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Subverting Gender Stereotypes in J.K Rowling's Harry Potter Series

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Abstract

It is generally argued that J.K. Rowling in Harry Potter Series discriminates against female characters as compared to male characters as far as the portrayal of characters is concerned. It is alleged that female characters are not given the due space and time, presenting them in secondary and subservient position, though they are intelligent. But, on the hand, there are some scholars who find female characters in the series assuming new roles, to some extent, along with their conventional roles. A close reading of the Harry Potter series can reveal how they journey the conventional to unconventional role, from meekness to assertion in the male-dominated Wizarding society. In a way, some of them succeed in breaking the traditional gender stereotypes, undertaking unconventional role along with their traditional role as nurtures. Their new role encompasses both feminine and masculine traits. While breaking down the long-established gender stereotypes, they rarely take recourse to violent modes and tactics.

Keywords

Resistance, Gender, Stereotype, Subversion, Sex, Masculinity.

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In simple words, gender refers to division of human society into male and female. The term refers to “behavioural differences between males and females that are culturally based and socially learned” (Appelbaum & Chambliss 218). In a broader sense, gender portrays culturally and socially constructed roles, privileges, relationships and expectations of men and women. Gender determines the behaviour and actions of both sexes but it is not a natural process in entirety, because institutions, beliefs and customs are cultural or social construct. Gender is not something “we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do” (West and Zimmerman 1987), “something we perform” (Butler 1990). A stereotype is defined as “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (Allport). Some of the stereotypes of men and women are: ‘men are not sensitive’; ‘women are not great drivers’ and ‘women love nagging and gossiping. In other words, a traditional role of woman is to be in charge of domestic chores like serving her husband, looking after her children, cooking and cleaning.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series as a fantasy often understood as a source of entertainment for children but in practice it goes beyond the source of entertainment,

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addressing the adult issues of larger and universal significance. Further most of the critics charge the author of discrimination against female characters for the way she reduces them to the secondary and subservient role, while contributing to the achievement of male characters from a distance. For this lop-sided and partial portrayal, the series is labeled as a sexist work. Though these critics come out with fair appreciation of the portrayal of female characters, they seem to be overlooking the role of these characters in totality as well as Rowling's art of characterization in *The Harry Potter Series*. Some female characters, to some extent, subvert the gender stereotypes, keeping calm and composure without losing sense and sensibility

Rowling is often charged of discriminatory and negative portrayal of female characters in the series, siding with male ones, referring to the incident in the first novel, *The Philosopher Stone*, where Hermione is shown cowering after being trolled: "[Hermione] was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror" (130). The critics point out the way the author seems to be overlooking the cognitive power and understanding of women. They are shown interested only in "low order of magic as taught in Divination classes" (Heilmen and Donaldson 223). Though they accept the fact that Hermione is endowed intelligence, sensibility, compassion, she is shown using her powers to contribute to the achievement of male characters, especially Harry Potter. Another example that is given by the critics is of the French girl Fleur, the only girl who takes part in the Tri-Wizard Tournament but she meets failure. Moreover women are restricted to motherly roles, for example, Professor McGonagall though she is educated, smart, talented and caring; she is reduced to conventional motherly duties at Hogwarts.

It is true that Hermione is rescued by boys in the beginning but later over the time she plays a crucial role in the fight against Voldemort and his followers. Further she saves the life her friends in the novel *Deathly Hallows* Girls in Quidditch teams in the *Chamber of Secrets* in the Gryffindor team. The series reveals the dominant and hegemonic convention. Eliza T. Dresang argues that "the Harry Potter novels are, in fact, feminist in nature" (218), refusing to view Rowling's writing as female subjectivity. However, in *The Order of the Phoenix*, Hermione draws the attention that that Trelawney is "an absolutely appalling teacher and a real old fraud" (324) which falls into conflict with the generalized version of Heilman and Donaldson. It is not true that all girls take interest in Divination classes which is reflected in the way Fleur and other girls get deeply disappointed when the representatives for Beauxbatons are being selected: "Two of the girls ... had dissolved into tears, and were sobbing with their head on their arms." (Rowling,

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The Goblet of Fire 237). Moreover, Rowling admits that she has not written the series from the perspective of a feminist; rather it has been produced from the perspective of a woman as an artist.

