

Literature, Language, and Learning: English in Contemporary Contexts

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14. Exploration of Ethical Values and Moral Dilemmas in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical values, moral tensions, and humanistic insights embedded in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series. While the novels may initially appear as imaginative fantasy centred on wizardry, a closer reading reveals deep reflections on contemporary issues such as racism, discrimination, slavery, violence, and the politics of "othering." Through the narrative arcs of characters like Harry, Voldemort, Dumbledore, Hermione, and the house-elves, Rowling portrays the conflict between good and evil as a complex moral continuum rather than a binary opposition. The study foregrounds themes of love, friendship, sacrifice, inclusion, and nonviolence that underpin the series' ethical foundations. It also explores psychological trauma, embodied experience, repentance, and the transformative potential of moral choice. By analysing key incidents and character interactions, the paper

argues that Harry Potter functions not merely as a fantasy narrative but as a moral text that invites readers to reflect on empathy, justice, courage, and the healing power of goodness in a world marked by conflict and discrimination.

Keywords: Good vs Evil; Discrimination; Identity Formation; Empathy; Psychological Trauma; Power and Resistance; Friendship and Sacrifice

In contemporary British Literature, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series has secured a predominant position among other literary works in the domain. Countless works and studies have been done. A superficial reading of this fiction may make only the wizarding world explicit. However, an in-depth study of Rowling's books has led to countless works and studies. Based on these studies and a more in-depth analysis of Rowling's saga, one can note moral values and ethical issues that, after a superficial first reading, may remain unexplored. Among them can be counted racism, gender issues and slavery, which are basically the same problems that have plagued the human being for a very long time and that continue to coexist in contemporary society. These problems are addressed by the author within the magical world she created, but the books contain an innumerable set of analogies with the real world, that is, the reader's world.

This paper attempts to identify the ethical values inherent in the Harry Potter Series. In the wizarding world of fiction, evil, hate, and murder are evident. Nevertheless, J.K. Rowling's discourse on love, goodness, joy,

togetherness, and resurrection is deftly represented through the characters. The contemporary world, especially among youth, is haunted by nihilism. Lord Voldemort proves it when he states, “There is no good and evil. There is only power and those too weak to seek it” (Sorcerer’s Stone, 291). There is a strong manifestation of evil subordinating the good. However, Rowling concludes her novels with the hint that good is real and evil is erasable.

Rowling defines the value of being good and the hopelessness of being bad. She says, goodness leads to “a soul that is untarnished and whole,” while evil leads to “a maimed and diminished soul” (Half-Blood 509-511). Goodness is stronger than evil, “like a tongue on frozen steel, like flesh in flame” (Deathly 685).

The concept of ‘othering’ is the core theme of Rowling’s fiction. There is a wide array of incidents in the novels that illustrate how discrimination is shown by one group to another. The purebloods underestimate the whole lot of human and nonhuman creatures, such as Muggles, Mudbloods, Squibs, giants, werewolves, and goblins. Discrimination and dehumanisation are the results of ‘othering’. The pure-blood wizards in the Hogwarts School comment on the Muggle-borns as: “Muggles are like animals, stupid and dirty” (Deathly 574). The Dark Lord Voldemort passes a crude comment saying: “We shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain” (Deathly Hallows 11).

At the same time, goodness is revealed through the words of certain characters. Harry’s godfather, Sirius Black, insists, “If you want to know what a man is like, take a good

look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals” (Goblet 525). Professor Dumbledore has respect for all the ‘others’. He does not consider the purebloods or wizards to be superior. In fact, his determined support and advocacy for the rights of the Muggle-born have earned him many enemies in his own society. Rowling herself addresses Professor Dumbledore as “the champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles” (Goblet 648). One of his admirers in the school says about Professor Dumbledore: “He could find something to value in anyone, however apparently insignificant or wretched” (Deathly 20).

There are a few characters who resist this practice of ‘others’ vehemently. Hermione is worried about the plight of the house-elves. She pities them, saying, “How sick it is, the way they’ve got to obey?” (Deathly 197) Harry Potter extends his unconditional love to Hagrid, a half-giant, and to Lupin, a werewolf.

