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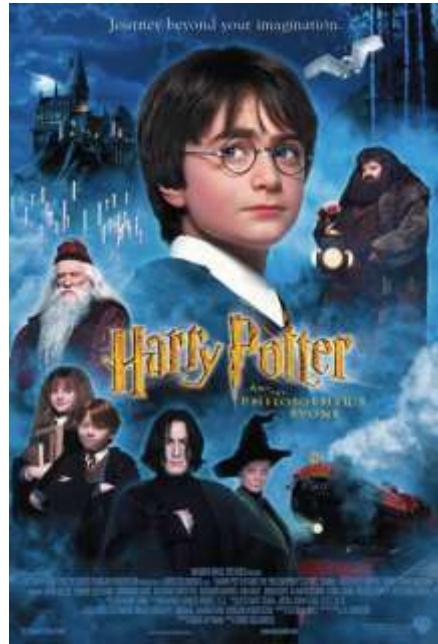
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Chasing the Shadow: Is the *Harry Potter* Series a Political Discourse?

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Politics and Children's Literature

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Politics and children's literature appear to be incompatible, for politics is essentially an adult area of experience concerning the acquisition, maintenance, control, and manipulation of power whereas children's literature is generally characterized by innocence, entertainment, and fantasy. However, since children's literature is largely written, produced, and consumed by adults, it is believed that an author may advance some political message under the guise of children's literature. Of late, there has been a trend to find out the political ideologies and affiliations of popular fiction writers such as J. K. Rowling, who have been very successful in the genre of children's literature. As the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series of novels transcends national frontiers and cultural and linguistic barriers, a not-so-unfamiliar question keeps raising its head from time to time: 'Are the *Harry Potter* novels politically motivated?'

Charges against the *Harry Potter* Series

The *Harry Potter* series has been condemned, banned, and withdrawn in several schools (e.g. in the U.S.A. where freedom of speech is guaranteed) based on the allegations from parents who fear that the *Harry Potter* series does profess views that would contaminate the minds of children.¹ Rowling has faced criticism from some quarters on grounds of packaging and promoting racism, subversion, homosexuality, black magic, and anti-government, anti-globalist, anti-capitalist, pro-Third World sentiments in the Harry Potter novels.

The Objective of this Paper

This paper intends to examine the issue of politics in the context of recent controversies surrounding the *Harry Potter* novels. It claims that reading the *Harry Potter* novels as a political discourse would tantamount to misreading the novels and their literary merits. This paper further aims to establish Harry Potter as a child hero, and therefore as an ideal role model for children. In doing so, this paper conducts an alchemical reading of the text.

My approach draws its inspiration from the clues provided by Rowling herself: "I've never wanted to be a witch, but an alchemist, now that's a different matter. To invent this wizard world, I've learned a ridiculous amount about alchemy. Perhaps much of it I'll never use in the books, but I have to know in detail what magic can and cannot do in order to set the parameters and establish the stories' internal logic."² Alchemy forms the 'internal logic' of the *Harry Potter* fiction series. Supportive of Individuation and the myth of the hero's journey, Alchemy underscores attaining psychic wholeness. Harry's journey from an orphan boy to a superhero

is an allegorical interpretation of the transformative process of Alchemy: the transformation of lead into gold or a flawed individual into a perfected being. The paper intends to demolish the fear that the *Harry Potter* series could contaminate children's minds and establish that such a tirade against this fantasy series is either a misreading of the narratives or an indulgence in the politics of fear.

An Analysis of the Apprehensions Regarding Politics in the *Harry Potter* Series

At the outset, I would like to analyze the apprehensions why the *Harry Potter* series is alleged to be a political discourse. It is any body's guess that Rowling had never any 'political' motive behind the fiction series like Jonathan Swift had with *The Gulliver's Travels* or George Orwell had with the *Animal Farm* or Harriet Beecher Stowe had with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. However, the *Harry Potter* series is as allegorical as any of these, though unlike them it is not political.

