



# Social Markers and Gender in the Harry Potter Series

Swathi Metla

Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh 515001.

## Abstract:

J K Rowling creates the extraordinary Wizarding world as a reflection of the ordinary world we (muggles) inhabit. Though she populates it with witches and wizards with astonishing talents, they prove to be humans like ourselves. Hence, the famed portal quest fantasy is chosen for this paper, because the portal (the Harry Potter universe/ portal, popularly called the Potterverse) gives an apt platform as it hosts young students treading towards maturity.

Since the *Harry Potter* series are immensely famous and made into films there is a definite trickling down into the popular culture. But this work focuses on the text alone to study the promising aspects which are of interest with regard to gender and the social markers that allow exploring this scope. Gender is a complicated and multi-faceted spectrum, though the text tends to be limited with the binary division, these limitations are taken into consideration to explore the non-hegemonic views.

Though gender roles are not abiding in the series, there are instances of them occurring, especially with the weaker characters like Merope Gaunt. Hermione, Ginny and Luna break many stereotypes and head forward in the careers of their choice.

Keywords: Gender, Social Markers, Roles, Portal, Fantasy

**Introduction:**

Fantasy takes upon itself the task of subverting the society or belief system at large. Fantasy literature need not be essentially seen as an escapist work where readers are transported to a different time or space that is to be imagined. They are not to stay neutral in the imaginary space-time continuum either. One must acknowledge the fact that Fantasy literature facilitates a deeper understanding of life and our world (or existence) by looking at an alternative existence or realm. Readers become better equipped at critiquing our problems, ideologies, hypocrisy, etc., by seeing them in the Fantastic realm with a sprinkling of fiction.

Gender can be defined in multitudinous ways. Simply put, gender is a social construct or norm which is set by the society. It is often confused with sex which is a biological term or category. One can safely say that gender is not just a binary categorisation as there is a spectrum of gender that can be explored or chosen by an individual. Therefore, the notion of the personal being or becoming political is taken up, this keeps the discussion going.

The term Gender denotes “the cultural constitutions concerning femininity or masculinity and the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintaining gendered identities. In much sociological and feminist thought, gender is defined against biological sex. It represents the socially acceptable and socially acquired, forms of being wither male or female.” (Wolfreys et al. 45) These are socially acquired characteristics: what a person does or wears or works as. The femininity or masculinity that is performed is defined by the term, but it comes with the nuanced understanding of people choosing their genders depending on their interests and not sex.

Material possessions are an aspect that is important, especially in this genre, because the society and people living in it are sometimes affected by this factor. Also there is a clear emphasis on the social markers because they tend to play an overarching role in creating social consciousness. Sometimes this may result in obsessive amassing of power, wealth or fame like in the case of Voldemort. Friendships are forged and grudges are harboured based on the social markers which are the sign for material wealth or assets. Harry and Ron become friends due to empathy and mutual respect. Harry and Draco become foes instantly as the latter brags about his father and insults Harry's and Ron's parents.

With this paper, the researcher wants to look at particular gender norms and how they are problematic or how stereotypical gender roles are broken by the characters in the chosen texts. Only the seven books of the Harry Potter series are chosen as they are novels and are in a chronological order. The play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* is not used because of belonging to the genre of drama and due to the time lapses and jumps.

Instances from the seven novels are quoted at appropriate places to support the implications or remarks made in the paper. A few characters from other popular Fantasy books are mentioned or discussed in passing.

### **The Modern Hero:**

Harry Potter is one of the most beloved heroes of the modern era. He is the most appreciated protagonist and the series is supposedly responsible for rekindling the habit of reading in the young children. It is easily noticeable that Harry is an underdog; especially at the opening of the series, he does not even own clothes, he wears hand-me-downs from Cousin Dudley. He never speaks out of turn and is not even allowed to ask questions. Harry, the hero, is not the epitome of masculinity: he is a young boy with ambition, curiosity and many flaws. It is his kindness and sacrificing nature which is extolled from book one onwards. Many a time these qualities are usually related to femininity; hence one may doubt his heroism.

