Echoes of Technologically Equipped Muggle World in the Magical World of Harry Potter: An Analysis

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Abstract

The Harry Potter Series in which, to save the Wizarding World, the protagonist, Harry Potter heroically combats against the rule of the commanding antagonist Lord Voldemort, falls into the category of Fantasy Literature. Rowling seems to have cautiously created two parallel and separate worlds — the magical world of wizards and witches and the world of muggles. In the contemporary world, advanced technology which has gained the most important space, seems to be absent in the magical world of Harry Potter because it is believed that magic can accomplish more than technology can do. But an in-depth reading and analysis of the series shows that the magical world is replete with risks and dangers unknown to a casual layperson. Unlike other major works of fantasy literature where there is little or no encounter with the Human world, J.K. Rowling seamlessly shifts from the normal to the paranormal without significant changes in the geography and setting. Both her worlds peep into each other’s life and leave an impact.

Keywords : Fantasy Literature, Muggle World, Magical World, Technological advancement, Cultural and social prisms, Dreamscapes, Class and Power dynamics

Introduction to the genre of the Harry Potter Series:

Before the advent of Printing Press and availability of printed literature in abundance, oral narratives were in vogue and they gave considerable space to magic and terrible monsters. The works of Homer, Virgil and many Greco-Roman authors abound in fantastical plots and characters. Leaving its mark in all epochs, Fantasy Literature inhabits important space in contemporary times also. The writers of Fantasy create their own world of beauties and
beasts, magical powers and talking animals to pull readers out of their difficulties of everyday life. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Fantasy, also spelled as phantasy, can be seen or understood as an ingenious work of fiction that depends for its effect on weird settings (such as other worlds or times) and strangeness of characters (such as supernatural or unnatural beings). This genre is commonly characterized by imaginary and improbable elements. It involves supernatural powers, magic, and magical creatures. Elements of Medievalism such as fortresses, knights-errant, monarchs, charmed weapons, horror, and references to ancient invocations etc. are the essentials of Fantasy Literature. David Sandner also writes, “Works of fantasy are set in an alternative world or ‘secondary universe’ often taking the form of a timeless, ancient land populated with tribes and communities of human and inhuman creatures, sometimes harmonious, sometimes living in conflict” (Preview, 2004). Fantasy Literature is a distinguished form of literary genre that refers primarily to the works constituting a cluster of fantasized elements, mesmerizing plot structures, varied forms of characterization that tends to carry not only children but also adults into a world of extraordinary powers where one’s imagination gets an entirely different experience of entertainment.

There has been a growing rapidity of literatures being produced in this genre since 1960s. “Since fantasy is not an ephemeral art, and has been brought into being from the sheer necessity of the times, it should be studied and evaluated in its own terms – as a cultural and social phenomenon, and as a literary genre,” writes Smith (pp. 305 – 312). Fantasy Literature resembles children’s literature for its vigorous attention on imagination. Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland is known for its exemplary focus on creating a fantasy world. Harrison Smith writes, “It may be developed through dreams, inner monologues, and weird episodes, as a way of explaining tangible aspects of behavior and thought” (pp. 305 – 312). George MacDonald, a Scottish author and poet, has been a major influence in popularizing the genre of Fantasy Literature. C.S. Lewis’s Narnia Chronicles, Terry Pratchett’s Discworld Series, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series are some notable works written under the genre of Fantasy Literature.
J.K. Rowling’s series of seven fantasy novels, adapted as films, is a sensation among people of all ages as Rowling employs magic as the dominating element in her whole work. The most popular Harry Potter novels fall within the genre of Fantasy Literature and also popularly included in the British children’s boarding school genre. These insightful mystery and adventure tales could also be included within the genre of bildungsroman novels, or coming of age novels. Set in Hogwarts, a fictional British boarding school for wizards, the Harry Potter Series is the protagonist Harry Potter’s heroic combat to save the Wizarding World from the rule of the commanding antagonist Lord Voldemort. The plot begins with school children getting magic lessons at Hogwarts. The story progresses involving more intense plot patterns, and imaginary setting. The story presents to the readers a search myth; finding a place in the external world. The characters in the novel have been armed with special powers. Percival and Potter possess extraordinary innate abilities in an extraordinary world. Percival is depicted as a fighter while Potter is a player of quidditch. Hermione Granger is another important character and specializes in encyclopedic knowledge, wits, recalls and is always helping others caught in terrible situations. Dark forces, spells, wizards are a common sight in Rowling’s novels. It is quite fantasizing to see how Rowling sets the novel in Hogwarts, an imaginary British Boarding School which teaches magic to students. The movements of characters, their dialogues are coloured with fantasy, magic, thrill and horror. The tone of the novels remains dark throughout with intense macabre presence thereby adding more to the magical effect. Death is a dominant theme in Rowling’s works. Dragon figures, unicorns, magical animals, living and moving trees, and a dangerous forest make Harry Potter Series a perfect example of Fantasy Literature. By using owls as messengers and wolves as characters, breaking the norms, Rowling lets people see beyond the set structure of society. To make people feel the presence of a world which has a wholly fantastic grip over the minds of people starved of imagination, Rowling gives colossal encouragement to fantasy through her use of varied forms of imagery, medieval weapons, letters put on parchment and fixed with wax etc.
Aim of the paper:

The element of fantasy in the Fantasy Literatures can be studied through cultural and social prisms also as is the case with all the other literary genres. Rowling seems to have created two distinct worlds — one which is supported with pure magic of wands and spells and the other that totally depends on technology. But an in-depth reading and a sharp critical analysis of the whole series shows that the technology and advancement do enter Rowling’s magical world through some cracks and crevices. The adaptation of these books into movies is the most relevant example of the same, although that is not the direct subject of study here. One can relook at J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* from Postcolonial, Diasporic, Feminist and Marxist perspectives as well. When *Harry Potter Series* is re-read wearing Postcolonial, Diasporic, Feminist and Marxist lenses, the readers discern how a simple story of a conflict between good (represented by Harry Potter) and evil (represented by Voldemort) also embraces discrimination and suppression. After discussing a general perception of existence of two separate and totally different worlds in *Harry Potter Series* and the echoes of the muggle world in the magical world of *Harry Potter*, the present paper tries to establish the hypothesis that innumerable incidences in *Harry Potter* are similar to the happenings taking place in the real world that depends on technology.

**A General Perception of Existence of Two Separate and Totally Different Worlds in *Harry Potter Series***:

J.K. Rowling birthed her magical world with caution. Two parallel and separate worlds of muggles and wizards exist in Rowling’s *Harry Potter Series*. The wizarding world is safely cloaked from muggles as it abides by the Statue of Secrecy enforced in 1692 which binds witches and wizards to live in hiding from the muggles. We do not see much interference of muggles and wizards in each other’s worlds. Both have their separate space, governing bodies, laws, customs and a way of living. Humans create geographical and social boundaries which are obliterated in the wizarding world where you can simply apparate, disapparate and travel using Floo powder, portkeys, broomsticks and communicate through owls. Since the wizards and witches could perform tasks with the wave of a wand, they surely do not need much technology like muggles do. Though wizards can use muggle transportation and
technology like buses, trains, refrigerators, etc. but they create their own utilities so they do not need muggle resources. For instance, wizards light candles instead of electricity. Dumbledore has a deluminator which puffs light in and out. Wizards have their own different technology which they keep on refining from time to time. We see advancement in broomsticks from Nimbus 2000 to Firebolt, the fastest to be used in Quidditch World Cup. The wizards have their own journal to publish their research work named Transfiguration Today. The Ministry of Magic also has a muggle research division and Hogwarts has Muggle studies as one of the options in its curriculum. Also, the wizards use parchments, quills and ink to write instead of pencils and paper.