In fact, Rowling has been accused of doing 'politics' in the *Harry Potter* novels largely due to the life-like character of Lord Voldemort, the villain of the fantasy series. He is chiefly concerned with the acquisition of power and growing more and more powerful even at the cost of himself. Voldemort, the dark lord of the underworld, believes that "There is no good and evil, there is only power...and those too weak to seek it" (PS17). The maneuvers of the civil ministry and the ministry of magic plus the moves and countermoves of Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore are nothing short of the political endgame played on a large canvass. The power-hungry Voldemort resolves to be immortal and to harass the Muggles (the innocent non-magic folks). Sirius's account of Lord Voldemort is a portrayal of any tyrannical leader:

"Imagine that Voldemort's powerful now. You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able stop themselves. You're scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing ... The Ministry of Magic's in disarray, they don't know what to do, they're trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere ... panic ... confusion ... that's how it used to be." (GF27)

The Image of the Villain in the *Harry Potter* Series

The image of Lord Voldemort is more or less that of a power hungry tyrant, who can stoop to any extent for self-aggrandizement. But Voldemort is no ordinary mortal; his aim of life is to be immortal. That he considers Harry to be his arch-enemy makes the boy a true hero. JKR says on Voldemort's death: "We really are talking about someone who is incredibly power hungry. Racist, really. And what do those kinds of people do? They treat human life so lightly. I wanted to be accurate in that sense. My editor was shocked by the way the character was killed, which was very dismissive. That was entirely deliberate" (*Time Magazine*, 2000). So, critics seem to be correct that J. K. Rowling has presented the public a political discourse. However, in this paper I intend to argue that critics *seem* to be correct but they are actually *not*.

Children's Literature?

I do not find any fault with the publishers of the *Harry Potter* series in branding it as "children's literature." The protagonist of the seven-series novels is Harry Potter, an eleven year old boy. The story line revolves round the exploits of Harry Potter, whose journey from a maltreated orphan boy to a superhero and the conqueror of Lord Voldemort is chronicled in each book. In fact, each novel is an account of Harry's one year, till he becomes a major at seventeen in the seventh book and eliminates Lord Voldemort.

It will be pertinent here to remind the audience that 'Lord Voldemort' is the anagram of 'I am Tom Riddle.' Tom Riddle, later known as Lord Voldemort, was the son of wealthy Muggle Tom Riddle Sr., and witch Merope Gaunt, who died shortly after childbirth. Tom Riddle Sr. married Merope by coming under the influence of a love potion. He left his wife soon after she became pregnant with their son, Tom Riddle, after he was released from the enchantment of the potion.

Tom Marvolo Riddle (i. e., I am Lord Voldemort)

Tom Marvolo Riddle was born and raised in a Muggle orphanage, but eventually attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The brilliant boy was sorted into Slytherin house. He was considered to be the most talented pupil to ever attend Hogwarts. At school he enjoyed the reputation of a handsome, talented, and polite boy. In reality, however, Riddle was cruel, arrogant, sadistic, manipulative, sociopathic and megalomaniac. He achieved outstanding grades in every examination. For a short time, took to a brief but successful employment at Borgin and Burkes. His regular attempts to enter Hogwarts were thwarted by Albus

Dumbledore, the headmaster at Hogwarts. All of a sudden, Tom Riddle disappeared from the public view till he appeared, unknown to others, as Lord Voldemort.

In fact, J. K. Rowling makes the *Harry Potter* series the story of growth of two children, Harry and Tom, toward manhood. Equally from the similar background, Harry and Tom grow, with a neglected childhood---isolated, uncared for, disgruntled, and individualistic---but when Harry comes to embrace love, Tom embraces ambition to rule others. Thus the *Harry Potter* series justifies its tag of “children’s literature.” Rowling very significantly says, “It matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be” (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*).

Any Political Message?

Before we proceed to analyze the major theme of the Harry Potter series (i. e., the growth of a flawed individual toward perfection), we may benefit from what Rowling has herself to say about any political message she had in mind while writing the books. When asked about the politics and message in *Harry Potter*, Rowling explained: “I wanted Harry to leave our world and find exactly the same problems in the wizarding world. So you have the intent to impose a hierarchy, you have bigotry, and this notion of purity, which is this great fallacy, but it crops up all over the world. People like to think themselves superior and that if they can pride themselves in nothing else they can pride themselves on perceived purity. So yeah that follows a parallel [to Nazism]. It wasn’t really exclusively that. I think you can see in the Ministry even before it’s taken over, there are parallels to regimes we all know and love.”³ She also said, “You should question authority and you should not assume that the establishment or the press tells you all of the truth.”⁴ Rowling wants to say that politics has become a part of modern life, but it is the root of all problems, not solutions.

The Postmodernist Condition

As a postmodernist fictionist, Rowling is very much aware of the contemporary issues plaguing modern man. She is very much aware that fragmentation of the Self characterizes modern life. Her villain in the *Harry Potter* series is Lord Voldemort, who rends his soul into seven pieces and keeps each fragment in an object or person known as Horcrux. He does not understand the power of the untarnished and a unified soul, i.e., Harry. He aims to be immortal by perpetrating violence upon others as well as upon his own self. Rowling has tried to convey the message that the greatest transformative force is love, by which one connects with everything else.

