

## Undoing the Binary: A Post-Modernist Reading of Gender Ambiguity in Harry Potter Series

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### Abstract

With the prevalence of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, there are numerous critical examinations, including the discussion on the gender construction in the novel. Whereas past gender-focused articles claim Rowling cast a variety of stereotypical characters, this paper, based on the previous gender studies by Judith Butler and Catherine Harnois, contends that Rowling has established a series of vivid characters whose gender are not stereotyped but dynamic and fluid. Harry's and Hermione's gender do not depend on their biological sexes and gender stereotypes but count on the immediate response in various contexts, and thus their gender is diverse and ambiguous. Via deconstructing their gender, this paper indicates that Rowling develops characters of both sexes who balance stereotypical traits of both genders and conveys a progressive and diverse gender perspective through magic, which will undoubtedly produce a positive social impact.

### Keywords

Harry Potter; Gender ambiguity; Binary opposition.

### 1. Research Backgrounds

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series have maintained its bestseller status for many years, reflecting a worldwide cultural phenomenon in modern realistic society and representing a trend of post-modern literature. In 1997, the first novel, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, was published, which gradually attracted the attention of readers and critics. Quite soon the novel reached the top of the bestsellers' list. Six sequels were printed, then the seventh appeared in July 2007. The popularity of this work has been reinforced by its movie adaptation, related videos and Internet spread in the modern society. As a result, the series has inspired a generation of young readers, who grew up under the "Harry Potter" influence. Because of its continued fame and unrivaled impact, the value and ideology the famous work wants to express would be mirrored among these young people. The gender construction, as part of the ideology reflected in Harry Potter series, will be carefully examined in this paper.

This paper contends that Rowling has established a series of vivid characters whose gender are not stereotyped but dynamic and ambiguous. The hero, Harry, is not quite strong and powerful as a traditional male figure but physically small and weak. In the same way, the heroine, Hermione, pursues her own cause and takes social responsibility with her intelligence and bravery, although sometimes she is timid and bewildered. Thereupon, Harry's and Hermione's gender do not depend on their biological sexes and gender stereotypes but count on the immediate response in various contexts, and thus their gender is diverse and ambiguous. Via deconstructing their gender, this thesis indicates that Rowling develops characters of both sexes who balance stereotypical traits of both genders and conveys a progressive gender perspective through magic, which will undoubtedly produce a positive social impact.

## 2. Three Pairs of Binary Oppositions

According to Jacques Derrida's Deconstructivism, this chapter analyzes and deconstructs the binary opposition appeared as backgrounds in Harry Potter series. On account of the deconstructive view, Judith Butler argues duality of gender should be dismissed in order to free gender from discursive power, admitting gender is ambiguous because there is no absolute man or woman [1]. Therefore, this chapter acts as an essential foundation for the following arguments.

Harry Potter series is a gender progressive text because of the inclusion of gender complexity and fluidity. However, some gender critics approach the characters in the novel from one-sided or unilateral perspective, claiming the series are sexist or feminist. Actually, they fail to examine the characters and gender identities as a whole on account of reinforcing binaries and encouraging a demarcation between males and females. According to traditional gender assumptions, they simply fit the characters in well-defined gender boxes. Thus whether Rowling's characters are stereo-typically gendered or not turns out to be a black-and-white answer. However, the post-modern critics, like Jacques Derrida, do not take those arbitrary assertions for granted.

According to Derrida, pairs representing the opposite meaning are called binary opposition, such as man and woman. If one is not a woman, he must be a man. The same goes to other pairs of oppositions such as goodness/evil, right/wrong, and white/black [2]. For each pair of binary oppositions, the former is thought to be superior, but the latter inferior. So the former one is regarded as the "center". But Derrida then shatters the rooted ideology of the "superior center", criticizing the elements do not exist equally, but be located hierarchically in the traditional binary. In order to break the hierarchy, he argues more emphasis should be put on the way the two elements of the binary overlap or share in common [2]. Although there exist differences, they have overlapping areas which is ambiguous. Thus Derrida's ideology on binary opposition is anti-traditional and subversive.

