About Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

Contact Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

Editorial Board: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

Identity, Representation, Self and the "Other": An Analysis of Harry Potter's Identity

Naomi Carey Nonglait
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Saint Mary's College,
Shillong.

Abstract:

The concepts Identity, representation, self and the "other' has become important in the interdisciplinary debate and discussion among academicians and scholars. This paper seeks to explore how identity is influenced by various factors. It seeks to answer questions related to how an individual struggles to find an identity of his/her own, despite the many influences and norms of the society. Can an individual find his/her identity? In the search for an identity, Harry Potter has to make a physical journey to another world, a world of magic. Can he find that stable identity as he tries to understand the self? How does Harry Potter relate to the "other" in the wizarding world? This paper seeks to analyse Harry Potter's identity and representation of the self to the other.

Keywords: Identity and representation, self and the other, Journey to discovery, identity, Harry Potter's identity.

Introduction

Identity is a debated term with various meanings and interpretation. The term identity that is explored here is in its relation to representation and how this form of identity can affect the individual identity. The identity of an individual is not only acquired by an individual from the time of birth but it is also a kind of journey to search the self. Identity is a concept that has therefore been "inflected" with various meanings ("Who Needs" 3). Due to this reason the term identity is debated by scholars from various disciplines. Identity can also take the form of a narrative. What then is the meaning of identity in this context? Etymologically speaking, the term identity traces to its Latin root "idem" which means "being the same" (Paranjpe 41).

Representation and the "Other"

Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist speaks of identity as an indefinable term. Hall argues that the term identity is not fixed but fluid for it is "multiply constructed" and influenced by various factors that cause changes to it ("Who Needs" 17). Identity however does not "signal the stable core of the self which remains always-already 'the same,' identical to itself across time" (3). Therefore what Stuart Hall is interested in is the facet of identity that reflects the "true self" for without the "true self" every other form of identity becomes "superficial" or

"artificial" (Ibid). This form of identity is claimed by an individual. It becomes a form of self-imposition and a manner by which the individual have a "shared history and ancestry" ("Who Needs" 3-4). From this perspective argued by Hall, one can say that identity is not "unified" for it is subjected to be "fragmented" and "fractured" (4). This goes to show that identity is always in the process of changing and influenced by factors such as "history, language and culture" (Ibid). The question that arises here is how an individual is represented in the society? Another question is how representation affects the identity of an individual.

Stuart Hall observes that identities are positions taken by an individual. These positions are constructed from being represented "across a 'lack,' across a division, from the place of the other, and thus, can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are vested in them" ("Who Needs" 19). Therefore, an individual will not be considered part of a group due to this "lack." That the individual is different from the "Other" marks the individual as not belonging to a particular group. This again reflects the position that an ethnic group holds in the society ("New Ethnicities" 441). From the hierarchical stance, when this position is marginalised, the particular ethnic group is considered the "unspoken and invisible 'other'" as compared to another group (Ibid). This creates the "hegemonic" stance of one particular community above the other. The challenge is how an ethnic community which is represented negatively in the cultural politics of a dominant society can be reversed and whether such dominance can be removed. There is the question of the position of being represented which involves politics. Therefore, the construction of binaries in representation, involves a kind of imagined "boundaries between radically constituted categories" and also the politics that involve the "difference between belongingness and otherness" (New Ethnicities 445).

Stuart Hall also observes that the discursive space around the concept of identity is a "paradoxical development" ("Who Needs" 1). This paradoxical question of identity as a key concept is put "under erasure in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all (2). Secondly, Hall expresses his view that identification is important in the construction of identity. Identities therefore emerge from the game of power and also difference "marked on a group" through "exclusion" and paradoxically this becomes a symbol of unity for a group (4). Hall also observes that identities are "constructed through, not outside difference" (Ibid).

Identity and Sense of Belonging

Identity can also be influenced by codes and norms of the society, or reflect the personal choice of an individual. It becomes a kind of spectrum that deals with many aspects of life. There is also the possibility of one form of identity becoming more important than another form of identity depending on the situation. This happens at a time when one is forced to abandon one form of identity by subscribing to another form which may be politically required at a given time. At other times, the role of a person, for instance, as a teacher, doctor, police personnel requires assertion at a particular time when they are at work and this constitutes only one of the forms of identity of that individual. There is also a

possibility of identity politics which at times prevent an individual to claim and assert his real identity for fear of not being accepted in a particular place. The individual then suppresses one particular form of identity to suit a particular situation. At times, individuals from a minority background when questioned about their origin would prefer to state as belonging to a mixed race so as to reduce the risk of being tagged as an outsider.

