

## **Harry Potter and the Master of Slaves**

Margaret-Ann Simonetta

Harvard University

ANTH S-1662: The Human Market: The Global Traffic in Human Beings

Dr. Keridwen Luis

August 5, 2020

“You know, house-elves get a *very* raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly.  
 “It’s slavery, that’s what it is!”

### **Harry Potter and the Master of Slaves**

Since its inception in 1997, the *Harry Potter* series has bestowed its universal readers with crucial life-models some may employ throughout their existence; demonstrating the series is more than just a handful of books, it’s a way of life. J. K. Rowling’s unparalleled hit, which includes seven novels and eight feature films, chronicles a young boy’s new and unique life in the wizarding world, all while supplying fans with an abundance of moral and ethical implications that may be extracted from these mediums and employed in everyday affairs. However, there’s one underlying overtone that riddles the chapters as a whole: the wizarding human supremacy which affects each character throughout the series, spawning radicalized subjugation against house-elves; a timeworn and highly debated social dilemma inside the secretive wizarding world. This deep-rooted battle encompassing the bondage of house-elves and their use within the *Harry Potter* series has sparked innumerable debates throughout the pages of the books and the fans who consume these contentious concepts. J. K. Rowling applies such circumstances surrounding the body trade, or historical slavery of bodies, to educate her global audience on the unfair pressures and cultural norms through the topic of slavery; thus creating a gateway by virtue of the *Harry Potter* series as a way for readers of all ages to understand the political and societal outcomes of the enslaved. What do the lives and legacies of the multi-racial characters within the *Harry Potter* series, and their perception toward the principals of slavery, ethically teach *Harry Potter* enthusiasts on the overwhelming topic of personal body rights and

the enslaved? Although J. K. Rowling molded these wizarding complications around real-world matters, she displays them in a manner that ultimately enlightens the audience on such chronicled and relevant concerns and strives to promote a political outlook on human rights by showcasing the immense struggles surrounding such elitist traditions within the wizarding world. By doing so, the *Harry Potter* series becomes a moral vessel for readers of all backgrounds to extract such biases from the series and understand them more fluently within their own cultures by presenting such issues of slavery spewed (or S.P.E.W.'d) throughout the series.

The impression of slavery and class hierarchy is exceedingly distinguished throughout the *Harry Potter* series, as the novels slowly wean their way toward this oppressive theme. Set in the early 1990s, a newborn Harry Potter is left on the doorstep of his aunt and uncle's home in the suburbs of London, orphaned by his parents who were murdered by the most dangerous wizard of their time, Lord Voldemort. Throughout the series, *Harry Potter* audiences follow Potter as he attempts to find his way through the wizarding world, which includes being introduced to the many forms of enslavement displayed throughout the wizarding society. Primarily, house-elves are showcased as the subjugated, however, other characters or worldly beings within the pages also suffer great forms of slavish encounters. Readers are first introduced to Dobby the house-elf in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, whose attentiveness was always in Harry's favor, despite such courageous acts deemed antagonistic toward his Master, Lucius Malfoy. House-elves are bound to their wealthy wizarding owners for life and rarely freed, as Dobby squeaked to Harry during their first encounter shown in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1999), "Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever. A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free..." (p. 14).

Indeed, the only way a house-elf can be freed is by the master presenting the elf with a piece of clothing; their daily garb being scraps of cloth they've managed to scavenge throughout their tenure. By the end of the book, Harry artfully frees Dobby by tricking Lucius Malfoy into handing Dobby the sock off Harry's foot, presenting readers with one of the greatest quotes series wide, "Dobby is *free*," (p. 531). From this moment onward, the *Harry Potter* series was privy to such issues encompassing bondage, revealing how the characters within the novels enact and react to this age-old theme, along with allowing readers the opportunity to engage their own ethics and morals through this concept. Dobby's beloved character continues to be a focal point throughout the series, yet, it isn't until the fourth installment, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, when we see Hermione Granger, Harry's best friend, create an anti-house-elf slavery movement which dominated a large portion of the book's pages. Authors Margaret S. Hero and John M. Parrish (2010) discuss the interworking of the enslaved shown throughout *Harry Potter* within their book, *Damned If You Do: Dilemmas of Action in Literature and Popular Culture*. The authors' contest, "Rowling makes clear that Hermione's willingness to confront house-elf slavery as a moral problem gives her multiple kinds of wisdom that other characters in the books lack," (p. 149). In fact, Hermione's anti-house-elf slavery act became a full-fledge organization at Hogwarts called the "Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare," comically dubbed "S.P.E.W." With this morally conscious intention in mind, Hermione's group (composed of three members: Hermione, Harry, and Ronald Weasley - mostly against the boys' will) began their rallying through the use of pamphlets, an intricate organization manifesto, and S.P.E.W. badges in support of the cause. Readers follow this movement as a subplot of the book and are shown a whirlwind of emotions from those who know of Hermione's efforts; Harry and Ron being the

