Wizards takes the front-seat. Here we must allude to the elitist, snobbish and segregational theory of blood-purity of the ‘dark wizards’, which has proved to be an apple of discord among the Wizarding community since long and upon which the autocratic theory of Wizard supremacy is founded. Voldemort’s takeover of the Wizarding world saw practical manifestation of this theory; however, considering Wizards of olden days like Salazar Slytherine and Gellert Grindelwald, who upheld the theory of blood-purity and Wizard supremacy, Voldemort stands at an end of the tradition, the racist ideology finding its acme in him. As is natural for any autocratic megalomaniac, Voldemort also uses systematic, scientific knowledge to preach his own ideology by promoting racial discord (noticeably Salazar Slytherin, a founder of Hogwarts and an

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ancestor of Voldemort both philosophically and biologically, also emphasised upon the magical education being confined only “within all-magic families” because “he disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy” [CS 150]); and not only Muggles, but Muggle-born Wizards and witches as well as various other magical beings ranging from centaurs and giants to house-elves and werewolves are thus marginalised by this sectarian and discriminating ideology.

Many including Rowling herself have found parallels between the ideologies of Hitler and Voldemort (Interview by *The Volkskrant*). Voldemort’s bigotry, megalomania and his notion of Wizard supremacy eventually leads to genocide of the Others that fall outside his circle of mainstream “pureblood” Wizards – a phenomenal occurrence strongly resembling the ethnic cleansing of the Jews by the Nazis. At the very dawn of his takeover, Voldemort kills Charity Burbage, the former Hogwarts teacher of Muggle Studies, for teaching “how [Muggles] are not so different from [Wizards]” (DH 12) and expressing positive views on Muggle-Wizard harmony. He later installs in the same post his faithful Death Eater Alecto Carrow, who starts preaching the ideology of racial discrimination, and above all, justifies it by referring to the ‘historical’ fact that Muggles have always been vicious to Wizards, and that “the natural order [was] being re-established” in the regime of Voldemort (DH 574). We come across this very kind of takeover of ‘scientific’, ‘historical’ and therefore ‘objective’ knowledge in Nazi Germany too, where it was taught in elementary history classes how the Treaty of Versailles was a conspiracy against Germany, how the hyperinflation of 1923 was a work of Jewish saboteurs and how the national resurgence started in the regime of Hitler; in biology classes students were taught comparative anthropology with the goal to teach them how different and inferior the Jews are to Germans, as they were taught the science



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of heredity and the glorious necessity and meaning of blood purity (Simkin).

Probably the most important connection between the anti-Muggle and the anti-Jewish propaganda is the importance of ‘blood status’. In Nazi Germany the Nuremberg Laws (established to take away Jewish civil rights) categorised the Jews as a race as opposed to a religion or culture. Anyone who considered him/herself Jewish-born, or had more than two Jewish ancestors, were classified as Jewish. People with one or two Jewish grandparents were considered to be Mischlings (mixed race) (Stackelberg 256, 284). As is well known, anyone associated with people of Jewish blood was at risk in Nazi Germany. We can find a parallel to this in the Wizarding World, where distinctions are made between “pure-blood”, “half-blood”, and “Muggle-born” (or “mud-blood”, a degrading term for the Muggle-borns). The treatment of these classifications is more or less the same as in Nazi Germany (pure-blood = Aryan; half-blood = Mischlings; Muggle-born = Jewish). The depiction of the “Magic is Might” statue at the Ministry of Magic clearly shows the status and position the Muggles hold in the Wizard-dominated society (DH 242); they are not only depicted as marginalised, but literally crushed under the Wizard and witch of happy, comfortable demeanour. The Muggle-born Registration Commission is another tool in the system of the Muggle holocaust. The sectarian bigotry of the discourse not only denies the Other (the Muggle-borns) of their identity (as Wizards or witches), but puts a stigma of thievery on them, declaring that the Wizard or witch of “impure blood” must have “stolen” the magical ability from the real, rightful ones and therefore are actually impostors to be punished – an absurd and theoretically impossible proposition (DH 219). The Manichean, fanatic ideology even extends its propaganda through (supposedly) Dolores Umbridge’s pamphlet “Mudbloods and the Dangers they pose to a Peaceful Pure-

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Blood Society”, the cover of which represents the Pure-Blood race as “a red rose with a simpering face in the middle of its petals, being strangled by a green weed with fangs and a scowl” (DH 249). This genealogy-based ideology therefore not only creates and segregates the Other, creating a heavily mythical discourse of the Other, but also implicates the means of dominating the Other by manipulating the historic knowledge among the sharers of the represented discourse. Curiously, we find parallels of all these in the history of Jewish holocaust in Nazi Germany – from the discourse discriminating the Jews to various commissions with the job of recording the profiles of non-Aryans.