Belonging to a certain group can either help a person to move about freely or restrict his or her movement. The frequencies of such identity politics depends on the situation, the place, the background a person belongs to, or even the colour of the skin. An individual also face conflicts and friction of choosing a particular form of identity over another. Sometimes a particular form of identity allows an individual to have status and power and even control over others. Sometimes the "peripheral or unessential characteristics of a person" such as the physical features does not make an individual have much choice over his or her identity (Paranjpe 40). At such times, a kind of acceptance and reconciliation of one's identity takes place. But one of the "essential qualities" which is memory forms the base of one's identity (41). Therefore the past or oral history becomes important in the comprehension of an individual's identity (Ibid).

Indeed the notion of identity reflects not only its complexity but also its ordinariness. In scripting the complexity of the term identity, A.C. Paranjpe has pointed at the psycho-social aspect of the term as being the "central organising principle of the personality system" (*In Search of Identity* 36). Paranjpe stresses on the importance of "unity, self-sameness and continuity of the personality for the persistence of a pattern throughout the life history of the individual and for the shared sameness and solidarity of the individual with his community" (Ibid). Indeed we find the protagonist Harry Potter as trying to achieve "unity, selfsameness and continuity of the personality" (Ibid).

Harry Potter's Identity

As an orphan, Harry is left to discover his parents' heritage. He seems to be a little struggling voice in the Muggle world and is unappreciated by his hostile guardians. Roni Natov brings to light how Harry is like his "great Victorian predecessors" who suffers in a hostile world, and is "vulnerable in his powerlessness..." ("Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness" 126). Harry embodies the injustices meted to orphans and children kept in institutions for the lack of care either by parents or guardians. He may be a struggling voice but his voice, like the voices of Jane Eyre or David Copperfield, speaks of our present society's harsh treatment meted toward children without love or care (Ibid). The pertinent question is how children who are ill-treated make choices? What becomes their moral standing?

The Question of the Moral Self in Harry Potter: The Journey

In *Sources of the Self*: *The Making of Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor argues that a "self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (35). In Taylor's view, one can project Harry's development of the self in moral standing with reference to those he has come in contact with. The influences from Professor Dumbledore, Professor

Lupin and even Ron's family can be seen in his personality development and he learns valuable lessons of love, kindness, trust, hope, faith, compassion, humanity and sympathy. Harry also learns to appreciate those who are different. Life saving skills is taught by Professor Lupin and Professor Snape which develops Harry's gift and talent in the use of magic. Harry's integrity is honed for the benefit of the wizard society which supports and adores him.

Therefore, in the developmental growth, Harry's self or identity is influenced by his "space" and "interlocution" which are mapped by geographical, moral or even spiritual spaces (Taylor 35-36). The existence of the self is within the "webs of interlocution" without which an individual would not achieve "self definition" (Taylor 36). Therefore, in order to possess an identity and self-definition, Harry must at all cost identify with a community, whether it is the wizard community or the Muggle community. In the *Harry Potter* series, we find that Harry tends to identify with the wizard world as a place he really belongs to and this community becomes a kind of "web" for his identity development (Taylor 39). Unfortunately, Harry feels disgruntled that Voldemort himself identifies with this same space, the wizard community and considers Hogwarts his real home.

However, this community feeling and sense of belonging gets shattered when Harry is chosen by the Goblet of Fire as another Triwizard Champion (*Goblet of Fire* 239*)*. Harry is "stunned" by this piece of information for he has not attained the eligible age to compete in such a difficult and prestigious tournament. Hogwarts that seem to be a home becomes a hostile ground where he experience feelings of loneliness, isolation and alienation. The eternal glory and fame that Harry might attain in competing in the Triwizard Tournament becomes a subject of ridicule to his peers and Harry has to endure his peers making sneer comments about him (*Goblet of Fire* 276).

Harry's identity is also challenged by Rita Skeeter, a witch journalist, who portrays Harry as a rule breaking adolescent, fond of seeking attention from the wizard community. The worst part for Harry is when teachers like Professor Snape bluntly state, "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here –" (*Goblet of Fire* 242). Since Harry cannot fight any sneer remarks made by his friends nor discouragement from a few teachers so he obliges by becoming what the authorities expect of him. In this connection Erikson states that ". . . the authorities expect him to be "a bum" or "a queer," or "off the beam," and Harry "perversely obliges by becoming just that" (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 92). The identity role that Harry assumes is a challenge for him, since he is considered to be mischievous and at the same time a hero.

Another incident that alienates Harry from his classmates and the school is when he is being suspected of egging a snake attack on his fellow student Justin Finch-Fletchley, at a time when the students are practising duelling with their wands (*Chamber of Secrets* 145). Unfortunately, when Harry tries to help his classmate by taking control of the situation, he communicates in Parseltongue or snake language to the snake, not to harm Justin. From this particular incident, Harry is misunderstood as being the heir of Slytherin. Harry's presence

makes the students feel insecure and scared. Harry feels cut off from his classmates, but it is a great relief that his best friend Ron believes that he was only trying to control the snake and not to hurt anybody.

