



Rowling's India: Orientalism in the World of Harry Potter

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Abstract

Children's literature in the past has often been conditioned by imperial discourses such as Orientalism. The paper examines the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling which is also punctuated by Orientalist stereotypes. The thrust of the analysis would be on the representation of Parvati Patil, a student of Indian origin in Hogwarts, especially her fascination with the discipline of Divination and various other revelatory episodes that would emphasise the continuation of Orientalist stereotypes which are symptomatic of Britain's ongoing complicated negotiation with its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural identity. The paper would examine, with ample textual details, how a character like Parvati Patil or Nagini, Voldemort's snake with an Indian

name, serve as textual emblems of the grudging acknowledgment of certain ethnic minorities within Britain that remains laced with differing degrees of scorn, disapproval, hatred and fear.

Keywords: Orientalism, Stereotypes, Parvati Patil, Nagini, Race, Otherisation

Children's Literature and Empire:

It is curious to note that the 'Golden Age' of children's literature in the West, spanning from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth, also coincides with what Eric Hobsbawm has defined as the 'Age of Empire'. As Said has pointed out, during this period, "empire was a major topic of unembarrassed cultural attention" (*Culture* 8) and he goes on to add:

British India and French North Africa alone played inestimable roles in the imagination, economy, political life and social fabric of British and French society and, if we mention names like Delacroix, Edmund Burke, Ruskin, Carlyle, James and John Stuart Mill, Kipling, Balzac, Nerval, Flaubert or Conrad, we shall be mapping a tiny corner of a far vaster reality than even their immense collective talents cover. (*Culture* 8)

The reference to Kipling is particularly apposite in this context as the man who was always so eloquent about the "White Man's Burden" was also the author of seminal texts in the history of children's literature like *Kim* and *Jungle Book*, both of which are remarkable for their consolidation of an imperial vision through the paradigm of a bildungsroman designed to cater to both adolescent as well as general readers. It is in acknowledgement of several such conjunctions

between children's literature and empire, as evident from the texts of Rider Haggard, G.A. Henty or Baden-Powell, that Don Randall writes that "modern imperialism inscribed itself both broadly and deeply upon cultural processes and productions, and that writing for children is by no means exempt from, or innocent of, this inscription" (Randall 29). Much of this inscription, functioned on the basis of a self-other binary in which non-Western, non-White characters or entities were often subjected to racist stereotypes of one kind or another based on an innate sense of Western superiority and this was evident even from literary texts which were not specifically set in non-Western locales. This is evident from poems like Rudyard Kipling's "We and They" where we have the following lines:

We eat kitcheny food,

We have doors that latch.

They drink milk or blood,

Under an open thatch.

We have Doctors to fee.

They have Wizards to pay.

And (impudent heathen!) They look upon We

As a quite impossible They! (Kipling, 631–632)

Such lines clearly establish how British self-perception, even in poems meant for children, was often based on vehement assertions of White superiority over the supposedly backward, coloured

racess of the world, especially those belonging to different colonies. Residues of similar strategies of self-fashioning and resultant stereotypes continue to linger in various contemporary examples of children's literature as well. It is in this context that Rowling's texts in the Harry Potter series play a key role, especially since much of the series is overtly directed against racial hatred and discrimination and has acquired a literally global, multicultural readership. However, as the rest of the paper will demonstrate, despite much obvious, overt posturing, the series still remains implicated in Orientalist stereotypes regarding race, culture and space as evident from Rowling's indirect references to India and characters of Indian origin which contribute to prominent strategies of self-fashioning in the text.

Orientalism and Stereotypes:

As Edward Said explains, while the essence of Orientalism was "the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (Said 42), that essence embodied itself in the form of an "archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held" which was bound by "a family of ideas and a unifying set of values, proven in various ways to be effective" (*Orientalism* 42). It is these inter-related ideas and unifying values which would later be identified by Said as "latent Orientalism" which would function as the bedrock for a variety of manifest content. As Said explains,

Now, one of the important developments in nineteenth century Orientalism was the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness – into a separate and unchallenged coherence...an almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity..." (*Orientalism* 206)

India too functioned in the British imagination as a site of various such “essential ideas” all of which of course conformed to the larger Orientalist paradigm. As Said himself demonstrates elsewhere,

Statements like ‘The Hindu is inherently untruthful and lacks moral courage’ were expressions of wisdom from which very few, least of all the governors of Bengal, dissented; similarly, when a historian of India, such as Sir H.M. Elliot, planned his work, central to it was the notion of Indian barbarity. (*Culture* 182)

In fact, whether it was history, politics, sociology, literature or any other mode of representation – they all relied on certain unchanging and timeless notions, such as those pointed out by Lord Cromer:

Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: “Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo-Indian should always remember that maxim”. Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind...They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth. (*Orientalism* 38).