But it is necessary to understand that Harry is a modern hero, and there is a “looking in” or introspection which sets him apart. Harry contemplates on his actions at every important turn or juncture and corrects his misgivings: he is therefore aptly lauded. For instance, he is given the “Philosopher’s Stone” by the Mirror of the Erised as he does not want to use it but safeguard it. When Ron successfully accomplishes the same feat of being sympathetic, he is also appreciated with choice rewards: he befriends Harry and Hermione because of that.

Coming back to Harry, he is set apart with the unique albeit messy kind of hairdo he sports throughout the texts, which serves as his uncanny resemblance with James. A second aspect that distinguishes him are his eyes, which resemble his mother’s, many say it to him throughout the series. His Patronus is of the Corporal variety and takes the shape of a stag, which is the animagus form of Harry’s father, James Potter.

The eyes are said to be the window into the soul, therefore, his eyes tie him to his mother, though he looks very similar to his father. Though he is starved for love during his childhood, Harry makes the noble choice of being nice or giving. This is the tribute paid to his genuine love for people. Secondly, the Patronus charm, that he summons, is a case of care being manifested. But apart from physical traits it is Harry's knack of being selfless or being able to fight for others which begets him his uniqueness: these aspects cannot be gendered, or limited to a particular gender per se.

### **Picking the periphery:**

The status of the characters that play a significant role are analysed in order to gauge the social standing by seeing the social markers or the material wealth they possess. Most of the characters that belong to the marginalized communities are favourites with Harry, who is the trusting hero, who gives second chances. Starting off with Hagrid who is a giant, Lupin who is a werewolf and Sirius who is an ex-convict, there is a host of people that play crucial roles in the narrative despite bearing a black-mark.

Though Rowling divulges that Dumbledore is gay, this is done after the book septology is released. This earned her wrath from the LGBTQ communities (that were fans or disinterested previously), as they felt a dire lack of representation in the narrative. This is one of the reasons why most of the fan fiction bridges these gaps and takes up interesting gender choices or pairings as an act of rebellion or rewriting as they see fit. Many of these writings work on characters that are less-rounded or not explored, and are about stigmatized or partial views that are prevalent throughout the Septology. For instance many of the fan fiction are based on Slytherin house or Slytherin characters that are actually nice instead of "evil" as generalized in the series. Though Rowling tries troubleshooting through her drama *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* released in 2016, she generalizes all the houses except Slytherin in this venture, which is the reversal of her former generalisation.

### **Heroes and Stereotypes:**

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that in a Fantasy work of great magnitude like *The Lord of the Rings* the hero (Frodo) do not exhibit the expected highly masculine traits of physical strength and machismo. Instead of exaggerated masculine attributes they are shown as embodiments of an enduring spirit, nobleness of mind or willfulness.

Their heroism is built on their maturity which is achieved on the journey where they discover themselves. Tolkien's epic achieves its cult status due to this factor: a simple Bildungsroman form is utilised to carve out an individual's battle to know and understand oneself, this is done through their overcoming the trials that are interspersed on their adventure. This is implemented in Rowling's narrative too: she makes the most of the boarding school scenario presenting moral values and the importance of friendship to readers. These are interesting as well as endearing to young and old.

G R R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* has a set of protagonists who do not fit into mainstream heroes as such. If we look at its Television adaptation entitled 'Game of Thrones' we could easily notice an array of strong characters that fall into this grouping of misfits: Daenerys is an abandoned princess living in anonymity; Jon Snow is a bastard (and later on a prince); Tyrion is a dwarf who is hated by his father; Arya is a highborn lady who wants to be an explorer. They are heroes or heroines who have roles they do not want to fulfill, be it with respect to gender or social obligations.