Wizards and witches live with muggleneighbours such as in Godric’s Hollow. The Hogwarts Express departs from muggle station, King’s Cross from platform 9 ¾. But it must not be forgotten that these locations are hidden by muggle-repelling charms and spells. Wizards often disguise themselves as muggles to move out on the streets. The only official contact between the two worlds is Muggle Prime Minister and Minister of Magic. We come to know of it when the Minister of Magic informs the muggle Prime Minister of Sirius Blacks’ escape from the prison of Azkaban. While the industrialized world runs on its fuels and machines, wizards find their own whimsical solutions. Just like muggles fly in planes, drive cars and motorbikes, wizards fly on brooms, and use floo powder and apparition to travel instantaneously. The Hogwarts castle has no electric security systems, yet it is protected by various spells and enchantments. For the conveyance of wizards and witches from the muggle world, to avoid suspicion, fusion of magic and technology is used, but only sometimes. The Knight’s bus and the Weasley’s flying car escort Harry from the alienation of the human world to the security of the wizarding world. At Hogwarts there is no mention of light bulbs or CFL’s, the light comes from an enchanted ceiling of the great hall.

Apart from reaffirming reader’s faith in the potency of imagination, Harry Potter is also an underdog story. Harry is a skinny stepchild who faces the brunt of his cousin’s antics. Dudley, the sub-normal son, is favoured in the highly mundane and ordinary world of the Dursley’s. Setting the stage for larger conflicts at play, things change when Harry finds that he possesses fame and prestige in the wizardly world. In direct contrast with his
disappointing muggle life as an insignificant stepson, in the wizarding world “he is the boy who lived.” Here instead of subverting expectations, Rowling employs the oft used fantasy trope of the “chosen one.” The very lightening scar which othered him from the Dursley family makes him a celebrity when he reaches Hogwarts. *Harry Potter* hence, allows the reader, both mature and young, to quench the yearning to escape from the life full of technology based comforts yet monotonous insignificance.

**Echoes of the Muggle World in the Magical World of Harry Potter:**

Magic can accomplish more than technology can do. Since muggles lack the magic skills they have to be technologically more advanced and vice-a-versa. The two worlds cannot and do not coexist given their inherent magical differences. However, there is some interaction and peep into the muggle world through wizarding lens and vice-a-versa. Perhaps, Rowling deliberately keeps the two worlds separate so that one may not overshadow the other. One is realistic and other is surreal; one is familiar and other not so familiar. Harry, listlessly moping around in the beginning of each instalment finds himself catapulted into another adventure in a matter of a few pages. This presents a unique problem. The magical world is replete with risks and dangers unknown to a casual layperson. Unlike other major works of Fantasy Literature where there is little or no encounter with the Human world, J.K. Rowling seamlessly shifts from the normal to the paranormal without significant changes in the geography and setting. The magical world lives along with the muggle world in a delicate harmony. Rather than delving into the conflicts created by proximity to a cryptic world, Rowling uses the same conjoined setting as a literary device and reaffirms her young readers that any teenager could find themselves battling death eater’s at a page’s turn. Many modern Fantasy writers who came after her like Rick Riordan and Jim Butcher merged their dreamscape with the humdrum of everyday life, having become aware of the potential a conjoined world offers.

What cannot be ignored is that the protagonist Harry Potter moves in both the worlds while he is living with Dursley’s at the Privet Drive and when he enters Hogwarts as a student. Hermoine is born to non-magical parents who are dentists by profession. The Dursley’s and Hermoine’s parents are aware of the magical world. There is currency exchange between the
two worlds as Hermoine’s parents do this in their visit to Diagon Alley. However, their currency is all metal gold and silver instead of paper. We see Hermoine’s parents interacting with the Weasleys at Diagon Alley and this interaction shows a subtle relationship between the two different worlds of Harry Potter.

Through Arthur Weasley, Rowling peers through the same keyhole, which the reader peaked from, back into the muggle world, to teach us that tedium is not the absence of miracles but the absence of curiosity. Harry explains the use of telephone to Mr. Weasley in Chamber of Secrets. Mr. Weasley has a collection of muggle objects that fascinate him. To bridge the gaps between the interaction of the muggle world and Hogwarts, we have Arthur Weasley who works in misuse of muggle artifacts office. To keep the magical world in shadows, Arthur’s office bewitches muggle objects that might find their way back into the muggle world. Arthur Weasley is himself spellbound by the ways of muggles. In book two when Harry and Ron fly their car to Hogwarts, Arthur instead of scolding his son like Martha did, joyously quizzes Harry on how they managed to fly a car, a muggle invention. Arthur Weasley in stark contrast with the casual reader, is captivated by the wonders of the muggle world and how muggles through careful dexterity have found their way around magic to live their lives. Wizards rarely use muggle technology but they do use radio to keep a track of missing witches and wizards.