However, being chosen as the Triwizard Champion has cost Harry, the loss of trust from his best friend, Ron. The feeling of loneliness surges in Harry's heart as he experiences only hate and jealousy from his peers, "vicious insults from the Slytherins" and a cold attitude from the Ravenclaws (*Goblet of Fire* 260). The Slytherins also intimidates Harry by wearing a badge with a "message, in luminous red letters" that read "*Support CEDRIC DIGGORY- the REAL Hogwarts Champion!*" and pressing the badge changes into another message which "glowed green: *POTTER STINKS*" (261). This is the period of loneliness for Harry as he cannot share his feelings with his classmates or his best friend, Ron. Though Hermione is the only one who seems to understand and sympathise with Harry, yet he feels lonely.

However, Harry is not totally defeated for he embarks on a journey to self discovery. He meets new challenges set out by Professor Dumbledore that is to find and destroy all the Horcruxes. By leaving the familiar and safe surroundings, like Hogwarts and then Grimmauld Place, the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry decides to search for the Horcruxes which becomes the only way to be able to destroy Voldemort. When Harry despairs at the thought of never finding the Horcruxes and complete the impossible task, he goes to the place of his birth, Godric's Hollow in the hope that he would get a lead or a kind of clue to finding the Horcruxes. Godric's Hollow also provides "a kind of ground" for Harry's identity, "something to which [he] can return, something solid, something fixed, something stabilized, around which [he] can organise [his] identities and [his] sense of belonging" ("Negotiating" 282). Making this journey makes Harry feel that he can reconstruct his identity and have a place which he can call his own.

Harry Potter's Sense of Belonging

Though Harry goes through difficult moments, yet he experiences a sense of "pride and joy" in associating with other wizard families and he is willing enough to figure in their lives. He is no longer self-centred, but thinks for the general welfare. There is "a sense of belonging to a community" which is seen as "a resource-like capital" (Sen 2). Harry cannot escape a "plurality" of identity and "their diverse implications" (Ibid). Therefore, he may belong to Gryffindor House, yet he also belongs to a Quidditch Team.

The question that arises here is what is one's particular identity? Does an individual choose his/her identity? Harry cannot make a choice about his identity in the initial stages as he is considered to be famous for outwitting death. However, a close reading of the *Harry Potter* series portrays Harry as struggling to form an identity of his own. Forging a new identity that is likable by him and his peers is something that Harry attempts to accomplish. He has to go through a lot of trials and tribulations to be able to forge and choose an identity of his own. The given role is assumed by Harry and he automatically complies with what society thinks and offers to him. He cannot escape the fact that his parents sacrificed their

lives to save him. Therefore, he listens to the advice and suggestions of the elder wizards and witches who thinks of his well-being.

Identity in the Wizard World: Magical Potions and Wands

Other than the bond of friendship and forming a group which marks one's identity, and one's physical identification mark, is what Erikson calls "*paper identity*" (Paranjpe 41). Paper identity would constitute a person's "name, social status, position, occupation, address" and a person is verified by his "reported name and status" and also whether his "facial appearance tally with the picture and description of the person certified by the document he is carrying" (*In Search of Identity* 41).

However, wands are a kind of passport identity when it comes to identifying a person in the wizarding world. For instance, Gringotts the wizarding bank, which is situated "hundreds of miles under London" and which lie "[d]eep under the Underground" (*Philosopher's Stone* 51) is the safest place to keep one's belongings and wealth. However, entrance to one's special vault requires identification. Identification of the concerned wizard or witch is done through one's wand. Since a wand is possessed by a wizard or witch who has earned its allegiance, therefore, it would be difficult for anyone impersonating another to get into the vault in Gringotts. Therefore, a wand not only marks the identity of the wizard or witch but forms a special bond and relationship between the individual and the wand. Sometimes this bond between wand and witch/wizard is broken, and the wand changes its allegiance, whereby the owner does not own the wand anymore. Such connection between wand and wizard is complex, for whatever experience a wizard has with the wand becomes a "mutual quest" (*Deathly Hallows* 399).

Wands also contain a form of memory whereby the last spell that a wizard performs can be verified. For instance, in *Goblet of Fire*, when the "Dark Mark" of Lord Voldemort is conjured, Harry who lost his wand during the commotion in the Quidditch World Cup discovers that Winky, the house elf of Mr. Crouch has found the lost wand. Mr. Diggory placing his wand tip to tip to Harry's wand, and saying the spell "*Prior incantato*" (121) is able to check what the last spell is and immediately

> . . . a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them, it looked as though it was made of thick grey smoke: the ghost of a spell. (Ibid)

From this incident, it shows that wands in the wizard world retain its memory of the last spell that it has conjured.

