

“A Uniquely Portable Magic”: Analysing Transnationalism and *Harry Potter* through a Reading of Keshav Guha’s *Accidental Magic*

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J. K. Rowling, in one of her many interviews published on social media, remarked: “I don’t believe in the kind of magic in my books. But I do believe something very magical can happen when you read a good book”. For millions of readers across the world, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series kindled the magical joy of reading a life changing book. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has become phenomenally popular; the books have sold over 250 million copies worldwide and been translated into more than fifty-four languages. The film adaptations have broken box office records and earned millions of dollars and were released in more than forty dubbed versions. The royalties earned from the *Harry Potter* books, films and merchandise made Rowling one of the wealthiest women in the world. Popular culture, be it books, film or music, are a significant means of forging a bond between readers across diverse nations and cultures; Rowling’s *Harry Potter* serves as a powerful example of the transnational impact of books, undercutting and eroding through hegemonic and national narratives. Guha’s debut novel, *Accidental Magic* (2019), revolves around four characters from different parts of the world whose lives become interconnected because of their love for *Harry Potter*.

Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann in the introduction to their book, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (2006), write: “Many artifacts of popular culture, as well as genres of film and literature, are important to world politics . . . The fact that Harry Potter has emerged as an important cultural force not simply on a national level, but also on a global level, gives its analysis particular resonance for those interested in how popular culture relates to international politics” (2-3). Keshav Guha’s novel, *Accidental Magic*, traverses this terrain of the international appeal of the *Harry Potter* series as it deals with the stories of four people from different countries becoming intensely devoted fans of the novels. Guha sets his novel in Bangalore and Boston and the story is narrated from the perspective of four characters — Kannan, an Indian student in Boston, Curtis, a US-based radio show host, Rebecca, another American, a professional academic consultant, and Malathi, a post-graduate student of literature in Bangalore. Kannan, Curtis, Rebecca and Malathi have nothing in common except their intense love of *Harry Potter*; the versatile world of *Harry Potter* fandom brings them into contact with each other, and with the larger international community of *Harry Potter* fans.

In recent years, national boundaries are being undercut by a larger transnational worldview. In the era of globalization, cross-border and cross-cultural engagements have become hugely relevant. In this context, Guha’s *Accidental Magic* assumes interesting significance. In an interview to the *Deccan Chronicle*, Guha said: “The book revolves around the plot where Harry Potter brings two people from India and two from America together. They are such different characters who wouldn’t have met otherwise. Therefore, the Harry Potter community is the bridge that enables their lives to intersect. Friendship and romance blossom from this intersection” (*Deccan Chronicle*, 11-12). The novel opens with Kannan standing in a queue of readers buying copies of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* on its release date. It is in the queue that Kannan meets Curtis, another Rowling fan, and a connection between the two is forged:

On 7 July 2000, as he waited in line with three dozen strangers outside WordsWorth Books & Co. to pick up their midnight copies of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Kannan was patted lightly from behind on the left triceps. He turned to see a large, near-bald man, in his fifties or older, his eyes beaming rays of warmth and curiosity at Kannan. He couldn't remember inspiring a gaze like that before, in anyone . . . he introduced himself as Curtis Grimmet . . . Grimmet had left with his email and cellphone number, had emailed in the morning and called a few hours later to invite him out to 'drinks and dinner'. (*Accidental Magic*, 4)

Through Grimmet Kannan, the shy Indian immigrant student, starts to mingle with the larger world of Rowling's fandom. Guha, in his interviews, makes it very clear that his novel is not Harry Potter fan fiction; rather he uses the enormously popular series as a bridge between his characters to connect across their cultural diversities. What is interesting is Guha's use of *Harry Potter* fan fiction as a trope for expressing cultural difference and barriers; we see how viciously Rebecca's Asian friend reacts to the fact that most Rowling fans want Harry's girlfriend to be white: ". . . the same way that so many white girls at Harvard hated it when a white guy was attracted to Asian girls — 'yellow fever' as they called it — the Harry Potter fanbase are in denial about the fact that Harry Potter, who is more than a character, who represents all that is most heroic in the world, is in love not with his white English best friend, but with a Chinese girl. It's against the laws of nature as they see them, these are people whose grandparents, maybe parents, thought miscegenation laws were a good thing . . . J. K. Rowling doesn't deserve fans like these'" (*Accidental Magic*, 65). When one takes into note that Rebecca's friend, Annabel, is herself Chinese, her interpretation of the fans' obsession with Harry's girlfriend and her view that Harry will be paired with a Chinese girl (Cho Chang) becomes telling: it reveals the transnational potential of the *Harry Potter* series.