Just like the muggle world, the magical world flirts with capitalism. The students of Hogwarts purchase school supplies from Diagon Alley and mimicking their muggle counterparts, hassle their parents to buy them fancy pets like owls and toads. They talk in excitement about the latest version of the Nimbus flying broom, something that is as exclusive and revered as the latest generation iPhone. To keep the capitalist demand and supply steady, the wizarding world has its own banking system, Gringotts, run by Goblins, safeguarding all the riches of the magic world.

The magical world mirrors the modern world in more ways than one. The idea of Salazar Slytherin that one should be eligible to study magic and attain status in wizarding world only if one is pure blooded harks back to 20th century. Salazar Slytherin the founder of Syltherin House is also in conflict with other three founding members of Hogwarts for reserving rights...
of admission in school to pure bloods only. This conflict plays a very important role during first and second wizarding wars as Lord Voldemort also believes in the supremacy of pure bloods. The Ministry of Magic also forces the muggleborns to register themselves with the Muggle-Born Registration Commission. This pure blood consciousness is seen being rigidly observed in the Black family. Sirius Black reveals to Harry how some of the members were disowned, deemed blood traitors or uprooted from family tree as they accepted half-bloods or muggle born into their lives. We find that racism does exist in the magical world though the magical abilities of both pure and mud bloods are same.

The hierarchy rather than being simple is quite complex in *Harry Potter Series*. At the top of this class system are the pure bloods who have descended from a long line of ancient wizards. Below them are the half bloods and mixed breeds, often at the receiving end of sneers and bullying which descends into ethical cleansing as we reach the end of the saga. At the bottom rung are the completely muggle born wizards and witches. Rowling defeats the purist argument through the character of Hermione, who is born to muggle parents yet is arguably the most intelligent witch of her class. But the Malfoy family depicts contrary ideals through their snobbish attitude and allegiance to Voldemort. The term mud blood is often used in the derogatory sense. For instance, the Malfoy family caters to the notion of being superior due to their magical ancestry since generations. Draco Malfoy mocks Hermione by calling her a mud blood as she is born to muggle parents. Similarly Argus Flich, the caretaker at Hogwarts, born to a pure blood wizard family, possesses no magical abilities. In addition, apart from sharing national and ethnic identities, the characters also support their own sporting teams. The Quidditch World championship as shown in Book 4 brings together teams from Ireland to Bulgaria. Different countries have their own magical institutions like the French Beauxbatons, the Bulgarian Durmstrang and the British Hogwarts.

The power dynamics can also be witnessed in master-servant relationship between the Malfoys’ and Dobby, the elf. He is supposed to perform all the chores without pay and is not allowed to wear clothes. Dobby is even punished for disobeying his masters. This bonded slavery ends when Harry Potter deliberately presents Dobby with a sock thus, setting the elf free. In contrast, there is another house-elf named Winky in the fourth book who considers it
shameful to roam about freely as Dobby whilst their true duty is to serve their masters. The
slave consciousness is ingrained in the elves due to their subordinate status and treatment
meted out to them. It shows that the power hierarchy that exists in the magical world is akin
to muggle world. This hierarchy is based on blood line with pure bloods and mud bloods
comprising the top most and lower most of the ladder respectively.

Even the Ministry of Magic and the minister himself are representatives of power dynamics
and later on this power is delegated to Dolores Umbridge when she becomes the headmistress
of Hogwarts. She misuses her position by forcing veritaserum down the throats of students to
extract information from them. From Marxist perspective these hierarchical structures are
representative of an ideology creating binaries where one is deemed superior to the other –
pure blood/mud blood; powerful/powerless; master/servant. Draco Malfoy often smirks and
comments at Ron Weasley’s clothes, second-hand books and living at Burrow. The
Weasley’s do not belong to the upper class magicians. Hence, they are the proletariats, others
to the bourgeois Malfoy’s who wield power and have influential relations with the Minister
of Magic himself. This type of discrimination is witnessed in muggle world as well.

