

## **Hijacking the Hysteria: Reading Heteronormativity, Homophobia and a narrative of Queerness into J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels**

**Souvik Datta**

University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

*E-mail address:* [souvikhrc@gmail.com](mailto:souvikhrc@gmail.com)

---

### **Abstract**

The Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling, despite being fantasy, rarely address problems that cannot be taken up in reality, whether for critique or accommodation. Fiction allows for this through its constructed spaces; but the Potter world is drafted with an exclusionist bias, lop-sided defamiliarization of reality. Heteronormativity is enforced, utopia, in the end, seems exclusivist and incomplete. There is negligible queer visibility/consciousness embodied/expressed in the texts. No questioning occurs in this bildungsroman which could well be Harry's coming-out tale. The wizarding community inaugurates a queer subtext, but Harry himself never seemingly celebrates pluralism or diversity. Rather, hegemonic masculinity and homophobia dictate adolescent life, focusing instead on its British boarding school contextualization and dormitory culture. What implication does this have for the adolescent reading public? Must heroism necessarily be heteronormative? Men can be 'masculine' outside such constructions, disrupting the traditional image of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine. Queer masculinities exist, applies even to 'straight' men, exposing the spectrum of masculinity in its spatial, temporal variance. Homophobia is a characteristic of the hegemonic masculine, but Harry has none of the latter in his ideologies and interactions. Is it

indicative of queerness, or masculinity in crisis? There is not only a consistent queer subtext, absence of which must be problematized, as also placing Harry's sexuality under the scanner, whose ambiguities and implications need examination: both from the interpretative framework and authorial intentions, besides present-day relevance.

**Keywords:**Heteronormativity; Homophobia; Queerness; Homosexuality; Masculinity

---

The Harry Potter series, by J.K. Rowling, has been a revolutionary set of works in terms of popularity and reception. Engaging and spell-binding (pun intended) to say the least, it was considered path-breaking in its ability to chart the return of the adolescent reading public into the world of fiction. Delightful in its art to captivate and absorb children and adult readers alike, Potter mania went on to become an obsession, especially among the younger sections of society. Since then, this series has been subject to a great deal of discussion, analysis and interpretation, at multiple levels of study. Literary and critical analysis has also been done, taking into account various thematic dimensions of the texts and the paraphernalia associated with them. While these have attributed importance to the works, surpassing the idea of being mere leisure reads to absorb young minds; it is also true that they have thrown up a large number of areas for exploration: areas that one could hardly think of reading into, or existent in the texts, had it not been for such scholarly pursuits.

Before embarking on the proposed project of research findings, it would be useful to first survey the existing literature and critical works related to the series. Apart from the seven primary texts themselves, there have been articles on a variety of themes and associated concepts, related to them. Some of them are self-explanatory in terms of their content, like Tison Pugh and David Wallace's "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series" and David Nylund's "Reading Harry Potter: Popular Culture, Queer Theory, and the Fashioning of Youth Identity". These are useful approaches focussing on a different take on the children's tale, concentrating on socio-normative notions of the sexuality

of the subject. Also, there have been theses by researchers in India, an eminent one being Dr Vandana Saxena's "The Subversive Harry Potter: Adolescent Rebellion and Containment in the J.K. Rowling Novels". Collections of critical essays like "Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays (Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture)", authored by Giselle Liza Anatol, cover a wide spectrum of issues that concern the inquisitive reader, from it being a product of popular culture to its impact on the psyche of the child to questions of sexuality and heroism. Similarly, with "Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter", edited by Elizabeth E. Heilman; and "Critical Insights: Harry Potter", edited by M. Katherine Grimes and Lana A. Whited. Laura Tamberelli's "Harry Potter and the Gendering of Hogwarts" and Steven Barfield's "Fantasy and the Interpretation of Harry Potter" deal with specific issues as their titles suggest, that of the novels' throwing up interpretations on masculinity and gender issues, and as a participant in the fantastic realm, respectively; while "Magic within the Mayhem: The Multi-Genre Success of Harry Potter" by Kelly O'Brien talks of the reasons for the success of the series. Put together, all these available literary readings (though not a wholly exhaustive list), combine to form a multifarious spectrum of perspectives, attempting to encompass most of what has been discussed concerning the primary texts themselves.

