

The Marginalized Mudbloods and The Squibs of Hogwarts: A Study of 'Disability' Through A Medium of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

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Abstract

Abstract: It was not until the 20th century that disability studies were initialized in the West with some of the seminal works of scholars like Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman. The disability studies essentially gave a voice to those people who were denied social justice, and it was not only considered as a medical problem anymore; rather it was a major social issue. Apart from some of the major classics, if one can take a look inside the pop culture texts, then J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series would present before us an array of such issues concerning marginalized disabled people. In this paper, we would like to show the unfortunate treatment of such 'disabled' people in the magical world of Hogwarts, keeping in parallel view the sorrowful situation of our real world as well, based on the theoretical grounds laid down by Foucault and Goffman. Also, we intend to shed some light on the identity formation of the disabled group, which is directly linked with gender, race, and class. It is also our intention to reflect on the fact that disability is something which is not to be "fixed" but rather embraced and normalized, to achieve an egalitarian society.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Racism, Stigma, Marginalization, Disability

Introduction

The major studies related to feminism, racism, and sexism had stirred up a storm in the cultural and literary field with its path-breaking norms and reformations. Amidst that, another most important and necessary problem to be looked at is the treatment of disabled people through the lens of disability studies. In the late 20th century, the disability rights movement had gained its initiation and many of the notable theories we get on this social model of disability studies, are majorly from scholars like Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault. In the U.S. and the U.K., the activists who belonged to

the disabled group started to claim that they were kept away from enjoying the basic rights which are needed to survive, and they formed their group to show their solidarity against such oppression inflicted on them. Ed Roberts, the leader of this 'disabled group' called these people, "one of the largest minority groups in the nation" (Mambrol).

In this paper, I have aimed to bring forth the plight of this minority group and show how because of the social stigmatization and being labelled as the 'disabled' group, they are treated as the outcasts of society, through the medium of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. As for my theoretical base, Shelley Tremain's *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Erving Goffman's *Stigma*, and Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* would serve as a strong base for the development of this discussion. In addition to this, my intention will also be to establish the fact that this problem of disability is something, which should not be 'fixed'; rather, it should be addressed with a broad mind and that could only happen with some major changes within the governmental structure and the social attitude of the place we reside.

In his work *Stigma*, which was published in 1963, Goffman talks about those people in society, who are different from what we 'normally' expect people to be. He also discusses the way it feels to be treated like the vermin of society and how they are excluded from being wholly accepted by society (Crossman).

The Marginalized and Silenced Squibs of Hogwarts

In the world where we live, the world which is 'normal', disabled people can belong from different spectrums of society – they can be prostitutes, physically deformed people, and mentally unstable patients. Goffman talks about three kinds of stigmas in his book, out of which, I am particularly going to focus on the stigma of group identity while dealing with Rowling's portrayal of stigmatized individuals in the Potter series. Foucault's idea of disability can be found in one of his most famous works *History of Sexuality*, where he talks about the body being treated as a problem, and being controlled, socially managed, and isolated, thus hinting to be disabled and unfit for society's normal functioning. In *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Tremain talks about the effects of the governmental power, in controlling and subduing the disabled group of society.

All these notions of these thinkers, when brought under one umbrella and clubbed together, provide an interesting and insightful revelation, as far as the disabled and the 'abnormal' group of society is concerned. It is not quite normal to witness the implementation of disability studies in books meant primarily for children's reading, but this amalgamation of the two must be made, to shape the little, young minds correctly. A child's mind is said to be very easy to mould; and some lessons are necessary to be inculcated early, to change their worldview positively.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* engages primarily with the story of a boy "who lived". After surviving the death curse of the most feared wizard of the magical realm, Lord Voldemort, he garners all the attention from the two worlds – both the muggle one and