In Harry Potter series, Rowling firstly sets up binaries that are the backgrounds of the story and then breaks them down to illustrate its fragility as a whole. There are three pairs of binary that will be examined. First of all, the division between the two houses, Gryffindor and Slytherin, is ambiguous though it seems a well-defined choice on the surface. Students in Hogwarts can not always be clearly sorted into either house because some can stay at both but others may not be suitable for the house they were classified into. Harry Potter is a typical example. The Sorting Hat firstly does not know which house Potter should go to because Potter fits in both Gryffindor (for his bravery) and Slytherin (for his ambition) (Philosopher's Stone 91) [6]. Actually, the Sorting Hat reiterates that Harry could have fit in either house (Chamber of Secrets 155) [7]. Similarly, Hermione Granger would also be suitable for the two houses. In Order of the Phoenix, she tells Terry Boot, "Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw during my Sorting ... but it decided on Gryffindor in the end" (353) [10]. Owing to the various personalities of students, the house division becomes complicated just like gender division in the society. Rowling creates the black-and-white choice for Hogwarts students, but then shatters it to demonstrate that a student cannot be placed squarely into either house. Gender division does so.

The second binary that Rowling establishes and later refutes is the distinction between Pureblood and Muggle-born. In the novel, parents of some characters come from both magical or Muggle families, whereas Potter's father is Pure-blood and his mother is Muggle-born. There is an unconscious tendency among the characters that blood status is associated with magical ability, as is illustrated when Harry first meets Professor Horace Slughorn in The Half-Blood Prince [11]:

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good."

"One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year."

"Funny how that happens sometimes, isn't it?" said Slughorn. (71)

Slughorn's surprise at talented Muggle-born witches suggests that Pure-bloods possess stronger magical ability. However, the Pureblood Ron Weasley is not talented but the Muggle-born Hermione is excellent at magic. Thus it's not appropriate to combine stereotypical personalities with established binaries. In order to prove it, Rowling creates a blood binary and then challenges it herself.

The final binary centers on good and evil. With the story moving on, the distinction between good and evil gets blurred. The characters in the novel perform both adorably and disturbingly at different times. Take Albus Dumbledore as an example. Firstly readers believe he is a totally good man, but then his shady past is exposed and he makes a problematic decision relating to Harry's well-being. In *The Deathly Hallows*, to Harry's surprise, the fair-and-square Dumbledore supports Pureblood policy and become a close partner of the well-known evil sorcerer Gellert Grindelwald in his youth[12]. What upsets Harry most is Dumbledore's purpose-send Harry to death. Actually Dumbledore has known that Harry must die in the final battle but he keeps it secret and sacrifices Harry's life. Apart from Dumbledore, in the final battle, the irritating Narcissa Malfoy, whose whole family are Death Eaters, pretends to die in order to save Harry's life and to defeat Voldemort. Thus good and evil shifts with time progressing. Rowling initially takes an assumed binary but in the second moment shows its faults.

Rowling creates and then challenges three pairs of binary in order to show nothing is black-and-white and there is always ambiguous area deserving to be explore. Her challenge of the binaries sets the stage for the challenge of gender. Thus she breaks down the gender binary with characters who possess seemingly conflicting qualities, such as emotion and reason or vulnerability and boldness in different levels at various times.

### 3. The Deconstruction of Gender Stereotypes

Based on the previous discussion of binaries, gender binary opposition is also fragile to break down because everything is dynamic without an inherent and innate difference in the view of deconstructivism proposed by Derrida. Inspired by this assertion, feminists put forward gender theories. "Simon de Beauvoir formulated 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', distinguishing sex from gender and suggesting that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired" (Butler 1986: 36) [1]. The distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist efforts. William Roy underlines sex is biological, whereas gender is social [13]. Lorber notes that men and women are more biologically similar than different, so biological aspects of human body do not determine gender roles. On the other hand, gender refers to the process by which certain roles, activities, qualities, traits, emotions, or objects acquire masculine or feminine meanings [5].

It is obvious to conclude that gender is socially constructed. However, the constructed gender becomes well established and stereotypical in its use to refer to sex-based categories. The category of female and male makes much difference for the construction of the society. From the aspect of social roles, man is to be the hero, the warrior and the problem solver, but woman the helper, the weak and the trouble maker. For example, man always takes the occupations of police, doctor and pilot while woman being nurse, housewife and secretary. Man and woman undoubtedly play the take-for-granted social roles. Besides social roles, psychological implication from childhood influences gender construction. Provided that a baby is a girl, she will be dressed in cute little pink outfits and given toys such as Barbie dolls to play with, never

race cars or other “boy toys”. When growing up, the girl will be taught to behave like a gentle lady with tender sensibility. Parents and teachers usually have a low expectation to her. The series of psychologically conscious or unconscious cultivation make the girl stereotyped.