most critical toward Hermione's attempts. Although many could argue the massive pushback Hermione withstood was a form of verbal societal racism (or the norm expressed within the wizarding world) her achievements were plentiful by employing the audience's perspective and eventual participation. J. K. Rowling's ability to display this pivotal social issue allows the reader to comprehend the situation at Hogwarts (and the greater wizarding world) and internally visualize which side of the token they would support; Hermione's cause against the enslaved, or the deeply rooted wizarding traditions of which most characters concur. Authors Hero and Parrish affirm this is the sole way, "Rowling makes her readers inhabit," these critical themes within the overall story, and go on to state those throughout the wizarding community who refuse to fight for equality, "neglect to, or choose not to," (p. 138).

Providing that, one cannot neglect the obvious factor enclosing this issue: house-elves are undeniably the spine of the wizarding world. They are essential workers, plausibly crafted in such a manner exclusively for the master's egocentric benefit. As advanced as the wizarding world seems to be, their perspective and overall attitude regarding social rights are strictly based on tradition, not morals. Readers could assert Ron's viewpoint and absolute dissent with Hermione's S.P.E.W. movement was because he developed racist ideology sprouting from his Pure Blood upbringing (the Weasley family being one of the last Pure Blood families in wizarding society). However, Ron's argument is chiefly found on his genuine standpoint that house-elves, "are happy," and enjoy the work they are told to do; a belief he staunchly defends within the books (Rowling, 200, p. 125). It becomes a slippery slope for individual characters caught between perpetuating what is ethically sound and what is socially or traditionally accepted. By way of contrast, it's significant to recognize the adverse reaction Hermione

received from the house-elves themselves, many of whom voiced their positive opinions for working at Hogwarts and beyond. Although Hermione was unable to fully grasp the reasons why a majority of house-elves agreed to be enslaved, she also failed to acknowledge their traditional reasons as to *why* they voluntarily underwent enslavement (many house-elves found personal enlightenment in producing for a living). Yes, Dobby was a free elf, but many of his fellow humanoids looked down upon his newfound freedom; at first, socially disbaring him from elvish culture. Thus, while Hermione's actions were commendable by nature, to successfully establish a revolution on behalf of the enslaved, it's vital to apprehend their interpretations before speaking on behalf of their culturally ingrained historical convention. As a result of this passionate issue, an article published on *MuggleNet*, the original *Harry Potter* fandom website and blog, discusses the different forms of bondage shown throughout the books, as writer Sophia Jenkins (2020) contests Rowling's slavish theme is, "Because she wanted to use her magical creatures to explore conflicting cultural values and the way those values can challenge our relationships with people who are different than us," (para. 3). Despite Hermione's unsuccessful S.P.E.W. efforts, her achievements have inspired years worth of fan-based conversations surrounding this distinct topic; arguably reaching more people through her sentiments via the text than those at Hogwarts. Through this agency, the reader has the ability to extract these beliefs and use them for their empowerment by shifting their personalized intellectual morals under the aegis of the enslaved within *Harry Potter*.

Notably, it's no secret to veteran *Harry Potter* fans J. K. Rowling has a history of slyly interpreting heavy-hitting social topics and inserting her perspectives throughout the series. Quoted on her website *Wizarding World*, Rowling's 2015 original writings state, "I am interested

in what happens when cultural beliefs collide,” verifying her motives behind affixing such dark notions throughout the novels was a purposeful move in the hopes to educate her audience through multiple cultural elements (para. 8). Although her social messages are not blatant in nature, she crafts them in such a manner where both young and adult readers can easily digest the information; all while allowing the reader to pause and reflect on their ethics and which themes scattered throughout the books gravitate appropriately with them. Two outcomes are viable through this social injustice lens, the first being the readers newly formed grasp on how the topic of racism can be displayed in popular literature by possibly altering their personal outlook on the topic of slavery, permitting a grander understanding that those themes within *Harry Potter* outstretch wide into the Muggle world. The second being a reader or group of readers coming together to create their own S.P.E.W.-inspired movement for their local communities, activating their willpower and ability to create change similar to Hermione’s methods. As Professor Albus Dumbledore once stated in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends,” (p. 306). Through such a wise interpretation, it seems as though Hermione understood Dumbledore’s words in the first novel and adjusted her values to always stand up to her peers in the face of grave injustice.

