

Wizardry and Mythology: An In-depth Analysis of Mythical Elements in Harry Potter

Priya Maji

Ph.D. Researcher

Department of Language and Literature

Alliance University, Bangalore

“Myths (legends and folklores) do not happen all at once. They do not spring forth whole into the world. They form slowly, rolled between the hands of time until their edges smooth, until the saying of the story gives enough weight to the words—to the memories—to keep them rolling on their own...”

— V.E. Schwab, *A Conjuring of Light*

Legends folklores and myths have always been known to aid generations in defining and redefining their relationships with men, natural environment and even with the unexplainable supernatural world. The belief in the tales of various supernatural elements helps them to maintain a balance with the sense of glory and gratitude for the natural environment, thereby protecting them from irrecoverable destruction. Folklorists have examined the nature of tradition among the people and how these various beliefs and practices have helped a society or community to build a cultural identity of its own over the time. They have broadly divided them under three categories: oral traditions, rites and practices, and artefacts. The idea of folk-literature dates centuries back to an extremely ancient and contested timeframe altogether. The various categories and sub-categories of myths legends and folklores have always had a deep imprint in genres of literature and interdisciplinary studies and have been an area of extensive research. Folklore is the other significant source, which describes and deciphers the society in the context of conserving cultural diversity.

As goes the unmediated words of the author, J.K. Rowling “I love freakish names and I have always been interested in folklore and I think it was a logical thing for me to end up writing...”

explains thoroughly the reason for the abundance of references from various myths, legends and folklores in her famous book series. The Harry Potter books are in fact celebrated for providing a realm promising not only magic but also mythology, to name just one genre amongst many others. The Potter series bespeaks the construction of fantasy realms, and also adds depth and willingness to believe in its presentation. Rowling is able to conjure a fantasy realm which is extra ordinarily political, complex and multifocal. Therefore we can see the idea of intertextuality working in multiple ways in the Potter

series. However, the mote idea is not merely in the projection of these sources, but is rather to form a narrative, which is built through their influence upon each other within various productions of situation created by Rowling. On beginning with the unique names that she very carefully had crowned her characters with making sure that “a lot of fairly hard-working (people do not get) teased ...” proves that names have power. Not only are the names charged with meanings of various languages, namely Latin, Greek, Celtic and etcetera, but are also loaded with various myths and legends.

To start with Harry Potter, the name Harry is said to have been derived from the word ‘Henry’ a legendary Middle English name by which notably eight kings are known and may be many more. All were gifted with one inborn talent that we see in Harry as well, that is leadership: “...lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis.” thus exhibiting true leadership quality. This name is also related to the term ‘Heri’, an Old German word meaning army, thus making us relate to the fact that Harry indeed was one of the founder members of ‘Dumbledore’s Army’. Coming next to one of his best friends, the brightest witch of her generation Hermione Granger, a name which on hearing immediately reminds us of the virtuous and beautiful Queen of Sicilia; Queen Hermione of the Shakespearean play *The Winter’s Tale*. However with further study we see that Rowling was inspired to name her wittiest female character ‘Hermione’ pertaining to the importance of the name in Greek Mythology. Reference can be drawn from the Greek God Hermes, who is known to be eloquent and intelligent, and is attributed with the qualities of “the bringer of good luck”, “guide and guardian”, and “excellent in all the tricks” in the *Iliad*. We find all such qualities in Hermione. She is well versed, always ready to answer any questions in class. She guides with her excellent mastery over spells and brings in luck by the fulfilment of all the plans chalked out by the trio: “Lucky you pay attention...Hermione.” It is no coincidence that Hermione’s favourite subject is Arithmancy and Hermes is the inventor of the numbers. Another allusion that can be drawn from the name is that of the daughter of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and his wife Helen of Troy. Both the characters at least have two things in common, their initial looks and their problematic love life. Hermione is described as “bushy brown hair and brown eyes. Her front buck teeth, already very large”. A similar portrayal is made for that of princess Hermione in Greek and Latin writings in the narration of the Trojan War, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to the plays of Euripides and the poems of Ovid where she is also featured as bushy hair and writing furiously. As Hermione was quite in dilemma at a point with the two men in her life, Ronald Weasley and Victor Krum, we find princess Hermione tied up between Neoptolemus/Pyrrhus and Orestes.

