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S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Magically Disabled: Relocating Disability to the Wizarding World

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Abstract

The magical world of Harry Potter has been captivating the minds of readers ever since the publication of the first book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997. The series has had a profound impact on readers, both children and adults alike and the influence of such a work on its fandom cannot be overlooked. Rowling has created an alternate universe where a wizarding world exists, parallel to the non-magical world. This wizarding world is different, yet similar to our world in many ways. It is a world filled with prejudices and discrimination, a world where people are judged based on their birth. Werewolves, half giants, squibs, house elves, goblins and muggles constitute the beings looked down upon by the majority of witches and wizards. While the series as a whole conveys the message that one's birth and disabilities does not define the person, there is a group which is overlooked and looked down upon in the entire series because of their disability- squibs. Squibs are individuals born to magical parents but lack magical abilities. Their disability makes them social outcasts and throughout the series we see them being presented as objects of ridicule and mockery. In the portrayal of persons with disabilities, the series thus follows the stereotypical image which was more prevalent in children's literature prior to the 1970s. The proposed paper aims to study the portrayal of persons with disabilities in the Harry Potter series through the characters of Mr Filch, Mrs Figg and Ariana Dumbledore and how the series simultaneously breaks certain stereotypes and re-establishes certain stereotypes.

Key words: disability, children's literature, fantasy fiction, stereotypes, social alienation.



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Ever since the publication of the first book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997, the Harry Potter series has been weaving its magic over millions of readers. The publication of each book was a sort of home-coming because thousands of young readers were brought back to the pleasures of reading by J K Rowling. The book, though categorized as a book for children, has become a favorite among children and adults alike. The series enjoys a fan following akin to that of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It is an epic fantasy, a sub-genre of fantasy fiction which is usually defined either by its setting in an imaginary world or by the epic stature of its characters, themes and plot. Rowling has created an alternate universe where witches and wizards exist in secrecy among non-magical people (Muggles).

The wizarding world created by Rowling is oddly unfamiliar, yet familiar to the reader. It is essentially a prototype of our world. Rowling stated in an interview that she wanted Harry to leave our world and face the same problems in the wizarding world. The series, for example, bears a lot many similarities to Nazi Germany and the extermination of Jews. Each and every aspect of our society appears in one form or the other throughout the series, but with a touch of magic to it. We come across a hierarchical power structure governed by so-called purity of blood and magical abilities. In this society, we also come across social pariahs like house-elves, werewolves, half-giants, goblins and squibs. The representation of such socially discriminated beings in this imaginary world offers scope for an interesting study. This paper is an attempt to study how disability has been relocated to the wizarding world and the various implications of this relocation.

As mentioned, everything in the wizarding world has a touch of magic in it, and so does disability. Disability here is attributed to magic and the paper studies this 'magical disability' by analyzing two disadvantaged groups- squibs and werewolves. Squibs are individuals born to wizarding families, but lack magical abilities. Two squibs appear in the Harry Potter series- Mr.



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Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Mrs. Figg, Harry's neighbor. The following conversation between Harry and Ron reflects the general attitude of the wizarding community towards squibs:

'And what on earth's a squib?' said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

'Well- it's not funny really- but as it's Filch' he said. 'A squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but squibs are quite unusual. If Filch's trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much.' Ron gave a satisfied smile. 'He's bitter' (Rowling, "Chamber of Secrets" 110-111).

Mr. Filch and his cat Mrs. Norris are widely disliked by the students and teachers alike. Filch is, in fact, a very good caretaker who he keeps a close eye on the students he keeps the castle clean too. If he is bitter towards the students, it is because he sees in them what he lacks, something which he will never be- a true wizard. His bitterness is also a reflection of the bitterness and ridicule that he experiences on a daily basis. He gets little support from the staff of the school. Mr. Filch is first introduced to us by Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster, in his welcome speech thus, "I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors" (Rowling, "Philosopher's Stone" 94). It is interesting that Dumbledore says "I have also been asked by Mr Filch." While he makes all other announcements expressly forbidding students from doing certain things, like forbidding them from going to the forest, he pins this one down on Mr. Filch. It seems as though he is not really concerned with students using magic in the corridors for dueling. Dumbledore's welcome speech in Harry's fourth year too has a similar ring to it. He says,



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‘Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include ... The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr Filch’s office, if anybody would like to check it.’