In a like manner, scholars across the globe have discussed these circumstances surrounding the body trade within the *Harry Potter* series for nearly two decades, giving way to a plethora of opinions on behalf of the house-elf revolution. Author Jackie C. Horne (2010) of *Harry and the Other: Answering the Race Question in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter* wrote an intricate critical essay on behalf of this matter; focusing on the unjustness of some within wizard

society. Horne discusses the emotional intricacies each character underwent in terms of comprehending and coping with the topic of bondage, and attests Harry ultimately discovered, “The most important way to fight racism is to be kind to the elves, to treat each individual elf as an equal,” (p. 81). Although Harry’s antiracist methods were not as stalwart as Hermione’s, he truly understood their value within wizarding society and treated every worldly being with respect. Above all, Harry’s story begins and ends with a subconscious feeling of home when he’s intertwined with the wizarding world; always having felt less than in Muggle civilization.

Harry’s capacity to uphold the golden rule presumably stems from a twofold angle. The first being his lack of a proper wizarding upbringing, thus having no prior knowledge of house-elves, their cultural stereotypes, or the injustice they have endured for centuries. The second presents itself from an emotional lens, as Harry was always conscious of his blessed position within the wizarding world, even if he was continuously preyed upon, his life at Hogwarts was better than his previous abusive existence at Privet Drive. In a heated moment between Dumbledore and Harry in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), Dumbledore reminds Harry it’s essential to always remember house-elves as, “being[s] with feelings as acute as a human’s,” a statement which immediately halted Harry’s reaction toward house-elves and their ability to profoundly sense (p. 832). Traditionally, slaves found within the Muggle world have also been highly neglected to be seen as “people” and not “owned objects,” — a thread we see regurgitated throughout *Harry Potter*. Horne grapples with J. K. Rowling’s initial inspiration for engaging the notion of bondage throughout the novels and goes on to say, “Rowling’s depiction of Dobby and his fellow elves contains uncomfortable echoes of many of the stereotypes held by whites of enslaved African Americans,” attesting these themes align with slaves from the 1930s and 40s in

Western society (p. 80-81). Other scholars have insisted Rowling's house-elf depictions to orient themselves closer to British enslavement and bondage practices, noting J. K. Rowling's geolocation and assuming she understands the complexities of European slavery much better than such forms found within the United States. Albeit the origin of Rowling's commencing starting line, her aptness to comprehend such global tragedies, remold their stories, and insert them into a young-adult series is what sets the *Harry Potter* novels apart from any other worldwide phenomenon. Every character is affected by this wizarding cultural standard, and through such influence, the reader has a unique opportunity (which may have never presented itself to the individual before) to stand beside the characters within the *Harry Potter* series who willingly fight against injustice, evil, and greed, to better themselves and their communities... thus, a cultural shift is born.

At last, the series demonstrates that love and an appreciation for all is the answer to life's most difficult questions and circumstances. Yet, the broader picture demonstrates to *Harry Potter* enthusiasts that one's attitude toward another person or race is just as significant throughout the series as it is in our physical existence. Regardless of which character or cause one may closest associate themselves to, the extensive cultural struggles encircling such elitist traditions and forms of injustice within the wizarding world can be used as an ethical vessel for one to illuminate themselves on broader issues and go forth with their own social reconstruction. While the wizarding world may consistently elucidate these unfortunate mature affairs within their broader society, they perfectly mimic our not-so-distant past across the globe; educating readers solely through this seven-book arrangement. By extracting such morals and placing them in everyday scenarios, *Harry Potter* readers have the potential to adapt these core values and utilize

them in their own cultures by means of promoting equality for all with the added benefit of a contemporary way of considering social hierarchy within society. Although J. K. Rowling chose to present these real-life biases in the form of the wizarding world, her motives behind enlightening the readership on such relevant matters have resonated with audiences for over twenty-years; gifting readers the opportunity to know that while we all have both good and bad within us, it's how we act upon such virtues that truly show others who we truly are.

## References

- Horne, J. C. (2010). *Harry and the Other: Answering the Race Question in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter: The Lion and the Unicorn* (Brooklyn), 34(1), 76-104.
- Hrezo, Margaret S, & Parrish, John M. (2010). *Damned If You Do*. US: Lexington Books.
- Jenkins, S. (2020). *Why House-Elves Are Not a Metaphor for Transatlantic Slavery*. MuggleNet.  
<https://www.mugglenet.com/2020/03/why-house-elves-are-not-a-metaphor-for-transatlantic-slavery/>
- Rowling, J. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rowling, J. (1999). *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rowling, J. (2000). *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rowling, J. (2003). *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rowling, J. (2015). *The Sword of Gryffindor*. Wizarding World.  
[https:// www.wizardingworld.com/writing-by-jk-rowling/the-sword-of-gryffindor](https://www.wizardingworld.com/writing-by-jk-rowling/the-sword-of-gryffindor)