One of the professors who has been guiding the trio in their entire academics’ period and beyond, who paid attention to every smaller detail such as choosing Potter as the seeker of the house or making sure that Hermione doesn’t miss any of her classes, thereby gifting her the time turner, Minerva McGonagall is an absolute reflection of Goddess Minerva. Minerva is the Goddess of wisdom, war, art, schools namely, just the qualities that we also find in Prof. McGonagall which makes her the Head of the Transfiguration Departmental, Head of Gryffindor House and the Headmistress of Hogwarts. Just as the ability of Transfiguration, The Mayong Spell of Assam is also known to turn man into animals. Even

though Goddess Minerva favoured war, she was never the patron of violence, but only favoured defensive war. We find Prof. McGonagall castings various spells during that fateful night of war. However, we later on understand that she keeps on giving instruction and plans strategies just to defend the castle and buy time rather than blatantly attack the opponent, therefore ‘Piertotum Locomotor’: “Hogwarts is threatened! Man the boundaries, protect us, do your duty to our school.” Even though Professor Sybill Trelawney is reduced to a laughing stock we know she’s the best seer that Hogwarts ever had as she very accurately had predicted the escape of Peter Pettigrew, return of Voldemort and the one who has the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. Prof. Trelawney is a namesake of the people who were known as Sibyl. These prophetic priestess’ were known to preside over the Apollonian Oracle. Namely Persian Sibyl foretold the exploits of Alexander the Great and we see the prediction of both comes out to be a game changer in the respective story.

Just one single person whom Harry could call his family for a very short span and who loved Harry with all his heart is Sirius Black. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, we have the momentous meeting of Sirius Black and Harry Potter. He is known to be an Animagus (a person who can turn himself/herself into an animal and return back to his/her formal self as per will). Sirius, in astronomy means the ‘Dog Star’ or ‘the greater dog’ also Sirius’ Animagus form. If we take the liberty to compare Sirius’ qualities and his Animagus form’s qualities together, we see how faithful this man was towards his friends. His nickname Padfoot reminds us about one of the many names for ghostly black dogs reported across the United Kingdom (Staffordshire) known to be spotted suddenly walking beside someone walking alone or guarding churches. All these characters live in and follow the guidance of the most powerful wizard, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. The many names in his name, suggests what a massive stature of a man Dumbledore is. The name Percival has its reference back to the Arthurian legend of Knight Percival. Percival who had his powers enhanced arguably by magic was known for his prowess and his quest for the Holy Grail. He was one among the three knights who had successfully completed the quest for the Holy Grail. A ‘half-blooded’ that Dumbledore was became the most prominent wizard of all times. If Voldemort ever had any inhibition, it was Dumbledore’s presence. Percival’s Grail quest can be equated to Dumbledore and Harry’s hunting down for horcruxes.

The rapport between Harry Potter and Prof. Dumbledore can be equated to the relation of Merlin and Arthur of the same Arthurian legend. This legend to a certain extent also gives a structure to the unfolding of the narration. Not only do we find a similarity between Merlin and Dumbledore, we find huge resemblance between Harry and Arthur of the same legend. Harry and Arthur both had to embrace orphanage at a very young age, this fateful event had been prophesised way before their birth. Only after their return to their “home” do they realise their true potency and their inborn extraordinary powers. Both had their Guardian angel always guiding them, Merlin for Arthur and Dumbledore for Harry. In both the worlds the chosen wizards are known to form “Order”. ‘Order of Merlin’ in the Arthurian Legend and ‘Order of Phoenix’ in Harry’s world. In the magical world only the most deserving or true heir is

sanctioned to possess the most coveted magical artefact. Arthur is known to pull out the magical sword out of the stone, and Harry pulls the Sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat.