Rowling chooses the winning trio in the Series in such a way that they achieve equilibrium: Harry has a high emotional quotient, Hermione is a genius, and Ron tones them down or facilitates their strengths, adding his spontaneity to the mix.

Only in book one does Hermione appropriate the damsel act, this is done because she is targeted by Ron who opens calls her out on not having friends. (*Philosopher's Stone* 127) She gives sass from the moment she befriends Harry and Ron, they bring down her feverish excitement to excel at studies (and sticking to rules), getting her involved in altruistic deeds and mischief. Only for asking her to go with him to the Yule ball does Ron acknowledge that Hermione is a "girl", he does it in a context that hurts her, and hence she replies: "Oh, well spotted," sarcastically. (*Goblet of Fire* 348) The situation turns messy later because they have invested emotion and deep liking for each other; it escalates when Ron turns jealous.

Hermione is like the archetypal wise lady in the series along with Professor McGonagall and Ginny Weasley. Harry listens to them and makes wiser choices throughout the story. Ron is his best friend and keeps him grounded by

being critical and doing it effectively using his humour and sarcasm. He is brought up in a wizarding household and is an asset throughout as he knows people, places and how things run in the Ministry and the wizarding world at large.

Hermione is a strong-willed witch who has the love for knowledge but a great capacity to empathise. She is the first to realise that House elves need to have rights and salaries, and that Hogwarts should not employ them without benefits as it sets a bad precedent. Her honesty and clarity of thought are obvious in the way she acts on a daily basis. Her hard work and intelligence pay off as she excels, and her model McGonagall would be very proud of her accomplishments. She refuses to stick to cooking when the trio is on the run during the course of the last book. She says that she is expected to cook as she is the girl: “Harry caught the fish and I did my best with it! I notice I’m always the one who ends up sorting out the food, because I’m a girl, I suppose!” (*Deathly Hallows* 241)

Though she knits for the house-elves from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, she does a gendered hobby of knitting if it benefits her views. She does not do things that are demanded from her.

Similarly, Ginny hates to listen to her mom and toe the line. She plays Quidditch when no one is watching and practices it so well that she replaces Harry as the team Seeker when he is dismissed from the team by Professor Umbridge. Ginny even wins the match for Gryffindor and stays on in the team after Harry returns, in the position of Chaser. She works professionally after her wedding unlike her mother Molly who takes care of the family.

Luna Lovegood, Tonks and other women who belong to the latest generation are seen working (from the Pottermore site). The witches of the previous generation are seen as homemakers mostly, from Narcissa, Mrs. Crouch to Molly and Mrs. Tonks. Most of the women characters speak up, especially Luna, Ginny and Hermione; taking matters into their hands. They accomplish a lot with their talent and wisdom.

### **Material or Social Markers:**

The following are the instances where descriptions of homes or places of accommodation are picked. These usually reflect wealth, legacy or social status of their inhabitants:

The Dursleys take in Harry due to sheer obligation and they make every effort possible to ensure their neighbours or relatives do not guess Harry is not “normal”; they are scared people might understand he is going to Hogwarts and are scared to be associated to a “freak”.

As the first book opens we see the kind of people the Dursleys are: “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense.” (*Philosopher’s Stone* 7)

Despite their misgivings they are people who prefer order and social acceptance and loathe Harry as he is their vulnerability – people may judge them due to him.

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gar-dens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys’ front door . . . Only the photographs on the mantel- piece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets — but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle . . . being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too. (*Philosopher’s Stone* 19)

As evidenced by the above lines, Harry is disregarded and not loved throughout his childhood. He is dismissed and seen as a burden. He craves love and gets it from his friends at school; therefore, he is ready to give up things or comforts for them. He befriends Ron over a small conversation about himself and not having enough money while growing up. He bonds with Hermione when he and Ron save her from a troll.