Guha, through Annabel, demonstrates how millions of non-British and non-white readers of *Harry Potter* dig in the series a global perspective: for them Rowling's wizarding world is not British or even white. It is a multi-cultural cosmopolitan community in which white hegemony is questioned, and defeated. We note how readers like Kannan and Malathi are also drawn to the global character of Hogwarts: for each of them the magic of the series is its ability to universalize student life and experiences. In their first meeting all Kannan and Malathi can talk about is their mutual love for *Harry Potter*: ". . . Do you like to read? . . . 'Yes, I do. I love J.K. Rowling. The Harry Potter books' . . . Now she looked straight at him, and he was forced to confront her unrestrained delight, her irises dancing, her smile stretching too far from her small face, the smile of someone who had just received her Hogwarts letter. 'Really? You like Harry Potter? Harry Potter is my favorite thing in the whole wide world', she said" (*Accidental Magic*, 79). For Kannan and Malathi, destined for marriage because of their parents' wishes, *Harry Potter* becomes a common bond that connects them — two different people from diverse disciplines and professions.

One of the fields that *Harry Potter* deeply impacted was the emerging arena of fan fiction. The unique thing about fan fiction is that it creates communities of readers bound by their commonality of ideas and stories. When one looks at the flurry of fan fiction spawned by the *Harry Potter* novels, one sees how diverse and varied they are. Guha's novel traverses the terrain of *Harry Potter* fan fiction,

using it as a trope for the connection between Kannan and Rebecca. Kannan and Rebecca are connected through their love for *Time Regained*, a fanfiction based on Rowling's series. What is interesting is how the fanfic enables them to transcend their differences and implicit, axiomatized hierarchies of nationalities and race; it bonds them at a fundamental level through their common beliefs. In many ways, the world of *Harry Potter* fanfic is a separate domain with its unique commonalities, transcending and overriding national boundaries and limitations. We see this in community fandoms like "GCR" and "Harry Potter for Big Kids" where fans gather from across the world to exchange ideas and opinions on the novels.

Academicians and scholars agree that popular culture, be it films, music or books, has a lot of influence on people, frequently changing the dynamic of ideas of politics and power. The *Harry Potter* novels, with their massive popularity, play a huge role in this context. When we look at the fandom sites and threads of the series, we note how the books created a new arena of group identification and inter-group loyalties and affiliations. In the post-truth and post-canon world, it is these fan groups which assume the role of mini-nations and mini-regions, nullifying the metanarrative notion of a nation-state or the corporate, for that matter. Keshav Guha's *Accidental Magic* asserts this contextual importance of *Harry Potter*. It shows how the novels create their own spatial region with dominant beliefs, norms, and values, and how this hallowed space draws in its mesmerized 'citizens', forming connections and friendships, even alternative solidarities between four diverse people. The wizarding community in Rowling's series is multi-ethnic; we see it in the diversity of students at Hogwarts where there is a Cho Chang and a Parvati and a Padma. But when we look at the ideology of the magical community, there emerges questionable concepts of the "purity" of blood and hegemony of bloodlines. So, does Rowling negate white hegemony or entrench it? The question is difficult to answer from the matrix of the Rowling novels.

Identities and themes of belonging are intrinsic to the *Harry Potter* novels. From the very beginning, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, we note how Harry struggles to find acceptance in muggle society because he is a wizard: "He'd lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years as long as he could remember . . . At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang" (27). It is clear from these lines that Harry is struggling to fit in because of his difference. Across the world, children who diverge from majoritarian identities (be it trans children, children with disabilities or children from broken families) find themselves in the same predicament that Harry does; bullied, isolated and marginalized, they have no friends and no one to support them in their loneliness. Interestingly, the novels struck a strong chord with transgender young adults across the world who identified with Harry's struggle to belong in a world which refuses to accept his identity. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, we see the same struggle for fitting in befalling the character of Ariana, Dumbledore's sister.