The very tradition of carrying ancient mythology in various narrations allows readers to be exposed to the names, creatures, symbolism and stories of ancient myths. Myths form a mechanism to explain various moral dilemmas as people have their psychologies moulded according to the Myths. The first actual adventure of the trio begins in the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone when they in the first place accidentally and later on planned to come in front of a magical creature named Fluffy. Fluffy is a three headed dog that is guarding a trap door. We have a similar creature in the Greek mythology named Cerberus. Cerberus is a gigantic and dreadful dog with fifty heads guarding the door of the underworld; such a description is given by Hesiod. Though initially there were many versions of the dog's description, later somewhat universally writers agreed upon Cerberus having three head. Not only does the description of these creature matches, the tactics to calm them down is also the same. The key to calm them down is music. Lyre playing can get Cerberus in control and Fluffy is lulled to sleep by the enchanted harp. Cerberus is known to guard the passage to Hell so that the living couldn't enter the world of dead and vice versa; now whatever the children had undergone bypassing Fluffy too was no less than a Hell. Not to say of the physical injury in the struggle with the Devil's snare and the dreadful game of chess the emotional turmoil was no less, Harry got the shock of his life to see who supported Voldemort and the mysterious presence of the Sorcerer's stone in his pocket. In Harry Potter and the Chamber's of Secret we have the mentioning of an unforgettable magical creatures which has obvious links to various myths and historical legend. The lethal shriek of the mandrakes in the Herbology class of Professor Sprout was distinctive. The screaming of the baby plants keeps the ability to knock down a person unconscious and a fully grown mandrake can even kill a person, thus Prof. Sprout's cautioning of wearing the ear cuffs properly. Apart from this fatal attribute:

“Mandrake or Mandragora (has) a powerful restorative. It is used to turn people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state. The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it.”
(Rowling, 1998, p.72)

Thus, we also have Mandrakes being used in potions to restore the ones transfixed because of the Basilisk. We find the mandrakes being used once gain in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows where Neville and Professor Sprout casts fully grown potted plants on the death eaters during the war. Mandrake's reference comes in the Bible through fertility power; with the help of Mandrake Rachel conceive Jacob. In Medieval times Mandrakes are known to be used by witches not for hurting people but rather to heal and make ointments. Besides its usage in mythology, mandrakes are known to be used in legendary history as well for it contains deliriant hallucinogenic tropane alkaloids, Mandrake has been known for its powerful narcotic, emetic, sedative, and hallucinogenic quality; its poisons can easily lead to death. Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra speaks:

“Give me to drink Mandragora...that I might sleep out this great gap of time My Antony is away.” Act 2 Scene 2

There are two creatures the reference of which we find in abundance outside the Potter world they are Phoenix and Dragons. Phoenix appears in the ancient tales of Arab, Greece, Rome and far Eastern Mythology. In the tales of Greece and Egypt, this magical bird is represented as the sun, perishing in flames at the end of the day and resurrecting back each morning. Grace and virtue is represented by Phoenix in the Chinese Mythology representing the union of Yin and Yang. Often in Japanese pictorial representation of the royals, phoenix is twinned with the dragon, representing the harmonious combining of the feminine and masculine virtues. Because of the occurrences of few happenings, the novels can also be viewed under the Biblical and Catholic purview. The Jewish legend illustrates it as the creature that did not abandon paradise with Adam, and its legendary cycle of rebirth is because it abstained itself from the forbidden fruit. Thus, Christianity symbolises rebirth and resurrection through the flight of the phoenix; Christ's resurrection. In the Potter's world we have its presence saving Harry from a 'life-and-death' situation. As inscribed on one chocolate frog card “A gentle creature, the phoenix lives to an immense age because it can regenerate each time it bursts into flames.” Even here it is known for its resurrection power and we also come to know about its other attributes:

“Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets.” (Rowling, 1998, p.155)

Satan's encounter in the form of a snake with Adam and Eve in the heavenly gardens marks a poignant scene in Chamber of Secrets as well. In the duel with Basilisk, Harry thrusts the Gryffindor's sword in its head and a fang of the Basilisk gets pierced in his arm injecting fatal venom that shall end his life in no time. It is at this juncture when the Phoenix flies in to emotionally drop tears restoring Harry's life. This incident echoes Genesis 3:15 man being saved by Jesus' love, passion and emotion, “he shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel”. Apart from Ron and Hermione if anybody had been a part of Harry's each and every emotional phase it's Hedwig. We have Hedwig always as Harry's partner. In the Catholic belief Saint Hedwig is known to be the patron saint of orphans:

“The loss of Hedwig represented a loss of innocence and security...Voldemort killing her marked the end of childhood.”

With the death of Hedwig, we see gradually the trio is being left all alone to try out their luck and take matured and responsible actions without the guidance of anybody. In the Prisoner of Azkaban, the Defence against the Dark Arts teacher Prof. Lupin introduces us to Kappa:

“... creepy water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.” (Rowling, 1999, p.115)

They are known to feed on human blood and even strangles anyone to death whoever happens to invade their shallow ponds. They can be tackled by throwing a cucumber inscribed with that person's

name or by spilling out the water in its head thereby making it weak. It appears in Japanese mythology and are said to inhabit ponds and rivers in Japan. Kappas have over eighty different names, though the most common are kawappa, gawappa, and kawaso. We find the prevalence of a mark throughout the potter series known as 'Dark Mark'. The Dark Mark is engraved on the hands of all the 'death-eaters', it marks their support for Voldemort and all his evil and inhumane activities. Similar idea runs in the Bible where Cain is said to be marked with the curse of Cain, which is popularly known to be visible on his arm when he killed his own brother, Abel.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire stands out to be the quaintest book of the series with its tournaments amidst vila and veela, dragons, merpeople and a very iconic spell. One of the participants of the Triwizard Tournament of the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, Fleur Delacour is remembered not only for her bravery but also for her charm and elegance. Fleur is a 'quarter-veela' a 'fairy-princesses'. Her beauty "usually dimmed everyone else by comparison," She was fair, tall and walked with an air of grace that made her seem like she was gliding whenever she walked. Her very presence appeared to emit a faint, silvery glow. She had long beautiful hair of silvery blonde and large, deep blue eyes. There are legends which even call veelas to be the souls of unbaptized young women who all are somehow stuck on Earth. When a veela is vexed by someone it might lead to the person's quick death. However a kind and loving human heart can even win over a veela's heart; this might explain why Fleur Delacour married Bill Weasley. Veela of Potter's world reminds us of vilas that is known to exist among South Slavs and Slovaks only (which includes Bulgaria). Vilas are fairies 'portrayed as beautiful women with long blonde hair'. There are three kinds, those living on land water and air; thus, the forest nymphs, water nymphs and air or cloud nymphs. Just as Phoenix marks the virtuous side of the mythological world; dragons mark the side of the vice. We first learn about Draconic creatures in the mythologies of ancient Near East and gradually we find it spreading all over the Greek and Egyptian Mythology, Rigveda even in the Bible through art and literature. Dragons are known for their horrendous loftiness and their abilities to breathe fire through nose and mouth causing irrevocable havoc. They are described as serpent like, and often endowed with features or parts belonging to various animals (a body like a lizard's or a crocodile's, with a feline's or a reptile's head, a bat's wings, an eagle's or a lion's paws and claws, and a mouth endowed with many tongues and pointed fangs). They are marked as the most dangerous and hardest to conceal creatures in both the mythological and wizarding world. Dragons are mentioned in Harry Potter quite often but its fierce nature is described first in the Goblet of Fire

"... fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing on their hind legs... roaring and snorting torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks" (Rowling, 2000, p.206)

Pakhangba of the Meitei tradition has a similar powerful elucidation. A creature with a serpent's body, head lion like and four sturdy legs. Unlike the chaotic imagery of the usual dragons, Pakhangba is the Dragon-God of the Universe and is worshipped for being the protector of the Earth.