Sometimes, an individual is verified through specific questions of the past experience and a password since there is a kind of identity theft that takes place. This identity theft in the *Harry Potter* series is acquired with the help of the Polyjuice Potion. With the help of the Polyjuice Potion, an individual can transform into a person or impersonate another person of their choice either to gather secretive information or to fool someone else. This transformation is almost similar to R. L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However,

there is a difference here, since Dr. Jekyll posses a different and distinct personality from that of Mr. Hyde. In the *Harry Potter* series, this physical transformation through the Polyjuice Potion only allows a person to impersonate another, but it does not change the sense of self. This identify theft is temporary, for it is used as a form of disguise to gather secretive information or impersonate another. For instance, in *Goblet of Fire*, Barty Crouch, the son of Mr. Crouch has escaped from Azkaban, a prison for criminals, and later captured Alastor Moody, an Auror who captures Dark Wizards. By taking the Polyjuice Potion, Barty Crouch Junior impersonates Moody, and secretively works in a manner that Harry would be brought into the presence of his master, Lord Voldemort. This would enable Lord Voldemort to use the blood of his sworn enemy, Harry Potter, to resurrect himself and form a new body.

Another instance, where the Polyjuice Potion is used is in *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry has to be safely transported to another place. Since Harry would be turning seventeen, his "mother's charm" or protection "will break only under two conditions" and that is when Harry comes of age or when Harry no longer calls Privet Drive his home (45). Therefore, six people namely, "Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus" drank the Polyjuice Potion in order to impersonate Harry, so that the Death Eaters would be fooled and confused as to which is the real Harry Potter (*Deathly Hallows* 48). The presence of the "doppelgangers" (49) would become a "fake bait" to Lord Voldemort's follower or the Death Eaters (47). In this manner, while moving to another secure place, Harry will not be detected by the Ministry of Magic which is under Voldemort's control. Leaving Privet Drive forever, is breaking the security and connection with the Muggle or non-wizard world. Harry has to be transferred to one of the safe houses, where Voldemort or his Death Eaters would not be able to attack Harry. Hogwarts therefore, becomes an affirmed secure home to Harry.

The wizard community becomes a complete part of Harry where he shares the same culture with the new acquired community. This sense of belonging and security is an aspect of having a close bond and relationship with the people in it. The wizard community can therefore, evoke a sense of belonging and sense of recognition to Harry. It "can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence" (Sen 1). Harry Potter tries to search within himself and understand the world around him. He takes "pride" in being part of the wizard community. But, Harry has a self-concept that he is not a real hero for he lacks magical knowledge.

Harry Potter's "Self-Schema":

Harry's "self-schema" is that he is an ordinary boy who lacks the knowledge of how he has defeated the Dark Lord. Harry also goes through the process of "possible selves" (Larsen and Buss 450, 451). Can he become a great Auror to protect other weak people? Can he become the greatest and most powerful wizard that ever lived by keeping the Elder Wand? Harry can become all these, but ultimately he chooses to destroy the Elder Wand lest he is tempted by its ability to wield great magic. The Elder Wand can offer him greatness and control of the world. But, Harry's choice of destroying the Elder Wand is a way of giving up the other "possible self" that is to be all-powerful and indestructible. Harry does not want to become like Voldemort, therefore, he chooses to destroy the Elder Wand, and gives up this

possible self, before it takes possession of him. Since Harry has "many thoughts and feelings about" becoming like Voldemort, the possible self may influence him to become one. This is what Harry fears the most, since "possible selves may influence a person's behaviour in certain ways" (Larsen and Buss 451).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, possible selves can influence a person to act or behave in a certain manner. Therefore, whenever Harry achieves something, he feels that his "possible self" of being good makes him achieve a particular form of identity. Such possibility of a particular self helps a person track his role toward "self-improvement" (Ibid). Thus one finds that there are many factors that influence identity and an individual should therefore be able to balance all the influences to his or her identity.

Works Cited:

Erikson, Erik. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. International Universities Press, 1968.

Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, 1st ed., *Sage*, 1996, pp. 3-17.

---. "Negotiating Caribbean Identities." *New Left Review*, Vol. 209, No. 1, 1995. <http://www.newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=1787>

---. "New Ethnicities." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and K. H. Chen, Routeledge, 1996, pp. 441-49.

Larsen, Randy J., and David M. Buss. *Personality Psychology: Domains of Knowledge about Human Nature*, 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, 2005.

Natov, Roni. "Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary." *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*, edited by Lana A. Whited, U of Missouri Press, 2002.

Paranjpe, A. C. *In Search of Identity*. Macmillan, 1975.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. 1998. Bloomsbury, 2010.

---. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. 2007. Bloomsbury, 2010.

---. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. 2000. Bloomsbury, 2010.

---. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. 1997. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. Allen Lane, 2006.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.1989. Cambridge UP, 1992.