Such supposed tendencies of inaccuracy and irrationality also easily blended themselves into notions of a kind of obsessive religiosity and various attendant modes of fraud and superstition. This is evident from many of the narratorial observations of Kipling in his novel *Kim*, which again operates as a remarkable example of the strength and scope of the Orientalist discourse. While on the one hand we are told that “the truth...is a thing that the native seldom

presents to a stranger” (*Kim* 16) or that “Kim could lie like an Oriental” (*Kim* 23), the text also categorically informs us, “All India is full of holy men stammering gospels in strange tongues; shaken and consumed by the fires of their own zeal; dreamers, babblers and visionaries: as it has been from the beginning and will continue to the end (*Kim* 32)”. What is particularly notable about such statements is that sense of timelessness which Kipling’s Orientalist imagination attributed to these assertions, thereby rendering India, or the Orient in general, devoid of all possibilities of evolution and development. This is precisely why, even after the end of territorial imperialism across most parts of the world, these assumptions refuse to disappear.

Such is the strength of these cultural stereotypes that they continue to find a way into the public sphere in various different contexts. As the Parekh report of 2000, on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, explains,

However, expunging the traces of an imperial mentality from the national culture, particularly those that involved seeing the white British as a superior race, is a much more difficult task. This mentality penetrated everyday life, popular culture and consciousness. It remains active in projected fantasies and fears about difference and in racialised stereotypes of otherness. (Weedon 30)

The validity of the concerns raised in the Parekh report becomes evident when we note how in 2014, a district Judge in UK, named Peter Hollingworth, while presiding over a case involving a woman of Indian origin, named ‘Patel’, could comment “She can’t be doing anything important....With a name like Patel she can only be working in a corner shop or off licence” (*The Hindu*, 7 Dec 2014). However, such racial attitudes are not just confined to older people and adults. Children belonging to various non-white ethnic communities continue to be subjected to

various forms of bullying and discrimination on racial grounds. The following poem by Kiran Chahal of London, aged 9, gives us a glimpse of the kind of isolation, fear and abuse racist attitudes in schools continue to generate:

They call you names for the fun of it

To make your insides weak

To injure all your happiness

And tell you you're a Sikh

To them you are totally different

To them you are lower class

They'll hit you and hurt you as much as they like

Till your insides are eaten at last

They say you're brown and they hate you

And they never, ever go away

They've become a part of your life now

And I fear they are here to stay. (*Bullying 22*)

Similar abuse is also often directed at Indian call centre employees, especially in the wake of global recession, outsourcing and attendant rise of unemployment in the West. *India Weekly Live*, in an article entitled "Indian Call Centres Facing Racist Abuse", included a quote from a 22

year old engineering graduate working in a Mumbai call centre about the extent of abusive calls coming in from England and America: “Earlier, people would get abusive if we didn’t answer their questions satisfactorily. Now, I get calls – on some days up to five a shift – from people who are calling only to abuse (*India Weekly Live*)”. These abuses and other discriminatory actions all stem from remnants of Orientalist stereotypes which are also reshaped by various contemporary socio-economic factors. It is important keep such contextual details in mind as we look at the representation of India in the Harry Potter series where older stereotypes and contemporary anxieties mingle and merge.

Rowling’s India – Characters and Allusions:

India in the world of Harry Potter is primarily represented through the character of Parvati Patil of Gryffindor and her sister Padma Patil who belongs to Ravenclaw. However, since much of the action revolves around the houses of Gryffindor and Slytherin, Parvati obviously occupies much more text-space than her younger sister. Significantly, much of the action involving Parvati revolves around the discipline of Divination in which she shows a keen interest. Divination is the art of looking into the future, or penetrating, in the words of Sibyll Trelawney, the teacher of Divination, “the veiled mysteries of the future” (*Azkaban* 103). Trelawney further declares that Divination is the most difficult of all magical arts, and adds, “I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field. . . .” (*Azkaban* 103). However, most of these assertions are soon nullified by the comments of Hermione and Professor McGonagall. While Hermione states that “Divination seems very woolly”, marked by a “lot of guesswork” (*Azkaban* 111), Professor McGonagall raises questions both about the subject and its teacher. She categorically states, “Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little

patience with it.” Furthermore, after hearing of Professor Trelawney’s reading of tea-leaves, which had culminated in a prophecy of death for Harry, she dismissively adds

Then you should know, Potter, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. (*Azkaban* 108)

Later, when Firenze the Centaur starts taking the Divination classes, he too dismisses the teachings of Professor Trelawney as “nonsense” (*Phoenix* 503). Most importantly, Harry himself dismisses her as an “old fraud” (*Goblet* 177).