The corners of Dumbledore’s mouth twitched.

He continued, ‘As ever, I would like to remind you all that...’ (Rowling, “Goblet of Fire” 162).

From this, it is very clear that Dumbledore is not at all concerned about what Filch has to say. Dumbledore’s speaking in such a manner at the beginning of every year is bound to give the students the impression that he does not value Filch’s suggestions at all. While most of the students are unaware of Filch’s status as a squib, Dumbledore and the teachers do know it and they do nothing to make his job easy.

Filch repeatedly complains of Peeves, the poltergeist who wreaks havoc all over the castle. He hates Filch and always makes his job difficult, and Dumbledore does nothing to stop him. Filch constantly complains that the students should be punished severely for breaking rules and making the castle dirty, and that Dumbledore is too soft on them. We cannot really blame him for this because being a squib, he cleans the whole castle without magic. He would naturally be irritated when his hours of hard work goes to waste. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry comes back from quidditch practice dripping mud everywhere and Nearly Headless Nick says to him,

‘You’d better get out of here, Harry,’ said Nick quickly. ‘Filch isn’t in a good mood. He’s got flu and some third-years accidentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five; he’s been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place...’



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[...] ‘Filth!’ he [Filch] shouted [...] ‘Mess and muck everywhere! I’ve had enough of it, I tell you! (Rowling, “Chamber of Secrets” 96).

Harry tries to reason with Filch who decides to punish him for his ‘crime’ by saying that it was only a bit of mud, and Filch says, “‘It’s only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it’s an extra hour scrubbing!’ ” (97).

Given the way in which he is treated by the people around him, it is no wonder that he turned bitter. And one cannot actually blame him when he takes the side of Professor Umbridge in the fifth book of the series. Umbridge offers Filch what has been denied to him by Dumbledore- strict punishments to students who disobey rules. He says to Harry,

‘... I’ve been telling Dumbledore for years and years he’s too soft with you all’ [...] ‘You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stink Pellets if you’d known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could’ve strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Number Twenty-nine comes in, Potter, I’ll be allowed to do them things ... and she’d asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves ... oh, things are going to be very different around here with her in charge (Rowling, “Order of the Phoenix” 553-554).

Though Filch’s idea of punishment is quite outrageous, we understand why he sides with Umbridge. Squibs are looked down upon by witches and wizards and they are regarded as disgraces to the families in which they are born. Ron’s Auntie Muriel says to Harry, “squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle schools and encouraged to integrate into the muggle community ... much kinder than trying to find them a place in the wizarding world, where they must always be second class [...]” (Rowling, “Deathly Hallows” 130). It will of course be kinder to send them to live as muggles, but it would be difficult for the squibs to do so because for them, the world in which they are born, the wizarding



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world, is their true home. Though no one would be prejudiced against them in the muggle world, the muggle world would always be alien to them. It is also probable that squibs like Filch refrained from living in the muggle world because of the prejudices held by the wizarding community against the muggles, who are regarded as inferior to wizards. The students of Hogwarts are a constant reminder of his lack. Wizarding children show magical abilities within the age of eleven. Being a member of a wizarding family, Filch would probably have been subjected to ridicule and mockery during his childhood when he failed to show any magical abilities. The students of the school are a constant reminder of his not-so-happy childhood, a reminder of what life would have been and also of the continuance of the prejudices associated with squibs.