What came across as a result of this mapping of literary resources available on the subject, is the fact that issues essentially related to gender and sexuality have not significantly been the subject of academic or critical debate. Questions like the latent feminist potential of the texts, debates on masculinity and heroism, and more importantly, gender as having a very performative aspect attached to it, seem to have been hitherto left unexplored and deficient to the extent that their exclusion and lack of analysis seem to strike the eye. Another grossly under-investigated and very apparent area is the queer potential of these texts, and this is something that is, in my opinion, a rather negative assertion against the text and the criticism surrounding it.

As subjects living in a post-modern world, a world of pluralities of different kinds and at various levels, it is unimaginable to think of sexuality in a unitary fashion, being solely unidimensional and strictly categorized. But this is exactly what the Harry

Potter novels seem to do. They seem blind to the fact that there exist multiple sexualities that can be brought to the fore, and remain oblivious of the fact that this kind of an absence is not only an exclusivist endeavour but can also have deep-reaching consequences. Very little stress has been laid on this issue, if at all in the first place. It is with this deficiency in mind that this research is sought to be undertaken. Aiming at being compensatory, it attempts to categorically eke out a narrative of heteronormativity and homophobia which hitherto seems to have passed unnoticed or unimportant enough for discussion.

The Harry Potter novels seem distinctively closed off to any kind of 'queerness'. "The word "queer" is typically thought to mean "homosexual," but it also has larger associations suggesting a non-normative, alternative identity"<sup>1</sup>. The scenario then is supremely problematic. The reason for saying this is because, taken in the general sense of the term, the magical world is itself invariably 'queer' or strange, as it breaks off at a tangent from the routine lives of ordinary people, or Muggles (the way the texts refer to them). Not only the people, even the magical creatures like house-elves, hippogriffs, werewolves, centaurs and unicorns are, so to speak, 'queer' in similar terms. It is not as if a wizard or a witch is entirely different from what the run-of-the-mill individual is; but yet this group is different from commonplace individuals, almost extraordinary in terms of what they are: their lives, powers possessed, and abilities. Michael Bronski, interestingly argues that though the books are not in any sense "gay," they are "profoundly queer in the broader sense of the word" since they "celebrate a revolt against accepted, conventional life—against the world of the Muggles, who slavishly follow societal rules without ever thinking about whether they are right or wrong if they make sense or not. They are at heart an attack on the very idea of normalcy."<sup>2</sup> But the way he almost rubbishes the possibility of there being an element of 'queerness' in the sexual sense is certainly objectionable. A close reading of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Warner, M. *The Trouble with Normal*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Bronski, Michael. "Queering Harry Potter." *Z Magazine Online* 1 Sept. 2003: 9. Print.

primary texts disagrees with this worldview, and the reasons for this would also be outlined hereafter.

There is a rather suggestive set of images and situations dotted throughout the books that seem suggestive of sexual 'queerness'. The fact that Harry lives in 'the Cupboard under the Stairs' in his uncle's house is imminent since it is a symbol for the closet that a gay man is confined to in the context of a heteronormative, hierarchical and homophobic society. Similarly, "Harry's first trip to London as a wizard also bears traits similar to a queer coming-of-age tale... Hagrid introduces Harry to a new world in which he can live openly as a wizard, and this experience parallels the experience of many homosexuals who are introduced to gay life by a more knowledgeable guide."<sup>3</sup> Harry goes to school where he finds more of his "kind", and this delights and excites him. Is then, the Potter series an exquisite coming-out tale of a queer man? According to Foucault, it is impossible to relocate oneself outside heteronormativity. He alludes to the limitations of sexual identity and the coming out story: a "reverse discourse." Foucault's work reminds us that such discourse of sexual liberation reinforces a binary and unbalanced opposition between the homosexual and heterosexual. He discards the traditional formulations of gay and lesbian identity politics as restrictive, although emancipation struggles may be temporally necessary. The alternative plane, perhaps, exists not only at the level of the exterior and the existential, but, is also superbly internalized in terms of sexuality.