The Weasley’s home and family is first seen in the trio’s second year of Hogwarts. When the Dursleys lock Harry up, Ron and his twin brothers come to Privet Drive and pick him up in a flying car and take him home. The following lines are Harry’s observation (or rather fascination with) the Weasley’s home: “It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigsty, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several storeys high and so

crooked it looked as though it was held up by magic” (*Chamber of Secrets* 29) When Ron tries saying that the home it is not very grand, Harry responds with “It’s *brilliant*,” as he sees a home instead of his prison-like room at his aunt’s. Harry loves the Weasley home (it is called the Burrow) as it is entirely different from Privet Drive where he does not have freedom or respect. The Weasleys treat Harry like one of their own children. Harry and Ginny marry later on and remain very close friends with Ron and Hermione who tie the knot. On his first visit to their home Harry comments “the Weasley’s house burst with the strange and unexpected.” But what he loves the most at their home is that “everybody there seemed to like him.” (*Chamber of Secrets* 37)

With Harry, one sees that the weight lies with how he feels and not how rich the people are, he bonds with the Weasleys as they are generous and gentle. He does not care that they live a normal life in a home in the urban fringes, rather he takes joy in homely comfort and peace which his urban aunt’s residence does not offer to him.

The words below describe the Riddle House a space which provides gossip to an entire village with the creepy backdrop being provided by the regal but decrepit building which breeds horror and rotteness as something supernatural happens there before half a century. The following lines are picked from the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*:

Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied. The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was “creepy.” Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. (*Goblet of Fire* 8)

Voldemort kills the Riddles, his grandparents and their only son, his father Tom Riddle, for abandoning his mother, Merope, when she was pregnant with him. And during the preparation for the Quidditch world cup in the series, Voldemort who happens to be the last Riddle takes refuge in the property to recoup and gain strength under the care of Peter Pettigrew. He plots to kill Harry and gain a chokehold over the wizarding community by catapulting the international events that are planned for the year.

This house is used for the planning and collection of information as Wormtail gets Bertha Jorkins to the Riddle House. Voldemort abhors his father, but utilises his ancestral property belonging to his muggle father when he actually

needs it. He also breaks into his father's grave to take his father's bones to later build himself a body. He does not gloat of his muggle father, but uses him as and when it is necessary.

The large Manor house which becomes the opening site of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is also a marker of the prestige and wizarding splendor the Malfoys ooze.

“The high hedge curved with them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of impressive wrought-iron gates . . . . A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond-paned downstairs windows. Somewhere in the dark garden beyond the hedge a fountain was playing.” (*Deathly Hallows* 9-10)

Draco Malfoy keeps bragging about his home and riches from the very beginning of the series, especially before or during the Christmas breaks. The Malfoys mistreat Dobby and plan to kill Harry during his second year; it causes them the loss of Voldemort's horcrux and their house-elf whom Harry frees by scamming Lucius Malfoy.

The way the Malfoy Manor is being used to commit brutality and murder despite the dislike of the owners is an interesting factor. The Malfoys have an aversion to their home being abused by visitors and Voldemort's inner circle alike; and they are unhappy as Lucius falls out of his favour. But they cannot openly oppose these events.

The next expedition to the Malfoy Manor occurs at another crucial moment. Harry and co. manage to steal wands and information during the unforgettable visit. Hermione is tortured by Bellatrix during the time and Dobby is killed too. Like the Riddle House it is a space of committing murder and violence, though the owners dislike it, they are silenced by overpowering or killed by Voldemort.

Voldemort loves the family homes and riches, including Gringotts chambers which are allocated to the rich households. But he misuses them like how he creates Horcruxes with powerful magical objects associated with the Hogwarts' founders.

**Bibliography:**

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Bloomsbury, 1998.

---. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Bloomsbury, 2007.

---. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Bloomsbury, 2000.

---. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Bloomsbury, 2005.

---. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Bloomsbury, 2003 .

---. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Bloomsbury, 1997.

---. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Bloomsbury, 1999.

Wolfreys, Julian, et al., editor. *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*. Edinburgh, 2006.