Dobby and Kreacher stand as examples of the impact of the mutilating power of othering. Dobby, the house-elf, serves in the Malfoy family. His masters are Dark wizards who oppress him. He has an eccentric behaviour of banging his head or firing his finger when his suggestion or plan goes wrong. He loses his self-esteem and picks up self-harm behaviour. This odd behavioural pattern may be the result of the ill-treatment by his masters. Kreacher, the male house-elf, serves in the House of Black with servile obedience and loyalty. He is eccentric because he hates freedom. Dumbledore laments, “Kreature is what he has been made by wizards, Harry” (Goblet 832). Harry himself

does not bother about giving a Christmas present to Kreature.

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, one could witness a ray of repentance through the insightful words of Dumbledore. While talking about the relationship between Sirius and Kreature, Dumbledore makes it clear that Sirius does not hate Kreature. To him, Kreature is just a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. “Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike.” (Goblet 834) Dumbledore realises that his wizard community has mistreated the house-elves for a long time. It has abused them to the core. The current events prove that the purebloods are reaping the harvest. Dumbledore is a good character, and this is his goodness. He humiliates none and feels compassion for everyone. (Half-Blood, 262) He extends respect, honour and patience even when he addresses the Dark Lord Voldemort, the murderous Draco and the enraged Harry Potter. He empathises even with his enemies, such as Voldemort, believing that everyone has a history of loss, fear, and pain.

Dumbledore is a man of ethics. He never underestimates or overestimates others. He is filled with the good intention of raising others. He always looks at the best in others. He admits his mistakes. To Harry Potter, he says, “I make mistakes like the next man” (Half-Blood 197). He is ready to apologise if anything goes wrong. At the end, he does not achieve victory; yet he repents, saying to Harry Potter, “I crave your pardon, Harry” (Deathly 713). This good nature of Dumbledore is his real magic. To him, true

love can do magical wonders. He is self-confident but humble.

Harry Potter is an icon of the triumph of nonviolence. Till the end, he does not use the Killing Curse nor kill anyone. He meets his opponents disarmed. His magic is his execution of non-violence. Even when his life is in danger, he states clearly: “I won’t blast people out of my way just because they’re there. That’s Voldemort’s job,” (Deathly 70-71). He is worried about the lives of his worst enemies, such as Peter in the Shrieking Shack, Malfoy in the Room of Requirement, and Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest. Harry Potter is frightened neither of death nor of dying. He believes his liberation is in giving up violence. Thus, Rowling decries violence and elevates the power of nonviolence to the highest position of honour. Harry Potter is traumatised and enraged, and he loses his temper over deception and betrayal. Snape advises him to stop shouting and be focused. “Master yourself! Control your anger, discipline your mind.” (Goblet 535-36) Dumbledore serves as a role model to Harry Potter with his emotional composure, centeredness, and patience. The fiction is filled with evil, violence, and loss, which are disturbing and mutilating. However, true maturity lies in patience, kindness, and gentleness.

Throughout the Harry Potter Series, the young wizard's journey continues as an adventure in search of Lord Voldemort. The latter is also determined to locate Harry and put an end to him. In Half-Blood Prince, the combat between Harry and Voldemort becomes severe. Voldemort has returned to the Wizarding World and begun

to gather his army. In the midst of these two characters who stand for virtue and vice, few characters are siding with either of them. Their intention, good or bad, is evident. It is a straightforward conflict between good people, represented by Harry, and bad ones, represented by Voldemort. However, there are fewer characters populating the middle of this spectrum. As the story progresses, more characters are introduced in *Half-Blood Prince*. Some have ambiguous moral standing. Even Harry could not tell who had good or bad intentions.

Though Voldemort is the arch villain in the Harry Potter Series, Rowling presents him as a brilliant character. His villainy is not Satanic. He is pitiable because he was orphaned at a young age. He has grown from a vulnerable child who has never experienced love. Dumbledore gives an account of Voldemort's past. His father was a Muggle. He abandoned the family. His mother was poverty-stricken, and she died.

Thus, Voldemort grew up in an orphanage. Devoured by love, Voldemort becomes a monster of power. Being a parentless child, his nature has become eccentric. He is friendless. He is of an unforgiving nature. He elicits loyalty not out of love or dedication, but by instilling fear in others. He could not bear commonness. His wish is to be exceptional in all matters. To achieve greatness, he is even ready to be a killer. Another interesting aspect of Voldemort's history concerns his name. His real name was Tom Riddle. To him, 'Tom' is a common name, which will mark him as one among the others. (*Half-Blood* 276-77).