Another squib mentioned in the series is Arabella Figg, Harry's neighbor. Mrs. Figg is placed by Dumbledore in Privet Drive to keep an eye on Harry. In the first book of the series, Mrs. Figg is described thus, "Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned" (Rowling, "Philosopher's Stone" 22). Dumbledore uses Mrs. Figg's status as a squib to place someone he trusted near Harry. Harry's aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, hated magic and did not want to do anything with witches and wizards. So Dumbledore uses Mrs. Figg. Harry comes to know of her being a squib only before his fifth year at Hogwarts. He asks her why she never revealed her true identity to him and she says, "Dumbledore's orders. I was to keep an eye on you but not say anything, you were too young. I'm sorry I gave you such a miserable time, Harry, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they'd thought you enjoyed it. It wasn't easy, you know" (Rowling, "Order of the Phoenix" 25).

Unlike Filch, she is not constantly reminded of her lack of abilities, nor is she subjected to ridicule and torment by a large number of people on a daily basis. However, since she



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still maintains some sort of relationship with the wizarding world, she will definitely be prone to the prejudices and ridicule. We see a hint of it when she appears as a witness at Harry's hearing at the Ministry of Magic. The Minister for Magic does not find her a satisfactory and convincing witness, one of the reasons being her status as a squib. We don't get much information on Mrs. Figg from the books. The image that we get is that of a "mad old lady" who is obsessed with cats. She is perhaps one of those squibs who has been taught to live among muggles. However, she has not severed her ties with the wizarding world as she is still working for Dumbledore. She is not exactly a bitter person like Filch, but she does not come across as a happy person either. Perhaps her interaction with muggles prevented her from turning bitter.

Ariana Dumbledore, Albus Dumbledore's sister, was rumored to be a squib. Her childhood is discussed in the final book of the series. Ariana was attacked by some muggle boys because of her magical prowess, and she becomes unstable. Aberforth says, "It destroyed her, what they did: she was never right again. She wouldn't use magic, but she couldn't get rid of it: it turned inwards and drove her mad, it exploded out of her when she couldn't control it, and at times she was strange and dangerous..." (Rowling, "Deathly Hallows" 455). However, Ariana's parents decide to keep her disability a secret from the world as she would be viewed as a threat to the International Statute of Secrecy and would be locked up in a hospital. Her existence remains a secret and many people comes to know of her only when she is carried out in a coffin upon her death. Rumors abounded that Ariana was a squib because of which she was kept locked in her house, and the family's repeated assurances of her ill-health was not believed by many. Ariana's story horrifies the reader- A six-year old who becomes unstable following an attack by three muggle boys because she could perform magic. Unlike the plight of a squib, her suffering is brought about by her ability to do magic. Her magic destroys her. The uncontrollable magic within her results in the death of her mother, and her own death after some years becomes the reason for a rift between her brothers. Ariana's disability is



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used by Rowling as a means to convey that even heroes make mistakes. Her death and Dumbledore's remorse makes Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard of the century, human before the eyes of the reader.

Another major character in the series who is discriminated against because of his disability is Remus Lupin, a werewolf. Remus is bitten by a werewolf Fenrir Greyback at the age of four, following becomes a werewolf. Werewolves are shunned by the wizarding society and they are not given access to education, found it almost impossible to find jobs and existed as social outcasts. Remus is educated because of the generosity of the Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore ensures that Remus' lycanthropy remain a secret from students, and takes the necessary precautions so that his monthly transformations does not affect anyone else. Later in his life, Dumbledore also gives him job as a teacher at the school in Harry's third year at Hogwarts. However, once Remus' status as a werewolf becomes public, he resigns from his post. He explains to Harry, "This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents- they will not want a werewolf teaching their children" (Rowling, "Prisoner of Azkaban" 309). Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic passes the anti-werewolf legislation which makes it impossible for werewolves to get a job. Werewolves live in poverty and are forced to take jobs far behind their abilities. Given the way in which they were treated, it is no wonder that most of them took the side of Lord Voldemort, who promised them unlimited powers and many saw it as an opportunity to revenge themselves upon a society that has always been unjust to them.

J K Rowling writes in "Illness and Disability" in her site 'Pottermore',

Remus Lupin's affliction was a conscious reference to blood-borne diseases such as the HIV infection, with the attendant stigma. The potion Snape brews him is akin to the antiretroviral that will keep him from developing the 'full-blown' version of his illness.