the wizarding one. Therefore, at the very beginning of the story, one would just not find a trace of any sort of marginalization and maltreatment of any inferior class anywhere in the narrative. However, as the series starts to gain its pace, the entire dimension changes from the perspective of the focus. From the main character of the novel, and his quest to establish order in the wizarding world by defeating evil, the narrative also extends its branches to deal with one of the most rooted issues of our society. By the story ends, we as readers, witness Harry's agenda of defeating Voldemort; but one problem remains unresolved till the end – that is, the stigmatization of the Squibs. The Squibs are those, who have at least one magical parent but, they do not possess any magical power. For this reason, they are treated as outcasts of society and are denied the right to study at Hogwarts. While some are fortunate enough still to remain inside and work for the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, some others are dictated to and forced to live among the muggles and study the normal courses of the muggles. Rowling, in the Potter series, introduces us to many such Squibs such as Argus Filch, Arabella Figg, Ariana Dumbledore, Merope Gaunt, and a cousin of Ron Weasley. Out of them, the most prominent and highlighted ones are Argus Filch and Arabella Figg, as they are quite an integral part of the series' progression.

It is debatable, whether Rowling intentionally depicted these characters as such or not, but one gets a highly negative impression of them when introduced to them for the first time – both in terms of physical appearance, as well as their conduct. Rowling describes Filch as a person with protruding eyes, and as for Arabella Figg, she is described as a “mad old lady... [whose] the whole house smelled of cabbage” (Rowling 23). Also, Voldemort's mother, Merope Gaunt is described as having “her hair was lank and dull, and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face.” (Rowling, 172). This physically ‘abnormal’ appearance indicates the way these disabled people are portrayed in a negative light. A feeling pervades throughout the series that they are a harmful and unhealthy lot of society, made to be ignored and discarded.

Squibs then are treated as someone, who had taken birth with some sort of a disease, which is essentially the lack of magical blood in their veins. In disability studies, people are quite habituated to think disability as a medical problem, ingrained within the body of a person. Under that light, they are easily labelled as the ‘inferior’ and ‘damaged’ group of society. Discrimination is something that they face at every single step of their lives, and they have no other choice but to live with it because they are stigmatized as not “normal”. Henceforth, another term gets attached to these disabled people, which resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the perception towards women. It is the concept of ‘Other’. Disabled people also fall under this category of ‘Other’, who are nothing but the ‘extras’ of the world. After a point of time, one must realize then, when Beauvoir said, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Hengehold, 1-24) that the construct is not determined by biology; but is a social construct that stems from the mindset of the society itself.

Thus, we find that the Squibs are reduced to mere nothingness and have no such individual importance where they should belong and also in society at large. They are

silenced, as their views have no weightage to play a role in the Ministry (the governmental structure of the wizarding world), and it will be clearer in the further discussion of their maltreatment in the hands of the dominating and powerful lot of the magical realm. Also, another interesting fact comes into focus, when the readers notice that there is even inter-discrimination regarding the treatment of Squibs in the Potter series. While Argus Filch, is kept within the premises of Hogwarts but is treated like an unimportant person, Arabella Figg on the other hand, despite residing in the muggle world, holds a position in the Order of the Phoenix. Also, she is called to testify in the Ministry when Harry goes through a trial for performing an underage wizard spell.

Squibs' Rights in Question

In the entire series, Filch has been kept inside the premises of Hogwarts, true, but his position is so derogatory, that it has reduced him only to be the caretaker of Hogwarts. Nonetheless, Filch does his duty with utmost honesty but his attitude towards the students is ruthless and sour because of the fact of his disability to do magic while 'they' can. Filch's grievance regarding his position despite being allowed to be inside Hogwarts may also stem from the fact that another Squib like him enjoys certain rights to a certain extent in an important organization like the Order of Phoenix. Arabella Figg's position is restored to some extent because of her inclusion in the Order of Phoenix, which is a secret chain of some wizards and witches who are uprising against Voldemort. Filch could never be sympathetic, nor compassionate because of the treatment he has always received but Arabella proves herself to be an important addition with her likeable characteristics.