Moreover, the genius of Rowling is at full display when she sets up Harry and Voldemort, the
protagonist and the antagonist as the two sides of the same desire of unrestrained
individualism. Both have experienced the limitations of conformity to the muggle world and
both want escape. Yet Voldemort’s darker fantasy to yield his individual freedom as he sees
fit is in direct contrast with the shared sentiment of greater good which both the muggle and
magical worlds adhere to, and herein lies the larger conflict. In her essay “Naturalizing
Geography, Harry Potter and the realm of Muggles Magic Folks and Giants,” Ivar. B.
Neumann argues how the East in Potter’s world is suitably othered, mystified if not
demonized. The Wizarding School Durmstrang, with their Professor Igor Karkaroff is shown
to be a former death eater, with his school’s increasing propensity towards the dark arts, more
so than Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, their western counterparts.

In European history up until the 19th century, the north was held up to
be a chaos to the south’s cosmos. The key idea was that the north
harbored more originary human and non-human forms. From the 19th
century East became increasingly marked as a political danger. We
recognize this in the geographical formatting of realm of magic folks
as well, where Voldemort is marked as eastern. The Wizarding School
of the east, Durmstrang has greater emphasis on the dark arts than the
Hogwarts. In International relations, many scholars have drawn on the
works of Edward Said, and what repercussions this way of diving the
world has on politics (pp. 158).

Rowling, in Tolkien’s fashion, who made an allegory of World War II through the conflict in
Middle Earth, has drawn a parallel with the rise of the third reich, with death eaters
mimicking the fascistic tendencies of Nazis and their domination of the weaker classes.
Embedded within an intricate plot, we hear theresonances of history rhyming. A
disenfranchised class, vying for the glory of its yesteryears, is blaming its shortcoming on
members of another section of society. Looking at the overarching theme, one realizes that
depiction of rise of fascist forces in literature has so often been used that it has become an
archetype to justify motives of the ‘Bad People’ without delving deep into the individual
psyches of the characters.

**Hypothesis:**

Since Rowling herself came from a very susceptible position, she shows that hierarchal
differences,hegemonic relations, class struggles, gender discrimination and other intricate
societal situations manifest in the real world are a part of the magical world too. We see
instances of collective power in the bond and friendship of Harry, Hermoine and Ron which
gives them strength to defeat the Dark Lord. The magical world of Rowling itself wields
power in contrast to the mundane world of muggles. Lot of characters and incidents are
inspired from Rowling’s surrounding environment.

*Harry Potter* is not a conventional fantasy epic by any means, thus. Like Tolkien and Steve
Erikson, Rowling does not rely heavily on worldbuilding. Also unlike George R. R. Martin,
she is not obsessed with the grim and the grotesque. Though the characters are fleshed out,
there is seldom any existential nuance. The wizarding world frequently enters the muggle
world through their floo powders and disapparations. However, the muggles, those privy to the secret of another world, assume the witches and wizards to be deviant inconsistencies. None of the muggle railroads, flying planes or cars venture knowingly into the magic world. The greed and thirst for adventurism that flung the western world into the darkness of Africa and Asia, is absent here.

It may then be concluded that J.K. Rowling deftly wove two worlds together, which may seem antithetical not only in their observance of the natural law, but also in the ways they interact. Yet despite all, every set piece she drafts, fits cohesively together and these world interact, not through their shameless incursions, but through their ardent love for knowledge. The same knowledge that created flying brooms, created the motorised cars. Hence, Rowling uses the suspension of disbelief not to trivialize the technologically advanced muggle world, but to unravel its fault lines.

Bio-note:

Dr. Sumneet Kaur, has been working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University for eighteen years and specializes in Feminism and Postcolonial Literature. She has published numerous research papers in national and international journals and has been writing creative fiction for international anthologies. She has recently authored a Coffee Table Book *Amritsar & Guru Nanak Dev University: The Contours of Inheritance*. Dr. Sumneet has also translated a Punjabi novel into English as, *The Collateral Minds*. She is currently guiding many students in Doctoral research and is writing a book for children. She is also a member of many Academic and Literary bodies.

Declarations:

1. It is hereby certified that I have read and understood all the guidelines.
2. The paper submitted is original. It is not published or sent for publication anywhere else.
References