The very survival of the community is predicated on a shielded existence, away from the eyes of the common public, where transgressions can cause upheavals and disruptions, to say the least. Visibility is a major phenomenon that needs to be analysed. Students of the wizarding community cannot board their school train from either platform Nine or Ten at King's Cross station, but must do so only from 'Platform Nine and Three Quarters'; that too after running headlong into a barrier after ensuring that they weren't seen by any of the Muggles. Zones like the utilitarian Diagon Alley

---

<sup>3</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

and its almost subversive, Gothic counterpart, Knockturn Alley, must be hidden from the public eye, like everything else. The flying car, no matter how big the emergency, should not be seen, unless its invisibility booster is turned on. Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall should only make an appearance in Little Whinging after the streetlights are put off. The Invisibility Cloak that Harry uses in many clandestine situations, is in itself one of the most important markers of this need to remain visually absent.

Considering these elements of queerness, both sexual and otherwise, it is not difficult to anticipate operative homophobia inherent in the textual fabric. This, interestingly, exists not only in the Muggles but also in the wizarding world itself. While the anxiety of visibility is one part of this manifestation, there is also a distinctive textual homophobia operative. The Dursleys' are a fine example. The opening line of the first book raises questions of what comes across as socially sanctioned and acceptable - "Mr and Mrs Dursley, of Number Four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much"<sup>4</sup> - a nearly forced assertion enforcing the widest possible gulf between them, and their "abnormal" nephew, who needs to be told to behave, not make a sound, and confine himself to his 'closeted' space most of the times when guests arrived, almost as if they were required to hide a dirty secret that they couldn't do away with even if they wished to. "More tellingly, the language Rowling has the Dursleys use to discuss Harry's mother and her wizard husband, referring to "her crowd" and to "their kind," mirrors often used to invoke homosexuality. And once Harry discovers the nature of his difference, the Dursleys demand complete silence and total concealment. (p. 3)"<sup>5</sup> In fact, most of the abuse operates by this element of 'difference'. "The Dursleys' fear of magic operates in a fashion similar to homophobia. For example, just as many people do not fear homosexual people or homosexuality itself (claiming instead to disdain it), the

---

<sup>4</sup> Rowling, J. K. "The Boy Who Lived." *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.

1. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Bronski, M. "What Is It about Harry?" *Boston Phoenix* 2 July 2003: 3. Print.

Dursleys fear that their neighbours, family, and business associates will discover their association with magic and the wizarding world almost as much as they fear magic itself.”<sup>6</sup> The phobia of Muggles towards the wizards is indicative of a symbolic queerness, as they are unable to predict their patterns of behaviour, reception and reactions to things. This results in a terrified perception of such people, bordering on xenophobia. The fear also lies at the prospect of loss of social respectability and propriety for displaying a visible link, however subtle or noticeable, to the non-conforming. Intriguingly enough and unsettling as the comparison may appear, in terms of treatment and marginalization, the figure of the werewolf, for instance, has been paralleled to attitudes and perceptions relating to the coming out of the gay man and his familial reception, especially in terms of the social trauma faced on account of alteration in perspectives, equations and sympathies.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, as seen in the figure of Lupin, such aversion does not remain confined to the domestic sphere alone, but also includes the workplace, much like how a homophobe would react if a person with whom he/she had regular dealings in office turned out to be gay. Lycanthropy/ ‘queerness’, almost becomes tantamount to a sickness that one should be warned against, distancing oneself from the affected. What could have been a more denigrating reading than this? Nonetheless, Harry’s playing up to this embodies the tragedy of the queer boy: that of being forced to adopt certain roles, practices and guises for the sake of maintaining the status quo, leaving their immediate social setup unscathed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence”<sup>8</sup> The text seems to be advocating this fact as if this was the way to be, with the promotion of anything else as problematic to say the least.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California, 1990. 3. Print.