Ariana is a witch but unable to exert her magic powers; a victim of bullying from muggle boys, she has to be hidden in her house to ensure her survival: "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” (459). The theme of bullying marginalized teenagers and its disastrous consequences is clearly something that Rowling understood. Ethnocentrism is another theme running through her novels. The feeling of superiority in one’s clannish identity is one of the core barriers to transnationalism and through the *Harry Potter* books, we see how wizard identity often threatens to cancel out other identities, those of half-bloods or muggle-borns. We see how Hermione is labelled a “mudblood” in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, how Neville is labelled a “squib” because he is not magical enough, how Hagrid struggles with his giant heritage. Heritage, lineage, blood are all traversed in the books to raise the larger questions of power and majoritarian superiority, and there seems to be no ultimate quell to the rage for clannish supremacism. It is this desire for majoritarian superiority that Voldemort exploits when he rises to power, and the appeal of majoritarianism has black mirrors across transnational borders in our contemporary reality; the rise of Trump is ample testament to that.

But the fanfictions based on the novels have certainly superseded white superiority and hierarchy. While Rowling’s Hogwarts follows the pattern of the traditional English boarding school, her readers and fans come from across the world and in their alternate fictions, Hogwarts is cosmopolitan and global, with no dominant white ideology. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Peter Mandaville use the phrase “glocalization” when speaking of Harry Potter; they write how there is resistance to the novels in certain nation-states because it undercuts local culture and assimilates western values into non-western states, becoming a “glocal” phenomenon: “. . . what worries Muslim and Christian fundamentalists alike about the Harry Potter books is not necessarily the Satanist/paganism issue — although those particular codes constitute a useful vocabulary of fear in which to express concern — but rather the emerge of texts beyond their control, or where they feel powerless to intervene in the chain of meaning making” (“Glocal Hero: Harry Potter Abroad”, 53). For fundamentalists across nation-states, the problem with the *Harry Potter* series is precisely this inability to control “meaning-making” or belief-systems; Rowling’s novels nurture a hetreoglossic narrative structure that refuses to conform to any singular ideology.

When one analyzes concepts such as transnationalism and globalization, one finds that they are amorphous in nature; there is no single definition. Both transnationalism and globalization meander across varied notions of racial and national beliefs and concepts. However, the meandering course of both transnationalism and globalization stress on hybridity; an amalgamation of cultures and races and nationalities. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), Hogwarts hosts the Triwizard Tournament, an international competition between three schools from different nations. Dumbledore’s words at the end of the tournament are highly significant: “The Triwizard Tournament’s aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened — of Lord Voldemort’s return — such ties are more important than ever before . . . we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided . . . Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open” (608). Dumbledore as the overarching wise figure symbolizes in the novels the power of goodness and humanity; his words at the end of the fourth book underline the need for a larger humanitarian community which will be able to counter the narrowness of ethnocentric, racial supremacy. Dumbledore, in many ways, embodies this idea of

transnational hybridity; as a character, he represents transitions of all kinds. His relationship with Grindelwald is proof of his non-binary identity while his life-long fight for the upliftment of the marginalized shows how much Dumbledore values global harmonization; time and again, it is Dumbledore who stands up to Voldemort's majoritarian ideas and sectarian beliefs.

Amanda Cockrell, in her essay, "Harry Potter and the Secret Password" (2002), writes of a duality of values within the series: "The sense of ambiguity, of no clear answers, grows with each book, as Harry grows and sees more and farther. The schoolmasters, well-meaning as well as malevolent ones, are marked by this duality . . . The non-human creatures who inhabit Rowling's world have their own duality . . . There are no sure things, even with magic to aid you. That may be the heart of the Harry Potter books" (*The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*, 24-25). Perhaps the transnational appeal of Rowling's series springs partly from its ambiguity and partly from its universality of themes and its broader message of the value of friendship and love. Whatever the reason, *Harry Potter* has transcended nationalities and cultures to become a universally popular classic. Keshav Guha's *Accidental Magic* explores the power of a popular story or book and how it can transform lives. Kannan, Rebecca, Curtis and Malathi are able to combat their loneliness through reading. *Harry Potter* provides these diverse characters with a home, a community, a haven which overcomes and subverts national boundaries, ascribed identities and prejudices, and cultural barriers. Rowling herself is now a household name across the world and many of her other works, from children's stories like *The Christmas Pig* to adult series like the Strike novels embody ideas of trans-identity, transnationalism and cross-cultural harmony.

F. Scott Fitzgerald aptly remarked: "That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong" (*Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman*, 260). J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series fulfills this primary urge of belonging and universalizes the problematics of the evils of despotic power. In *Accidental Magic* we discover the internationally universal appeal of Rowling's series and witness how popular literature can help readers overcome loneliness, isolation and the rigidities of national and social boundaries, sometimes using the ambiguities of the novel and morphing them to conversations around planetarity, trans-tending.

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