Through The Gender Lens: Perspectives On Harry Potter

J. K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series has undoubtedly been a huge success, with all the seven books made into movies. The utopian world that Rowling painted in her books with magic and out-of-the-world adventure caught the attention of readers all over the world. Since its publication, there have been numerous analyses of the series, with most gender interpretations concluding that the work was bound by stereotyping and was downright hero-based (Schoefer, 2000). But this paper aims to prove that Rowling only presents a realistic view of contemporary society with a clear portrayal of gender relations in an ever-changing, complex world. She does not offer a revolutionary work with highly feminist views, rather she mirrors real society (Zettel, 2005). But she has shaped the reflection to show that this reality should not be the normative and that it has to be changed to achieve gender equality, through the development of her characterization. Rowling's portrayal of femininities and masculinities only gives an honest view of the current gender dynamics in the lives of adolescents while subtly encouraging fluidity and individualism.

The Harry Potter series is arguably the most popular children's phenomenon in recent decades. In fact, the books turned out to be so popular that the global hysteria surrounding it was dubbed 'Pottermania'. Though first published as a children's book, it was savored by people from all age groups. The series tells the story of Harry Potter, a young orphan who learns that he is a wizard when he turned eleven and that he is to attend Hogwarts, a school of wizardry. There were seven Potter books and the last one "Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows" was published in 2007.

The books unfold the story from Harry's perspective. The reader gets to know him right before he turns eleven. Harry becomes an orphan at the age of one when Harry's parents were killed by an evil wizard named Lord Voldemort. Harry has since been living with his aunt, Petunia Dursley, her husband Vernon Dursley, and their son Dudley Dursley. They treat him very badly, giving him only what is necessary for him to survive. Harry gets thrilled when he learns his true identity of being a wizard. He attends Hogwarts, a school of wizardry that has the most skilled wizard in the world as headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. There are four houses in Hogwarts named after the school's founders; Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff (Rowling, 1998:114). The students in Gryffindor are known for bravery and chivalry; Slytherin is the most popular among those who have leanings towards the dark arts; students who are assigned to the house of Ravenclaw are highly intelligent; but those in Hufflepuff are just and loyal (Rowling, 1997:88).

Harry has two best friends; Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They all meet at Hogwarts and they are prone to getting themselves into adventures. Eventually, Harry finds out what the wizarding world has been dreading, that Lord Voldemort has returned to power. He sets out to kill Harry and Harry must fight him in order to save himself and the world to which he belongs. The story sees them overcoming numerous obstacles, solving several mysteries, and embarking on various dangerous adventures. The trio finally succeeds in bringing an end to the reign of terror orchestrated by Lord Voldemort and his Death-Eaters.

Rowling's work has been subject to intense scrutiny and has become a center of cultural

controversy that ranges from religious disputes to the influence it has over the next generation's views on social issues including sexism. Religious zealots claimed that the book encouraged occult practices, witchcraft, and rebelliousness in children. Reading through many of the articles and books on Rowling's picturing of gender can raise numerous questions as to whether the author is just an enforcer of patriarchal values who imitates gender inequalities that exist in the real world or if she is a critical feminist writer who empowers her female characters. The magic world that she paints does pander to male dominance and privilege much like the real world, but most of the main characters traverse restrictive gender norms and expectations to assert their independence and construct their own personhood. Rowling had skillfully subverted several elements of conventional gender standards throughout the books and had tried to place both female and male characters on an equal footing.

The institutions in Harry's world include Hogwarts, a co-educational institution, which provides the same opportunities to both boys and girls, both educationally and socially; and The Ministry of Magic, where Fudge's predecessor was Millicent Bagnold, a woman who reigned as the minister for 10 years. Another institution is the family structure- the family in Harry Potter only brings to mind two of the families- the Dursleys and the Weasleys. Both the families had a complex woman as the head (Zettel, 2005).

In the case of the Dursleys, Petunia Dursley is described as being excessively feminine and cold-hearted. Her dutiful housewife tendency is pictured by her obsessively cleaning the kitchen and always walking around with an apron. Also, she is the typical stepmother to Harry. But, there is more to her character. Growing up, she had to constantly compete against a sister with green eyes and exotic features, while she herself was described as a 'horse'. This, as a reflection of the pressure placed on young girls regarding their body features, is an important issue, which is powerful enough to drive a wedge even between sisters and because of this, Petunia had an inferiority complex with regard to her sister. Adding Lily's magical talents, Petunia always felt inadequate next to her sister, and she channeled this into her compulsiveness for normalcy, and Harry was the exact opposite of a normal child, and hence her aversion towards him. But, when Harry informs the Dursleys regarding Voldemort's return, she could no longer uphold the pretense that she has constructed around her and her family. She stands up to her husband who is portrayed as this man with excessive masculinity, showing that though the Dursleys were portrayed as this conventional patriarchal family, it was the woman who took the lead in time of the crucial life-altering event. The Dursleys, who had so far tried to build a world of their own centered on bourgeois normativity and conventionality, are compelled to shatter this world, signifying the breakage of the normative.