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The sense of ‘apartness’ that the management of a chronic condition can impose on its sufferers was an important part of Lupin’s character.

Lupin’s shabby clothes and exhausted look are characteristic of not only his disability, but also of the stigma associated with lycanthropy. The fact that he is a gentle human being who would never harm anyone intentionally is overshadowed by his lycanthropy. No one tries to understand the man behind the wolf. Rowling successfully urges her readers to look beyond appearances and disabilities through the character of Remus. Remus, unlike most of the werewolves, gets a chance in his life. He goes to school, gets friends who are ready to overlook the fact that he is a werewolf and stand by him through thick and thin, gets to work as a teacher whom students love, gets married to a woman who loves him for being the person that he is, and also becomes a father. All these factors, however, does not make his life much better, but he is still more fortunate than others like him. This is enhanced by a number of people who were able to look beyond the prejudices. Harry tells Remus, “‘But you are normal! ... you’ve just got a – a problem-” (Rowling, “Half Blood Prince” 279).

One can always argue that not all werewolves are like Remus because we encounter only one werewolf apart from Remus and that is Fenrir Greyback. Greyback is quite the opposite of Remus. Remus explains to Harry,

‘Fenrir Greyback is perhaps, the most savage werewolf alive today. He regards it as his mission in life to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible, he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizards. Voldemort has promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback specializes in children ... bite them young, he says, and raise them away from their parents, raise them to hate normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him upon people’s sons and daughters. It is a threat that usually produces good results’ (Rowling, “Half Blood Prince” 279).



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Just as Remus is a product of the people who believed in his innate goodness, Greyback is a product of the society which gives prominence to the wolf in him. Had they been treated with respect and given equal opportunities, werewolves would not have become as cruel and as ruthless as Greyback.

The portrayal of persons with disabilities in the Harry Potter series is somewhat problematic. Rowling takes a progressive stand through the character of Remus Lupin. Remus is an example of how life changes when the attitudes of people regarding one's disability change. Disability thus is a social construct. Remus' family and friends taught him that he is much more than his so-called disability. However, we see him struggling to adjust with what he knows and what he experiences all through the series. The societal prejudices pressurize him and tend to influence his actions, as can be seen when he resigns from his job, and also when he resists the love of a woman for a very long time. The portrayal of Ariana Dumbledore evokes sympathy in the minds of the readers. She leads a life away from the world, unseen and unknown to such an extent that people comes to know of her existence only upon her death. Here again, Ariana and her family would have suffered less if the society was not intent upon viewing her as a threat. Societal norms force the family in leading a life shrouded in secrecy, thereby making them targets of cruel accusations which are far from reality. Rowling's portrayal of disability takes a disturbing turn in the case of squibs. The sympathetic portrayal which we see in the case of Remus and Ariana disappears when it comes to squibs. We don't sympathize with Mr. Filch or Mrs. Figg. We experience Mrs. Figg's discomfort at the Ministry of Magic, but we don't think much about it. We encounter Filch in all the seven books of the series, but not even once do we understand him. We are as irritated by him as the students of Hogwarts are. It is as if he is a standing joke. The representation of squibs is thus similar to the stereotypes that was more common in the writings of the



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pre-1970s. They are subjected to ridicule and mockery, and the society gets away with it this time.

Louis Althusser used the term ‘interpellation’ to explain the way in which we encounter the values of our culture and internalizes them. For him, interpellation works in a manner much like giving a person a name, or calling out to them in the street. That is, ideologies “address” people and offer them a particular identity which they are encouraged to accept. Works of literature play an important role in this process. It becomes particularly important when this process happens through books for children. Interpellation is a subtle process, and it evidently happens in the case of Harry Potter series too. We have inherited the wizarding world within ourselves with all its prejudices too. ‘Harry Potter’ was a hitherto unknown phenomenon. We went down the rabbit hole with Alice, experienced the wonderland and came back when Alice woke up from her sleep. But with *Harry Potter*, we got our Hogwarts letter, entered the wizarding world through platform nine and three quarters, and we never came back, and therein lies the problem.

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