The playing out of such homophobic intent is consistent with another practice: socio-cultural heteronormativity. Here, however, the ‘deviating’ element is restricted between magical poles only, not extended to the sexual plane, where things must be as heteronormative as they can/should possibly be. There seems to be a very deliberate and conscious exclusion of any (sexually) queer character that is encountered in the novels, a stark absence since the stories trace a phase in which the children are growing up into young adults, puberty being attained, with a sexual renaissance underway, both at the individual and collective levels. Not only considering visibility, but it also appears as though the novels are oblivious of any such existence in the first place. The text seems to reinforce the social norm that heterosexuality and heteronormativity is the way to be. Very consciously steering clear of the mention of queerness or the presence of any such equation between the characters, the books reiterate the regressive worldview that all spaces that the narrative permeates into must consciously be ‘straight’ and mainstream in terms of sexual comprehensibility. This is grossly dissatisfying, and ironic too: why is it that a magical ‘outwardly queer’ world must necessarily be so forcefully heteronormative, restrictive and ridden with an exclusionist bias from within?

The consequences of this operative heterosexism, homophobia and effacement of the queer spectrum are particularly disappointing in the post-modern world where alternative sexualities have come to the fore, and are no longer topics subject to concealment and suppression. One must necessarily question the outcome of such effacement concerning its intended readership – mostly children and young adults. What such erasure in a greatly pedestalized and popular novel series like this will do, is to reflect a complete lack of initiative towards creating awareness among children regarding the existence of ‘queer’ people in society. Rather, they will remain ignorant of the fact that such people are ordinary individuals too, like their heterosexual counterparts, deserving to be represented and depicted just like anyone else. This is a general perception, even among the middle and upper classes of society. “...the hegemony of the binary model of sex/gender effaces the indefinite range of variant genderings [and] enforces that effacement with taboo: gender “deviance,” . . . if it is

visible at all, is sick, disgusting, and immoral.”<sup>9</sup> The pressing need of the moment is for such inclusion in early teenage years to prevent incorrect, tyrannical and hierarchical ideas from permeating into young minds, the future generations to-be. The room must be made for the elephant, the adolescent reading public should not be subject to a fragmented view of social existence.

Another question that needs to be asked is whether the authorial intention was to play safe as well and if she does act as a custodian of moral culture, policing such dynamics. To counter any such possibility, Rowling seems to run from pillar to post in forcibly making a hero out of Harry, even if she perhaps never intended to make him a stereotypical one. "The danger of heteronormative heroism in the Harry Potter books is that it potentially reinscribes the problematic heterosexual/homosexual binary that critics such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jonathan Ned Katz identify as both policing desires and the identities constructed around those desires.”<sup>10</sup> Harry neither looks nor acts like a hero. Whatever he seems to be at the end of it all, is in complicity with, and being a beneficiary to the help of others; be it the deeds of his friends, Ron and Hermione, or his teachers, or gifts like Parseltongue, which he gets endowed with based on pure accident. Yet, Rowling subsumes him and shifts the focus on plot rather than deed, on the battle between good and evil rather than his heroic deeds. This she must do since there is not one that is significant enough to boast of. Yet, even though Harry is nothing without his friends, allies and comrades, he must somehow be shown as heroic. Did Rowling at some point, while penning down her tales, feel that Harry's story wasn't conventionally heroic enough, and hence, left scope for a questioning or alternative reading of his character? Is it a case of authorial anxiety, attempting to channelize the reading the way she wished to, rather than allowing 'free play of meaning', and infinite scope of interpretation, as any post-modern text would allow? "The Potter world depicts twenty-first-century diversity in

---

<sup>9</sup> Norton, Jody. "Transchildren and the Discipline of Children's Literature." *Lion and the Unicorn* 1 Jan. 1999: 421-22. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

myriad ways yet nonetheless fully erases same-sex attraction.”<sup>11</sup> The statement is disappointing, yes, but unfortunately, true.