Rowling creates the character of Hermione in her own image: intelligent but somewhat confused. In the beginning, she seems to be boastful when she says that she knows everything, she has read numerous books and knows about a number of magical beings; however he has not yet learnt how to get and share knowledge. But gradually being mature she comes to learn about so many things. She dedicates herself to the cause for the rights of non-human beings, House-elves, apart from providing timely and necessary support to others in the time of need. She moves from being hysterical, timid and fearful to be bold, assertive and vocal. Hermione's character grows beyond the stereotype of the weak woman, gradually attaining qualities and abilities which are often associated with male heroes in the conventional sense. In the fourth novel, she seems to be subverting the stereotypes combining both masculine and feminine traits as socially ascribed. Though she is shown saving her friends from danger, mustering courage, she continues to express her feminine traits. Thus, she becomes equal to men, accepting "roles otherwise reserved for men, and not by accepting roles of a lower order created by men" (Dresang 225). Hermione realizes her innate potentialities, adopting the masculine or feminine role as per the requirement.

Rowling creates characters which embrace both sides, even in the face of adversity. Even though Hermione acts as an assistant in Harry's quest, she proves herself the main contributor to the victory of Harry. Without her, Harry and Ron would have been lost. But Heilman and Donaldson remark that Hermione shows personal ambition at last, in *The Deathly Hallows*, when she tells the Minister for Magic that she does not want to work in law, since she hopes to "do some good in the world!" (105). Heilman and Donaldson make the comment that "with this ambition Hermione separates herself from her partnership with Ron and Harry that has defined her and possibly restricted her for the past six years" (144). Hermione's role seems to be quite ambiguous as sometimes she appears as an emotional female, the assistant and other times she seems submissive and compliant. In *The Chamber of Secret*, while Hogwarts is being terrorized by from an unknown enemy, Hermione shows a brilliant contribution by supporting them with knowledge to help Harry Potter and Ron Weasley finding the enemy but at the end of the day, she is left with no time to showcase her talent.

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Though Molly Weasley, stay at home mother, takes care of her children and family, she, like Minerva McGonagall transcends the liminal space of home and hearth at times, displaying her worth in the public sphere, for instance Minerva McGonagall shows it in the academic field. Hermione comes out with verbal support for Harry when he becomes angry for being kept in dark about Voldemort and supports Harry when shares his confusing experience with Cho Chang. It is often charged that Harry Potter series depicts gender stereotypes but the author claims that she intends to promote gender equality, giving equal opportunities to both boys and girls show their talents. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, Delores Umbridge is introduced to counter the Dark Arts Professor at Hogwarts, shown holding the position of Undersecretary in the Minister of Magic, though outwardly, she appears to be “little girlish” (212). But this change develops animosity between Umbridge and Minerva McGonagall. Similarly, Rowling elevates the position and role of Molly Weasley, Ron’s mother. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, Molly besides playing the role of stay at home mother, she also takes the membership the Order. Luna Lovegood, though is briefly introduced in *The Goblet of Fire*, she plays a significant role in the development of a secret Defense against the Dark Arts class. Apparently, the author does not draw lines between the worlds of male and female but it is subtly suggested through interferences that the Wizarding world is created from a male perspective.

Rowling uses such words as powerful, brave, towering and intelligent to describe the men whereas frightened, simpering, stern and dotty to describe the women in the series. Furthermore, women are described in physical terms, for example, Luna Lovegood is described as. “She had straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised lookThe girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness” (*The Order of the Phoenix* 185). The female characters help Harry foreground his experiences, for example, when Harry’s plan to rescue his uncle, Sirius by going to the Ministry of Magic seems to be frustrated, seeks support of Hermione, Ginny and Luna in crisis, though they were ready to help him.

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