The Weasley family, on the other hand, revolved around their matriarchal figure, Molly Weasley. She is shown as the epitome of motherhood, with her seven children. She also serves as a mother figure to both Harry and Hermione. She is the typical glorified mother, who always tries to protect her children, but she is also shown as a very capable witch, as she eventually takes out Bellatrix Lestrange, the one evil witch, who had climbed through the ranks of the male-chauvinistic Death-Eater society. Her magical abilities apart, she runs the entire household on a very tight budget, proving her efficiency. Her motherhood is actually her crowning glory, and she also has a very strong personality, always standing up to what she believes in, and she chose to be a mother and she chose not to have a career despite financial strains, giving the message that being a housewife or a mother does not limit one's personality in any way. If judging a woman for her appearance is superficial and detrimental, then so is judging a woman for not having a career, so is judging a woman for being an at-home mother. Molly deserves to be

saluted for making her own choices to be not independent career-wise, and in this sense, she is definitely a feminist. There are a number of women who are housewives and Molly is the representation of all those women, showing that motherhood and other family duties are not a constraint, but rather a strength.

Another main argument supporting that the series is anti-feminist and patriarchal is that all the lead characters in the series are male, including the protagonist and the antagonist, Harry and Lord Voldemort (Schoefer, 2000). But, the series cannot be just labeled as sexist because it has a hero instead of a heroine. Also, Hermione, the lead female character is seen as a sidekick to the two lead male characters, Harry and Ron, throughout the series. But, this claim is unfounded. To anyone who has read the work, it is very evident that Harry would not have survived even the first adventure without Hermione helping and leading him, making her the actual hero.

There is also a subtle subversion of masculinity, which can be seen in the general descriptive of the story, as well as in certain characterization of some male characters, including Harry. Harry's success is an attribute to his masculinity but he is constantly undermined by the knowledge and prowess of Hermione (Battis, 2006). According to Gallardo's article, the femininity of the lead hero is bought out by symbols throughout the text. The story of Harry itself, is straight out of a Cinderella tale, with a neglecting step-mother and a bully of a brother, instead of sisters; and magic; and dances (Gallardo, 2003:196). In creating this comparison, a new array of symbols regarding gender fluctuations is brought to the front. Harry enters a world where the wizards wear dress-like robes and pointed hats and his strength is often stated to be his skill with a broom. Only, a broom is a piece of household equipment in the real world, a housewife's tool to be exact. Also, the typical picturing of a powerful witch is never complete without pointed hats and her flying in a broomstick. This placing of the hero, in the conventional position of a witch, is the polar opposite of gender conventionality.

Like Harry, a number of characters show gender ambivalence, that is, they exhibit a mix of both masculine and feminine characteristics. A perfect example of this is Neville Longbottom and Rubeus Hagrid. Neville, as a boy is highly in contrast with Neville, as an adult. The former is a typical feminine character, while he later turns out to be a rebellious, fearless leader-type who fights in the final battle against Voldemort. There is a comparable contrast in his character, each pointing towards the two ends of gender stereotypes. Hagrid, physically is a half-giant with a highly masculine body but he cries on various occasions and carries around a pink umbrella, signifying femininity. He is both manly and motherly: he knocks down doors and drives a macho motorcycle, but he also knits, bakes cakes, and mothers baby creatures. Another example is the case of Veela, who offers an extremely feminine performance of gender. They are described as the most beautiful of women who have the power to mesmerize and entrap men. But these same Veela, when angered, transform into fire-spitting creatures with enormous strength.

Also, the Veela and their entrancing dancing remind us of the sirens or bird-women of Greek mythology, whose seductive singing lured sailors to shipwreck on the rocks they inhabited. This association evokes the stereotype that females are sexual beings who are dangerously seductive and hold destructive power over men. But, Cherland has another explanation for this phenomenon, as she goes on to explain that Rowling uses the Veela to subvert the social discourse of rationality/irrationality that marks males as reasonable and females as foolish. While Harry's and Ron's minds go blank and they become dazed, Hermione remains unaffected and rational (Cherland, 2008:275).

One critic who displays abundance awareness of the fluidity and complexity of gender issues is Annette Wannamaker who argues against labeling unconventional forms of masculinity as feminine or feminized as these conceptions of the feminine and the masculine itself is based on pre-existing and constructed notions of gender. She states that, as opposed to the portrayal of a perfect feminist world, the existence of a reflected real world with complex personalities and so-called flawed gender displays will educate on the necessity of breaking stereotypes, with special attention towards nullifying the female disadvantages. She asserts, “the portrayal of gender in the Harry Potter series is often ambivalent, and mirrors less an ideal feminist or patriarchal vision of what boys and girls ought to be and more the messy, contradictory reality of what they are” (Wannamaker, 2006).

My examination of the Harry Potter series is more in line with Wannamaker’s approach since contemporary gendering has evolved from a dichotomous stand into a multiplex array of interpretations. Rowling’s male and female characters cannot be categorized into absolute gender binaries because they are complex and grow as their experiences and relationships evolve. Rowling lets her characters traverse gender roles on an individual level, but also spotlights the gender normativity that exists in the real world and the magical world on a societal level. Rowling uses a more subtle but also more effective form of social activism that achieves more than simply glossing over the gender inequality that exists in the real world by creating a utopian magical society without sexism or launching a storm of protest that will prove as ineffective as Hermione’s Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare. She shows that her characters first have to acknowledge inequality and oppression before they can work towards changing it for the good of all.

To sum up, Harry Potter books do contain gender stereotypes and portrayals of women and men, but Rowling does not reinforce sexism. She not only gives a realistic view of contemporary society, but also presents us with numerous verbal pictures and alternatives that enable us to understand the characters as multilayered individuals rather than mere representatives of two disparate and opposing gender types. Not everyone fits snugly into minutely defined boxes of masculine and feminine in terms of their identities or sensibilities and Rowling clearly conveyed this message throughout the books.

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