This majorly hints at the fact that those disabled people, who can add value to the able-bodied people in society, are given somewhat bearable importance. Here, Mrs. Figg's usefulness to the Order of Phoenix, as well as when she comes to testify in Harry's trial, places her just above an inch of Filch. These portrayals of disabled people by Rowling, pose a serious threat to the young minds of the children, who are the primary target audience of Rowling. Since the budding minds do not understand the complex notion of disability and the limited rights of the Squibs, they look at these characters with contempt on a sheer basis of hatred because of their behaviour towards the students of Hogwarts. This will make them believe that discriminating between people belonging to lower rank and upper rank is normal and natural, which in turn will blur their judgment between right and wrong.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*, when Dolores Umbridge temporarily replaces Professor Dumbledore as the headmistress, Filch becomes her ardent follower, because, for the first time, his notions are given importance, which is against the betterment of students. While this hatred for the students and punishing them for no reason may downright seem to be a ruthless act on his part if given a deeper thought, this reaction is because of the inhuman actions taken against him all along. On the contrary, Figg's importance in the Order of Phoenix makes her a civil and likable character, who contributes quite a lot to the organization. This proves how, within the

same community, the difference in treatment matters and shapes their attitude and behaviour accordingly.

Disabled by the Government

Arabella Figg's situation is quite not in sync with the clash with the governmental structure, but Foucault's theory of disability and government relates a lot with the situation of Argus Filch. Shelley Tremain, in her *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, gives a detailed insight into the theories of Foucault on this issue. Shelley states that "power functions best when it is exercised through productive constraints, which is when it enables subjects to act to constrain them" (Tremain, 9-24). Foucault here stresses the role that power plays in determining disability, and he asserts here that, power is not treated as a repressive force, but it limits and constrains the types of choices a person can make. It is very much visible in the case of Figg's relationship with the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry acts as the government of the wizarding world and Figg comes in more direct contact with the Ministry than any other Squibs mentioned in the Potter series. This makes her all the more constrained by the Ministry and it is visibly seen too in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. When Figg comes to testify during Harry's trial because he performs underage wizardry, Cornelius Fudge, the Minister, humiliates her by questioning her bloodline and mocking her by saying that 'Squibs' cannot see Dementors. After she leaves the courtroom, Fudge adds by saying, "not a very convincing witness" (Rowling 134). This attitude of the government towards the Squibs shows their plight and the derogatory manner in which they are treated because of their disability. Interestingly, Figg is so habituated to this behaviour that she cannot protest against it anymore. This indicates the way the government has infused the fact in their mind, that they are made to be treated in this manner, and they have normalized this for the Squibs in general as well. Therefore, Foucault was very much right in saying that the group that holds the ultimate power, can only hold on to that power by normalizing this process of making the inferior subjects feel worthless and unfit to live in society.

It does not stop here, however, because the Squibs are banned by the government from procreating, buying or selling things within the wizarding world. Turning back to the theory of Michel Foucault, "productive constraints" (Rhodes 139) are something that is employed mostly by the Order of Phoenix, rather than the Ministry. Figg is allowed to be a part of the Order, but she is restricted from attending other events of Harry despite being Harry's guardian in the Muggle domain. Although she is given a somewhat respectable position within the Order, she is barred from everything related to the Ministry of Magic.

Educational Restraint by Imposing Discipline

As it has been established by now, the Squibs are a blotch on their bloodline, and they are a shame to society. But it is not only the Squibs, who are problematic to society. The non-wizard folks, who are also termed as 'muggles' are also treated as a disabled group

- their 'disability' being, their incapability to perform magic at all. However, putting that aside, it must be taken into account that, the inclusion of Squibs, and their eligibility to stay in the wizarding world, does not in any way solely depend on the fact whether they are magically able or not. On the contrary, Squibs can be the most useful in the magical society, if they are provided with the right sort of education.

The Ministry, who despise the Squibs as if they are the untouchable creatures on earth, can easily provide some sort of work to them and make use of their hard-working trait. There are some departments in the Ministry itself, which do not require any form of wand waving. Those departments easily function based on hard work and intelligence. Provided the opportunity, the Squibs can turn out to be the most useful in contributing to those departments. Instead of letting them learn and grow out from their disability, the only validation that can save them from being ousted from their society is the acceptance letter from Hogwarts. Their acceptance in the school determines their place in their world.