Actually, she has based the fantasy series on the theme of Alchemy, which believes in the transformation of base metals like lead into gold or the ordinary self into a complete Self.

Harry's transformation from an ordinary boy into the captain of Dumbledore's Army and the vanquisher of Lord Voldemort is an enactment of the alchemical theme of transformation. In this context, we must remember how Rowling highlighted the contribution of Alchemy in the making of the *Harry Potter* series: it decided the stories' internal logic. Alchemy has nothing to do with politics; it is concerned with personality development or achieving psychic wholeness, which Carl G. Jung termed as 'Individuation.' We should follow the hint provided by J. K. Rowling to understand the *Harry Potter* novels and not to impose 'politics' on a text that has mass appeal cutting across religious, cultural, racial and language biases.

The Psychology of Alchemy and the *Harry Potter* series

To talk of the psychology of Alchemy and not to mention Carl Gustav Jung is simply impossible, for it was Jung who introduced Alchemy into modern psychology. Jung found that the alchemists were psychologists on their own merit. Alchemical operations were carried on in laboratories in which matter was put to several elaborate chemical experiments. The alchemists assumed that everything in the world had a soul and it wanted to develop to perfection. Base metals like lead was the prime material on which the experiments were conducted following procedures laid down by master alchemists. The avowed goal of the alchemists was to evolve lead into gold, the most perfect matter that Nature has produced. The transformation of lead into gold was a miracle or magic done by the Philosopher's Stone, which was part solid and part liquid. The transformation of lead into gold was the material proof that the alchemist had transformed himself from a leaden state to a golden state: he has turned himself from an ordinary, flawed mortal into an integrated being.

The Process of Alchemy and the Journey of the Hero

The process the alchemists followed were categorized into three main stages: *Nigredo* (black stage), *Albedo* (white stage), and *Rubedo* (red stage).

During the *nigredo* stage, the matter or the psyche underwent putrefaction. This stage was the most dreaded stage because all the flaws inherent in matter or the alchemist came into surface. The separation of the subtle qualities from the gross elements characterizes this phase. Here the person's ego is pounded and he comes face to face with his own complexes: internally characterized by the psychological complexes such as Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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fear, envy, feelings of inferiority or superiority, or the very things one would like to disown, and externally an encounter with the Shadow, who is a representation or epitome of one's own defects.

The *albedo* is a cleansing stage: in it the material or ego, which has accepted the blow, undergoes a cleansing, from the dark matter in the *nigrdo* to a whitening stage. In this stage, the ego is cleansed or the mask of the persona is dropped but the process is not complete. In *albedo*, one anticipates the union of the Anima and the Animus in the psyche but their union is fully accomplished in the *rubedo*.

The white stage (symbolically the moonlight) is the indication that one is going in the right direction, that the *rubedo* or redness (symbolically the sunlight) is not very far. In the rubedo further cleansing of the material is done and with the Philosopher's Stone is produced, which turns the lead into gold. Psychologically, all the components of the psyche, particularly the conscious or ego and the unconscious, come to live together and the alchemist achieves Selfhood. Jung's Individuation theory also moved in similar pattern and ended with the integration of the Self.

Adventures of Harry Potter as the Core of the Series

The adventures of Harry Potter constitute the core of the *Harry Potter* series. The journey of the hero in the novels is the journey of individuation, based on the alchemical pattern of transformation. Until the orphan boy is called into the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by its headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Harry has no idea that he is a wizard, already famous in the wizard world. He has already spent eleven years in a most debasing manner: the cupboard under the stairs was Harry Potter's room in the Dursley household; he was wearing Dudley's old rags for his dresses; he was bullied by Dudley and his friends at school; he had often to pretend that he did not simply exist. Even after his call to adventure in the Hogwarts, Harry's *nigredo* continues. He recognizes his own psychological complexes and the fact that he is destined to kill Lord Voldemort, the murderer of his parents and the tormentor of the two worlds (the magic world and the world of the muggles). He also comes to know that Voldemort tried to kill him too but for his mother's charm that protected him.

In fact, Rowling treats love as the greatest magic on earth. In the *nigredo*, Harry struggles to separate himself from his shadow personified, Lord Voldemort, who shares a self-same connection with him. Later this difference is more pronounced as a confident Harry sympathizes with Voldemort: "You're the one who is weak.

You will never know love or friendship. And I feel sorry for you.” Harry’s Nigredo claims 1000 plus pages in the Harry Potter books. It ends with the death of his godfather Sirius Black, who stands for the nigredo.