On the whole, Voldemort loves greatness than goodness. Power is everything for him. He kills his own father and says to Harry, "I am now going to prove my power by killing you." (Goblet 658) To avoid his own death, he causes the deaths of others. Voldemort earns the readers' sympathy at the time of his death. He is like a wounded child. He could not believe his own vulnerability and mortality. Rowling describes his final condition as "left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath". (Deathly, 704, 707) He understands that his addictive dependence on power and violence is suicidal.

Draco Malfoy

The Harry Potter Series proves that evil is not the ultimate end. People can be redeemed to goodness. The character Draco Malfoy stands as a living example of it. Draco is the young villain in the story. His main business is sneering and slurring others. He likes inciting conflict. He is wrong to wish to be the murderer of Dumbledore. However, he is aware of his inability to perform such actions. He resembles Voldemort in being driven by his own desperate insecurity and fear of being rejected or harmed by the bigger bully. The reverse archetype of Malfoy is Harry's own father, James Potter. In his younger days, Harry had a high opinion of James. However, James had some ugly secrets. He had been arrogant and cruel. He had humiliated Snape. When Harry learns of his father's unethical side, his empathy turns to his enemy. (Order, 650)

Deloris Umbridge is perhaps the most sinister character in the story, even more so than Malfoy or Voldemort. Her smile and speech are falsely built. It is a

sheer act of presumption. Her physical appearance and behaviour portray her as a good woman. She always dresses in pink. She adores and exhibits her love for kittens. Her laugh is consistent. When asked, she gives a moral talk, saying that evil is unreal and that fighting it is unnecessary. Deloris has another hidden identity: she craves power. In her pursuit of power, she acts ruthlessly and cruelly toward whoever crosses her path. As her focus is on attaining power, she cannot bear suggestions, opinions, or opposition from others. She is ready to trouble the children even.

Rita Skeeter, the journalist for the Daily Prophet newspaper, is an excellent satire of profit-driven fake news. She knows the knack of drawing readers' attention to the fake news. She tells people they have to hear everything she says. (Order, 567) People generally believe what comforts and excites them, not what is true. They wilfully disbelieve what makes them uncomfortable or afraid, even when this ultimately endangers and destroys them. In the fiction, Severus Snape and Sirius Black are branded as vicious villains, but the truth is different. Snape hated Harry's father and resented Harry himself. So, Harry is sure Snape is the murderer of his father. However, Dumbledore was still right to trust Snape, a sign that people can actually change. Harry is certainly wrong to doubt Snape. However, in honest life, only his wrong conceptions save him. At the end, when the truth is revealed, Harry's enmity toward Snape converts into admiration. In fact, Harry names his son after Snape, the man he has despised.

Some minor characters change. Professor Quirrell has been good in the past. However, he loses all good

characteristics after joining the allies. Pettigrew seems to be weak and cowardly at the beginning. Even Harry remarks about the absence of villainous nature in him. However, in Goblet of Fire, we see Pettigrew brutally murdering Cedric Diggory.

Horace Slughorn is one of the several characters foregrounded in Half-Blood Prince. He sticks to uncertain moral codes. Slughorn is the new Potions Professor, appointed at Hogwarts School. He is a genial and well-intentioned man. He behaves kindly towards Harry. He is interested and preoccupied with the thought of teaching young people for their potential to accrue power and accolades. However, at one stage, he makes a wrong judgment and enables the young Lord Voldemort to immortalise himself through Horcruxes.

In Half-Blood Prince, the secret is revealed that Draco is working for Lord Voldemort. He has been assigned the task of killing Dumbledore. Harry Potter has long doubted Draco's loyalty, and his suspicion has come true. However, throughout the novel, we see Draco in distress and paranoid, as he has been forced to do an unpleasant job. The doubt arises about Draco's acceptance of doing an evil job. It is because of his family's relationship with the Death Eaters.

In all the books in the Harry Potter Series, there is an inherent theme that people can be saved by living together. The characters are either fixed in loneliness or in the support and circle of friendship. Voldemort's mother, Merope, proves how living an abandoned life kills the power of magic in her. Of course, she meets her end by this

loss. Human beings can lead a secure life not by being strong, intelligent, or virtuous, but by being together. One should love others and expand the circle of inclusion. This truth can be evidenced through Harry's life. Hermione is the most fiercely loyal friend in Harry's life. Harry says to Cedric, "Let's just take it [the Champion's Cup] together" (Goblet, 634), or as Ron says to Harry, "We're with you no matter what happens" (Half-Blood, 651). Rowling writes, "The mere fact that [Ron and Hermione] were still there on either side of him, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them." (Half-Blood, 99)

Dobby, Neville, Luna, and Ginny are fringe characters and outsiders at the beginning. Later, they became friends along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. The lesson learnt from them is that one should not underestimate or subordinate the silent persons. Ron is a fairly prejudiced, dull character. Harry decided to go on his expedition alone, without such a person's companionship. Dumbledore counsels him, saying, "You need your friends, Harry" (Half-Blood, 78).