Incidentally, it is the same Professor Trelawney who captivates Parvati Patil who becomes entirely immersed in the art of Divination, as taught by Professor Trelawney and thus serves as comic fodder in Rowling’s narrative. Not only does she become immediately convinced by Professor Trelawney’s predictions, but along with her friend Lavender Brown, “quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball” (*Azkaban* 295). This obviously creates a marked contrast between the responses of Hermione, Ron and Harry and that of Parvati. Since the trio of Harry, Ron and Hermione obviously operate as the centre of readers’ affections and sympathies, such a contrast only serves to render Parvati rather ridiculous and the ridicule is further extended when she interprets mere coincidences as evidences of Professor Trelawney’s “Inner Eye” and feels “deeply impressed” (*Azkaban* 299). Quite naturally, she feels “scandalized” by Hermione’s interruptions during Professor Trelawney’s class and such responses further serve to demonstrate the irrationality of her own attitudes. Rowling makes such a stance indisputably clear through her narratorial interjection:

He [Harry] couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect, bordering on reverence by many of the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower- room at lunch times and always returned with *annoyingly superior looks* (emphasis mine) on their faces, as though they knew things that others didn't. (*Azkaban* 142)

The implication is clear: while some of the students may indeed succumb to the irrationality and inaccuracy peddled by Professor Trelawney, in the name of Divination, Harry and his white British friends, with their actually superior intellect will steer clear, irrespective of the pretensions of superiority displayed by Parvati and the like. This narratorial annoyance is further emphasized when Parvati's irrationality is pitted against the rational alacrity of Hermione whose rejection of Divination, in favour of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy (seemingly, a magical equivalent of arithmetic), further consolidates the irrational basis of Divination as a discipline, a generation, Rowling's strategy of setting Parvati as her foil only serves to enhance the view shared by Professor McGonagall, and the irrationality of Parvati herself as an individual. Since the series indisputably establishes Hermione as the most knowledgeable witch of her ridiculousness of Parvati herself. Therefore, when, after her Divination exam, she glows with pride and states "She [Professor Trelawney] says I've got all the makings of a true Seer...I saw *loads* of stuff" (*Azkaban* 322), it only serves to emphasise her own ludicrousness and lack of intelligence. In the process, Rowling, by thus aligning Parvati with Divination and Professor Trelawney only serves to reinforce the inherited stereotype of Oriental inaccuracy and irrationality which has been in circulation for decades, as evident from some of the aforementioned examples.

However, one has to remember that the fundamental force behind such stereotyping is the notion that the Orient operates as an entity that is diametrically opposite to the West's perception of itself. As Lord Cromer had stated, "I content myself with noting the fact that somehow or other the Oriental generally acts, speaks and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European" (*Orientalism* 39). This is further illustrated by Rowling's depiction of Parvati in several other situations where her behaviour and action are entirely antithetical to that of the three protagonists of the series – Harry, Ron and especially Hermione. Consider, for example, the following conversation regarding Firenze the Centaur:

I'll bet you wish you hadn't given up Divination now, don't you, Hermione?"
asked Parvati, smirking.

It was breakfast time a few days after the sacking of Professor Trelawney, and Parvati was curling her eyelashes around her wand and examining the effect in the back of her spoon. They were to have their first lesson with Firenze that morning.

"Not really," said Hermione indifferently, who was reading the *Daily Prophet*.
"I've never really liked horses." She turned a page of the newspaper, scanning its columns.

"He's not a horse, he's a centaur!" said Lavender, sounding shocked.

"A *gorgeous* centaur . . ." sighed Parvati.

"Either way, he's still got four legs," said Hermione coolly (*Azkaban* 599).

The vivid visual contradiction between one curling her eyelashes and the other intently reading a newspaper emphatically connotes the intellectual superiority of Hermione, as opposed to the frivolity displayed by Parvati's concern with her own looks before attending Firenze's class. Furthermore, Hermione's curt reply, "Either way, he's still got four legs", bitingly ridicules any kind of attraction one may feel for Firenze. In the world of Harry Potter, where there are clear demarcating lines between wizards, goblins, house-elves, giants, merpeople and the like, Parvati's attraction towards Firenze operates in the form of a deviation which Hermione rebuffs with characteristic sharpness. However, considering the fact that the Orient has often been associated, in Western imagination, with "the freedom of licentious sex" (*Orientalism* 190), Parvati's apparently transgressive desire, is entirely in keeping with Rowling's Orientalist paradigm.