On this note, a similar picture can be found relatable in our real world, where education becomes a far-fetched dream for some, who are 'disabled'. Still, there are some children in our society, who are deprived of education because of either their physical disability or mental disability. They are stigmatized and marginalized and are made to accept the notion that they do not belong in society to live a normal life with others. A secondary class is a label, which gets attached to them, thus the dominating power establishing their authority. According to Vlachou-Balafouti opines, "Education is an 'enabling good' [because] it is required to obtain other social goods, such as income, employment, and self-esteem." (Saraco 23). In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural and social capital become two very important parameters to look at the problems the Squibs face in attending school.

So, cultural capital is a set of skills and knowledge we possess, just by being in this social sphere and it also helps us in climbing the social ladder. In Hogwarts, the ability to cast spells with the wand, and pass the O.W.L.S. examination, are considered to be necessary to complete one's education. This is the arena, from where the Squibs are erased, and as a result of that, they are unable to gain any sort of education, to be of any use to society. Bourdieu's concept of social capital, on the other hand, talks about the status one gains individually and uses that solitary power to exert on a particular group, resulting in the division of class and stratification. Status and gaining privilege are the two things that matter in Hogwarts a lot.

The school provides the wizards and witches with connections, which help them to feel important and proud. Such a special connection is established by Professor Slughorn, and he names the club 'Slug Club'. The Squibs, however, remain outside the boundary of receiving proper education, let alone getting the opportunity to make connections and friendships.

Foucault, in one of his most famous works, *Discipline and Punish*, terms the school as a kind of institution with an agenda of supervising and ameliorating the abnormal (Roberts 138). These schools, according to Foucault, regulates and “discipline” society, until the dominant ideologies get embedded within their mind, and they start believing and seeing certain things in a particular way. Hogwarts then turns out to be a ‘Foucauldian prison’, where the residents of the magical realm are trained successfully to believe certain rules and practices are for the betterment of the school and the wizarding world. Thus, the fact that the Squibs cannot attend the school of Hogwarts, is a much-normalized notion for them as they have learned to believe that they are disabled to get enrolled in Hogwarts and receive a proper education. The Squibs too do not expect otherwise, as they are also disciplined to believe that they do not have the authority to be educated in Hogwarts.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this paper was to lay open the miserable condition of the marginalized Squibs in Rowling’s magical world, under the light of disability studies. Through the lens of J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world, it was also my intention to show how, the children who are from our real world, if found disabled, are treated as the outcasts of society. The social model of disability states, that the Squibs do not have any problem; and neither the children of our muggle world. The problem lies within society; the problem is the mentality that has been imbued within our minds. It is the way society has learned to think as a result of disciplining by a certain power group and now, eradicating such thoughts has turned out to be almost impossible. Hogwarts, as an institution, itself is responsible for disabling the Squibs whereas, they could have been allowed to take up other subjects other than those that required the usage of the wand.

Again, the Ministry and the Order of Phoenix are different in treating the Squibs, yet the Order imposes some restraints, apart from giving them some importance, just to remind us once again, that discrimination still exists. Children belonging to our world, also faces time and time again, a similar kind of discrimination, when after being termed as “special” children”, they are sent away to special institutions to get special education. Although they might have the same level of intelligence as other “normal” kids, just because of their physical or mental disability they are marginalized. It is quite ironic in this sense that, we always tend to say that all children are special. Then it becomes a confusing issue how this differentiation of special occurs within the category of “special”. What do we mean then when we generalize and attach the label of the word “special” to all the children and then pick up some from that lot and marginalize them as a different kind of “special”? Although this discrimination has been stopped as per the Equality Act of 2010, still, in some places and some countries, till now we tend to treat those people differently, who seem “abnormal” to us.

It is very much natural to have diversity in a particular society. Therefore, admitting Squibs to Hogwarts and giving them a place where they belong is as normal as a child from our real world getting his or her deserved place in society. At every step, if we fear

that raising our voice would lead to social agitation, then the transformation of the 'disabled' to an "abled" individual will not be possible. Yes, it is a fact that we need certain norms and rules in our society to live or else chaos will ensue. However, when those norms become shackles and promote ethically wrong rules, then such norms must be dismantled to create unity and remove the barrier of disability from society for good.

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