Elves live in a condition of absolute submission to wizards. They do not seem to rebel against their fate. Dobby himself states that elves cannot set themselves free. This is the confirmation of their lower position. The condition of submission is also evidenced by the fact that Dobby is set free, and he does not belong to the Malfoy family. Dobby is happy with his new status as a free elf. At the same time, he is ready to extend his service to Harry, as if Harry were still

a slave. This is how he wins the sympathy of the series' major characters.

Generally, the question arises whether the consciousness of our physical appearance is a hindrance to achieving our goals. Rowling gives a different perspective on this view. Human beings are fundamentally physical, embodied creatures. There is goodness in the physical body. When Fawke cries, her tears have healing power. (Chamber, 207) Lily's love lives on in Harry's skin: "Voldemort could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests". (Order, 844) Dumbledore finds out the way to open the cave of Voldemort. He is sure the doors can be opened not by magic, but by his hands and his eyes, patiently looking at it. (Half-Blood, 558) Dumbledore cheerfully warns Harry that Voldemort is wrong to fear his body: "There's nothing to be feared from a body, Harry" (Half-Blood, 566). Even after death, Harry still has a body.

As the story progresses, one can witness the characters' transition in attitude. The most extraordinary mission of Harry is not defeating his enemies but considering how to treat people who fluctuate in their moral behaviour. Rowling suggests that our goal is not to get beyond our bodies but to embrace them. The power of magic becomes subordinate to the power of physical finite strength. It could be witnessed that the repeated advice shared among one another is to sleep, eat, or enjoy chocolate. "A full stomach meant good spirits; an empty one, bickering and gloom." (Deathly 287) Dumbledore brilliantly advises Harry, "It is necessary to start with your

scar” (Goblet, 827). Our bodies carry our trauma, and we must not ignore this.

Thus, the story of the Harry Potter Series is about moving away from greatness to goodness (Half-Blood, 443; Deathly, 508, 568, 716). The climax is a brilliant anti-climax. Harry does not become the next Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Minister of Magic or Lord Harry. He becomes Ginny's husband and the children's father. He is sure they will not grow up with the trauma he suffered. He embraces ordinary life and cares about little people. He wants goodness, not greatness.

Love is the most important theme, handled wondrously by Rowling, throughout the Series. It is exhibited through family and friends. For Harry, Hogwarts is his home, and his friends are his family. It is Lily's sacrifice, through her love for her son, that saved Harry from Voldemort. Voldemort's love is self-centred. He loved himself and his greatest desire was not to die. This brings him to ruin. The dangers of love are also present throughout the saga. Snape, who is the one who loved another person in an egoistic way, ends up suffering his ultimate punishment to avenge the death of his beloved. Harry knows how to love others. His true power lies in his ability to love his friends, which makes him the hero of the story. His eyes are the same as his mother's eyes because he has inherited the courage to love others and sacrifice himself for those he loves.

J.K. Rowling has introduced ethical and moral values in the Harry Potter Series to sensitise the readers to the realities of life. The characters are endowed either with

good or bad behaviour on the conviction of the writer that good literature should ennoble the reader. In this way, wizards and witches become representatives of men and women; their behaviours become models to be avoided or followed, and their actions become things to be supported or condemned. The separation between good and evil becomes clear.

To conclude, the books in the Harry Potter Series are not about magic but morality. They spread the message that one should love even the strange and unwanted ones and sacrifice oneself for others, even when one is burning with hate and lusting for power. Trust in God is stronger than evil and death itself. Life should be lived always in hope and joy. Professor Dumbledore tells his students, “Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.” (Goblet, 723)

The modern world is caught up in polarisation, conflict, and war. At this time, the profound and practical moral imagination provided by the Harry Potter Series is relevant. It can heal the negative attitude of othering and energise love, even beyond the author’s own intent.

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