## Conclusions

This hysterical, nervous, unsettling, and jittery attitude towards the existence of ‘queerness’ needs to be discarded with immediate effect. It is unfair that a particular section of society should be eliminated. Though Rowling resorted to tokenism without pedagogy when she announced without consequence that Dumbledore was gay; such declarations are useless as they have no bearings on the story. Moreover, considering that this genre is fantasy, the effacement appears such a waste, given its infinite scope for addressing and exploring such issues. That which could have been a rebellious and subversive space is ridden with incomplete defamiliarization of reality. “Given the books’ avowed interest in resisting cultural normativity, how heteronormativity nonetheless contains queer readings points to its crushing ideological weight. Queer figures are subsumed by the texts’ construction of wizarding heteronormativity, and thus the fantastic becomes infected with the banal. Similarly, heterosexual female and male characters are likewise thwarted by the cultural logic of heteronormativity, especially regarding how gendered normativity constructs Harry’s masculine heroism.”<sup>12</sup> Rowling’s novel series lays out the hope of utopia but does not quite live up to its promise. The bildungsroman is fragmented, sexually pluralism and diversity are not celebrated. The apparent absence (or absent presence) of the queer (sub)text makes the text fall short of its all-encompassing glory. Yet the Harry Potter novelsaid the analysis of the ideological impacts of heteronormative beliefs and practices. These novels strike at the roots of their resistance to normativity through contradictory notions and actions mired in their narrative. The boarding school story, therefore, remains queered only at a superficial level, and its heteronormativity renders futile any attempts at subversion whatsoever.

---

<sup>11</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v031/31.3wallace.html>>.

## Works Cited

- Anatol, Giselle Liza. *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. Print.
- Bristow, Joseph. *Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Bronski, Michael. "Queering Harry Potter." *Z Magazine Online* (2003): 9. Print.
- Bronski, Michael. "What Is It about Harry?" *Boston Phoenix* (2003): 3. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- Grimes, M. Katherine, and Lana A. Whited. *Critical Insights: Harry Potter*. N.p.: Salem, 2015. Print.
- Heilman, Elizabeth E. *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Norton, Jody. "Transchildren and the Discipline of Children's Literature." *Lion and the Unicorn* (1999): 421-22. Print.
- Nylund, David. "Reading Harry Potter: Popular Culture, Queer Theory and the Fashioning of Youth Identity." *Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2007, Pp. 13-24* 26 (2007): 13-24. Web. 22 Feb. 2014.
- O'Brien, Kelly. "Magic within the Mayhem: The Multi-genre Success of Harry Potter." *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal* 4 (2009): n. pag. Print.
- Pugh, Tison, and David L. Wallace. "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 31, Number 3, Fall 2006, Pp. 260-281* 31 (2006): 260-81. Project MUSE [Johns Hopkins UP]. Web. 22 Feb. 2014.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2001. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: Scholastic, 2004. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic, 2001. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.
- Sandfort, Theo. *Lesbian and Gay Studies: An Introductory, Interdisciplinary Approach*. London: SAGE, 2000. Print.
- Saxena, Vandana. *The Subversive Harry Potter: Adolescent Rebellion and Containment in the J.K. Rowling Novels*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2012. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: U of California, 1990. Print.
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.

---

BIO-NOTE

---

Souvik Datta works as Assistant Professor of English in the College of Vocational Studies, affiliated with the University of Delhi. He has been teaching English for almost five years now, both in affiliated colleges of the University of Delhi and elsewhere in India. His interest areas include Indian Literature (both in English and translation), Film Studies, Popular Fiction, and of course, Queer Theory. An incorrigible filmbuff, his adjunct engagements of life include reading fiction, watching cinema and writing about it, and a keen eye for aesthetics that he intends to cultivate.

---