Albus Dumbledore represents Harry’s *albedo* (‘albus’ means white). He is the old wise man who has been the ‘guide’ and the chief counselor of Harry Potter. He is an alchemist and a great magician, who is as powerful as Lord Voldemort in magic. He puts Harry with the Dursleys’ after his parent’s death. As Harry turns eleven, Dumbledore summons him to Hogwarts to learn magic and follow his personal calling (to kill Lord Voldemort). He teaches a lot to Harry and gives him lessons in the most powerful magic---Love. He initiates Harry in the transformative power of love:

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. (...) It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.” (PS17)

Politics without a Clear Political Message?

Certainly, politics is an issue that Rowling deals with; however, she does not have a political message. For example, Dumbledore’s friend Grindelwald pleads for the use of ‘magic is might’ weapon with the justification that anything can be done ‘for the greater good.’ Even a well-meaning wizard like Dumbledore falls a prey to such an alluring campaign. Of course, he is quick to grasp the scheme of his friend and later becomes a foe and defeats him. Similarly, Tom Riddle through the powers of magic grows into Lord Voldemort and wishes to be immortal. He is a “racist” and wants to promote ‘pure bloods’ and to wipe out half-bloods and muggles. Dumbledore risks his own life to eradicate Voldemort and as per the prophecy only Harry can do it. The wise old man, the mentor, prepares Harry to eliminate Voldemort. Though he equips Harry with potent charms and other magical objects, the greatest lesson he teaches Harry is the initiation in the most mysterious power—Love.

Rowling impels the readers to reflect upon the condition of modern man vis-à-vis Voldemort. In order to become immortal, Voldemort has split his soul into seven pieces and puts each portion in a thing, called Horcrux. Similarly, modern man has a split personality and like Voldemort they are celebrating it. I am inclined to believe that Rowling is offering a critique of the postmodern man who has forgotten the magical power of a

united, whole ‘soul.’ Harry’s *rubedo* will be to destroy the Horcruxes and that means the death of Lord Voldemort. On the other hand, it necessitates that Harry Potter must be ready to die, for others. This sacrifice for others, expedited by love and empathy, is what distinguishes Harry Potter from Lord Voldemort, the wily ‘mafia sardar’. To his utter amazement, Harry discovers that he himself is Voldemort’s last Horcrux. It means he must die to kill Voldemort. Harry is ready to fulfil the prophecy that ordains the death of the dark wizard. Eventually Voldemort gets himself killed when his fatal curse inflicted against Harry rebounds and kills him. As the seventh novel ends, Harry lives happily ever.

Not a Political Discourse

An analysis of the *Harry Potter* novels reveals that they are not a political discourse. Politics divides; Alchemy unites. The core message of the *HP* series is apolitical: Love is the greatest magic. The *HP* books in fact record the journey of self-discovery of the child and with maturity he becomes the ‘master of two worlds’ (i.e., the Muggle and the Magic). It may be observed that Rowling has transcended the postmodern canon of fiction writing by restoring the Self and the human agent in a big way. She has achieved this through Alchemy. I would conclude by using the political register (but without any political motive) that the allegation (read fear) of politics in the *Harry Potter* series is totally baseless, fabricated, and unfortunate. In other words, viewing the *Harry Potter* series as a political discourse can be equated with chasing the shadow: searching for a fault that simply does not exist.

NOTES

1. In his book *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick* (2001), Richard Abanes discusses the presence of occult elements in the *Harry Potter* series and concludes that the series is not free from blemish as occultism is unquestionably condemned in the Bible. A scathing attack against the series is made by Steve Wohlberg’s *Hour of the Witch: Harry Potter, Wicca Witchcraft and the Bible* (2005), which cautions parents to keep their children away from Harry Potter’s reach. The publication of Roger Boehm’s *Evil Defined—From a Christian Perspective* in 2006 gave a push to the allegation that the *Harry Potter* series is anti-Christian for it promotes witchcraft. Boehm concluded by saying: “There are untold numbers

of books written on witchcraft and the occult but none more ingeniously packaged to attract children like this one”

2. Quoted in <<http://www.hogwartsprofessor.com/rowling-confesses-desire-to-be-an-alchemist/>> Accessed on 25th Dec. 2011.
 3. J. K. Rowling at Carnegie Hall Reveals Dumbledore is Gay; Neville Marries Hannah Abbott, and Much More, *Entertainment Weekly*, October 2007 The Leaky Cauldron
 4. *Ibid*
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