There are several similar other occasions in the text when Parvati is rebuffed for her unacceptable statements and actions, either by individual characters or by the narrative itself. For example, in *The Goblet of Fire*, just as the students of Hogwarts get ready to welcome the foreign students, Professor McGonagall tells her, "Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair", thus forcing her to remove "a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait" (*Goblet* 241). Not only does it again highlight her frivolity, it also re-employs inherited stereotypes about Oriental excess and lavishness. Furthermore, several textual details also suggest to us the representation of Parvati as somebody who is also a gossip and one prone to excessive reactions of one kind or another. Therefore, not only does Harry find her and Lavender Brown's response, on seeing Bowtruckles, "thoroughly irritating" (*Phoenix* 258), but she is also associated with "airy, overly friendly greetings" towards him, which were meant to conceal their own gossip about Harry (*Phoenix* 202). A similar response is seen again when she hears the

news of Hermione going out with Cormac McLaggen (*Prince* 314) or when Luna Lovegood wears radishes as earrings (*Phoenix* 251). However, all such weakness and idiosyncrasies are dwarfed when set beside their crucial absence during Dumbledore's funeral – "the Patil twins were gone before breakfast on the morning following Dumbledore's death" (*Prince* 633). Utilizing the stereotype of extremely conservative and overprotective Indian parents – something which is also seen in contemporary representations like Mira Syal's *Life is Not All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and Gurinder Chaddha's *Bend it Like Beckham* – Rowling takes the Patil sisters away from one of the most emotive episodes in the whole series as wizards and witches from around the world congregated in Hogwarts to pay their last respects to Dumbledore and thus again reinforces the subtle scorn and disapproval with which the Patils have been represented throughout. Significantly, we are also told that "Seamus Finnigan, on the other hand, refused point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the entrance hall that was resolved when she agreed that he could remain behind for the funeral" (*Prince* 633). Thus, Seamus' resolve serves to further emphasise the disparaging light in which the Patils are portrayed. However, this is not the only crucial absence with regard to the Patils. Though they had joined Dumbledore's Army, led by Harry to learn and practice various spells for defence against dark arts, during the crucial journey to the Ministry of Magic, which led to a face off with Death Eaters and Voldemort, only Neville and Luna had joined Harry, Ron and Hermione. Therefore, despite all their earlier oddities, Luna and Neville find themselves in a redeemed light as opposed to the silent ignominy which the narrative seemingly offers to the Patil sisters. Although they both return at the end during the final battle for Hogwarts, their contributions are hardly worth noting.

Rowling's attempt to describe the students' population at Hogwarts as a representative cross-section of contemporary British society obviously requires the presence of characters like the Patil sisters since Indian migrants or people belonging to Indian origins do make up a significant section of the contemporary British population. However, there is also no denying the fact that despite the various protestations of racial equality and harmony which the series foregrounds in different junctures, Rowling's portrayal of the Patil sisters is rather prejudiced. While it is indeed true that the representation of the Patil sisters does not carry any of the racist venom that was displayed either by the poems of Kipling or the kind of violence documented in the quoted poem of Kiran Chahal, there is certainly an entrenched sense of scorn and ridicule that seems to colour the representation of the Patil sisters. As already explained, such representation not only recycles certain inherited Orientalist stereotypes, but also peddles new stereotypes born out of Britain's ongoing negotiation with a multicultural future. In that sense, the representation of the Patil sisters refers to a grudging acknowledgment of the presence of ethnic minorities based on different degrees of racial otherisation which also contribute to varying forms of self-fashioning – Rowling's subtle scorn and ridicule for the Patil sisters is one available mode, while racist abuse and violence represent more extreme forms of the same process. However, behind both responses is a sense of fear and threat, either regarding job losses, or miscegenation or terrorist attacks or cultural decline. And it is perhaps because of Rowling's own acknowledgment of such fears that Voldemort's pet snake, a 'horcrux' within whom lives a fragment of his own soul, bears an Indian nomenclature – 'Nagini', a Sanskrit word meaning 'snake'. Overt and covert racist prejudices thus operate as foundational forces in the Harry Potter series and re-assert the abiding relevance of postcolonial studies in the new millennium where the aftershocks of colonial discourses continue to be felt across different discursive levels. As

Peter Hulme reminds us, “while postcolonial studies needs to move beyond various straits, it also needs to be recursive, testing the power of its analyses on the monuments of European culture” (Hulme 55). The Harry Potter series is now a monument of global culture and postcolonial studies needs to include various such monuments within the scope of its critical gaze to unmask the persistence of Eurocentric biases and lingering and renewed forms of racialized perceptions.

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