Apart from social roles and psychological implication, mass media such as literature, movies and televisions constructs gender-box. In movies, male characters are overwhelmingly more active and violent whereas female characters are more domestic and concerned with appearance. As usual, female’s ultimate liberation comes through someone else’s efforts. The combination of these factors contributed to the gender construction makes gender stereotypes much fixed and rooted.

Nevertheless, stereotypical gender constructions that are conveyed either consciously or unconsciously can be very damaging and sometimes even deadly to children who are imitating the behavior. Lippa notes once gender stereotypes come into being, they act as standards that guide people’s actions (e.g., when women try to act in “feminine” ways, at least in some settings), causing people to encourage gender-stereotypical behavior in others [4]. Most importantly, negative stereotypes about the relative abilities of women and men sometimes serve to undermine individuals’ performance. For example, a girl will experience doubts about her math ability because of the stereotypical impression that girls aren’t really good at math.

In order to shatter the damaging stereotype, gender theorists in the third feminist wave put forward new thoughts. The third wave metaphor then, is a site of both ambiguity and controversy. The third wave feminism featured by a lack of a clear definition fits comfortably with a postmodern feminism which embraces contradiction and plurality. Harnois criticizes that feminist scholars fail to recognize the diversity of people and rectify static gender based category [3]. Judith Butler fuels emerging movements such as “queer and transgender politics”, which take an interest in the intersections of gender and sexuality and help articulate ‘performance third-wave feminism’ as a theoretical framework of the politics of transgression (Butler, 1986: 72) [1]. She also expounds that gender is the variable cultural interpretation of sex without the “fixity and closure” characteristic of simple identity. “To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities” (1986: 79) [1]. Thus feminists under the third wave encourage the embrace of whichever traits and roles an individual finds fulfilling, whether they are traditional or transgressive or, as is most common, a combination of the two.

Harry Potter, a series emerged at the end of the twentieth century, is influenced by the third wave movements. Throughout the novels, Rowling implies her distaste for the established and stereotypical gender prejudice. In order to break down the gender binary opposition, she sets up characters who not only perform diversely based on the spontaneous situations, but whose gender identities are fluid. As the same character may operate on one side of the gender spectrum in some cases and on the opposite end in others, Rowling’s characters possess a balance of traits which honors individual “complexity and contradiction” (Harnois, 2008: 126) [3]. The presentation of gender in Harry Potter is a major issue because, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2004) in her TED lecture on gender, states, “the problem with gender, is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are”. Rowling notably create a fantasy text that facilitates the complex discussion about the ideas about gender that our society attempts to build itself on. Harry Potter series, as a most influential work among children, spare no efforts to convey a progressive gender view-- gender is ambiguous and individuals may perform as stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine at different moments or different ages. This paper will be relying on the basic tenets of gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Catherine Harnois and centering on the hero Harry and the heroine Hermione to discuss the gender identities embodied in the two characters is fluid and ambiguous.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper explores the gender ambiguity and plurality in Harry Potter series, claiming that Rowling deserts gender stereotypes by establishing a series of vivid characters, among whom Harry and Hermione are the most typical. First of all, according to Jacques Derrida's Deconstructivism, three pairs of binary opposition appeared as backgrounds in Harry Potter series are deconstructed. Through creating and then challenging these pairs of binary, Rowling demonstrates that nothing is black-and-white and sets the stage for shattering the stereotypical gender binary. On account of the deconstructive view, many post-modernist scholars, such as Judith Butler, argue that duality of gender should be dismissed in order to free gender from discursive power, admitting gender is ambiguous because there is no absolute man or woman. Throughout Harry Potter novels, Rowling implies her distaste for the established and stereotypical gender prejudice. In order to break down the gender binary opposition, she sets up characters, especially the hero and heroine, who not only perform diversely based on the spontaneous situations, but whose gender identities are fluid.

In Harry Potter series, Rowling breaks down the gender binary by establishing a series of characters who possess seemingly conflicting qualities, such as emotion and reason or vulnerability and boldness in different levels at various times. Harry's and Hermione's gender do not depend on their biological sexes and gender stereotypes but count on the immediate response in various contexts, thus their gender is diverse and ambiguous. Harry Potter series mainly as a children literature will exert profound influence on its young readers, especially in the aspects of gender. Rowling spares no efforts to convey a progressive gender view: although from the aspect of social roles, man is to be the hero, the warrior and the problem solver, and woman the helper, the weak and the trouble maker, gender is ambiguous and individuals may perform as stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine at different moments or different ages, just like Hermione and Harry in Harry Potter series.

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