The issue of marginalisation in Potterverse becomes further complicated when magical creatures enter the arena. Rowling writes that the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures of the Ministry of Magic is divided into three divisions: Being division, Beast division and Spirit division (FB xii). Whereas the Spirit division deals simply with ghosts, the definitions and identities of “beings” and “beasts” are confusing and much debated in the Wizarding ministry. It is after much debate that the Wizards define and identify the beings as “any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws” (ibid). This very definition reflects the Wizarding community’s attitude in general (irrespective of the blood-status of the Wizards) towards the identity construct of magical creatures – they are willing to bestow the status of a “being” rather than that of a “beast” only upon the creatures ready to comply to the laws of the centre, the mainstream, namely the human Wizarding community. Nonetheless, the Wizarding community acknowledges the beings’ contribution to the magical world at least, as we find that the Fountain of Magical Brethren at the Ministry in the pre-Voldemort regime features statues of a centaur, a

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goblin and a house-elf too along with those of a Wizard and a witch (OP 127). However, after Voldemort's takeover we see this statue replaced by the Magic is Might statue, which strikingly features only Muggles and Wizarding people. The significance of this statue is not only in the depiction of the Muggle-Wizard relationship in the era of Voldemort's resurgence, but it subtly suggests that in the new dawn of magical supremacy Muggles are at least acknowledged to have a space of their own (howsoever marginalised and downtrodden they may be); but a space, an identity or, to say so, the very existence of magical creatures is denied by the blood-status-boasting Wizards in Voldemort's regime.

As the mainstream always wants to negatively identify and stigmatise the Other, an air of suspicion and anxiety always operates within the mainstream. In Pottermore we come across another kind of racism. As his origin as a half-Giant becomes exposed, Hagrid, a kind and widely beloved person, is all of a sudden treated as a malicious being to be avoided – all because his mother belonged to the popularly notorious race of Giants (GF ch. 24). Madame Maxime, originally a half-Giantess but an acclaimed witch, is so ashamed of her origin that she pretends to be offended when Hagrid recognises her true identity and denies of having any biological connection with Giants at all (GF 428-9).

Marginalisation of the werewolves is quite different a case from that of Giants. Since long lycanthropy has been represented as a kind of illness and Rowling also exploits another facet of this hypothesis. The question of the identity location of werewolves in the magical world is very much complicated, because, when not transformed, werewolves retain the intelligence of mainstream Wizarding beings, and yet magical legislators oscillate between "Being" and "Beast" about deciding upon the werewolves' identity status (FB xiii).

So severe is the marginalisation of werewolves that they are

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deliberately outcast and denied of livelihoods, as we know from the poor conditions of Remus Lupin, an extremely efficient Wizard and a warm-hearted human being. Werewolves are the entities in Potterverse who are shunned because of their supposedly incurable disease with which much fearful myth is associated. One may go so far as to opine that their representation by Rowling reflects the traditional hateful outlook of ‘normal’ people toward those affected by such diseases like AIDS or leprosy in the world we live in.

The centaurs, renowned for their ancient knowledge and culture of their own, fare little better, though they have not been banished to the geographical margins of the Wizarding World. A group of centaurs resides in the Forbidden Forest on the grounds of Hogwarts, but remains aloof from humans wilfully. One of them, Firenze, is banished by his herd for what his people view as “peddling [their] knowledge and secrets among humans” (OP 698). Although they have a partially humanoid appearance, the Ministry of Magic treats them as a non-human class. Having been exiled from his own people, Firenze becomes Hogwarts’ Divination teacher. During his first teaching session we see Dean Thomas, a student, inquiring, “Did Hagrid breed you, like the thestrals?” (OP 601). Dean’s innocent curiosity reflects the prevailing attitudes of the Wizards that any non-human creature, however powerful or intelligent in his or her own right, surely have come into being under the supervision of at least a half-human like Hagrid. Dolores Umbridge also reveals while hurling insults at the centaurs that they fall under the jurisdiction of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures which “generously” granted “certain areas of land” (OP 754-5) to the centaurs.

On the other hand the house-elves stand at the bottom-end of a feudal relationship with the Wizarding people, and the subservient ideology is so deep-rooted in them that it is blasphemous for them to think or

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act freely or contradict their masters. Among them, Dobby features as revolution personified. He not only gleefully leaves the job of the Malfoy family (CS 338), but takes up a paid job at Hogwarts (something unthinkable by other house-elves) and even declares “Dobby *likes* to be free” (GF 378-9; italics added). The Wizards’ point of view toward house-elves is in general derogatory; the extremists like the Malfoys and Crouches treat them degradingly, whereas ‘good’ Wizards like Fred and George Weasley exploit their servitude to sneak out food from Hogwarts kitchen. When Hermione, sympathetic toward the predicaments of house-elves, wishes to visit the Hogwarts kitchen, the Weasley twins are anxious that she might instigate a strike among the house-elves (GF 367). Nonetheless, Dobby’s standing up against the enslavement and for the freedom of the house-elves and exemplifies his radical thoughts might well earn him the status of a “Marxist hero”.

The issue of marginalisation as depicted in the *Harry Potter* series is multidimensional. The saga reflects myriad interwoven layers and facets of socio-political encroachment and segregation, and ideological, theoretical and practical problems of overlapping nature as we find them in our familiar world. By merit of this intricacy the *Harry Potter* series has attracted vast scholarly attention, and surely in future more scholarly works enlightening these complex issues will be produced. However, the success of the series lies not only in representation of the problems of our known world in its own peculiar way, but in the fact that it has made the readers of a wide-ranging age-group ponder over them by virtue of the fascinating literary style of J.K. Rowling.

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