The series have the mentioning of spells always but besides the Killing curses the spell casted by Peter Pettigrew to revoke Voldemort left readers awe struck. “But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.” (Rowling, 2006, p.410)

Rowling is inspired about this spell from the tales of Medea. The Persian sorceress of Greek myth, Medea, said to possess the ability to rejuvenate and resurrect and have power over life and death, with the usage of formulas and quasi-scientific procedures. The spell also echoes the ‘Mayong Spell’, an occult methodology to cure and revive the ailing.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son. Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master. Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe.” (Rowling, 2000, p.206)

Pettigrew’s casting the spell reminds us of the famous three witches of Macbeth making a charm just before Macbeth’s introduction

“In the cauldron boil and bake;
 Eye of newt and toe of frog,
 Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
 Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting...” (Act 4, Sc. 1)
 (Clark and Manson p.234)

This charm ends with the famous lines: “Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.” which is also sung by the choir at the very beginning of the movie Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Voldemort would have won if he had succeeded in possessing the prophecy record, such a fate could be stopped because of Dumbledore’s Army; their meet ups to learn new spells. These meet ups were possible because of Hermione’s Protean Charm. If one fake Galleon was changed, it would be magically reflected in the others too. Thus, when Harry transfigured his coin to show a new date for a D.A. meeting, simultaneously the change would be reflected in those of others. This charm is named after Proteus; servant of Poseidon, he knew everything about the past, present, or future. To escape people’s endless questions, he transfigured himself into any animal or creature. Voldemort’s most coveted pet, the snake Nagini was a Maledictus (female carrying blood curse) and also a horcrux. Nagini being a female and a snake reminds mostly all Eastern readers the myths and legends of ‘Naagins’. Half human and half serpent figures, Naagins are worshipped as deities and are known to stand up for sacrifice and protection of their loved ones. Even though Nagini’s name matches to the Naagin named demi-goddess of the Indian Mythology, the traits that Nagini possesses makes us equate her to Satan’s ‘serpent-form’ and the snake

of the North-East myths Hill Giri and Phom. Harry felt as though he attacked Mr Weasley in Nagini's direction, a mercilessly act. In Phom, it is this snake who directs man and woman to consummate their togetherness. The snake in Hill Giri allures the woman to disobey and consume the forbidden fruit (similar narration to that of the Bible) The snake is just the manifestation of evil possessing the same traits as that of Voldemort, absolute inhumane thus his only and favourite companion.

The best is said to happen when it's for the greater number, thus Harry's solitary walks through the forest accepting his death. His walking all alone to face Voldemort in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows makes him get equated to Jesus Christ, because it reminds us of Christ's embracing crucifixion by dragging the cross on his shoulders. Harry willingly takes the responsibility to save all from the evil of Lord Voldemort; just as Jesus wished to save the entire humanity. Just as the sacrifice of Lily Potter ensured that no evil would touch Harry, Christ's sacrifice assures that spiritually all Christian believer shall be protected forever. Voldemort is able to kill only that part of his soul that he unintentionally had left on Harry—a part that would have enabled him to return to life, hence Harry's reason of resurrection and killing Voldemort even after being struck by the Killing Curse.

The world of Harry Potter thus dominated the perception of magic and mystical creatures for a whole generation. Rowling's weaving of mythological references; makes the Potter series a reason to explore not only British myth and folklore but also urges readers to look into legends and myths across the globe. Nevertheless, the narrative of the fantasy world is build using both folklores and myths which pre-dates the book's publication while creating elements unique to the world of Harry Potter which specifically reflects a anew world for the readers. Hence Myths, legends, seasonal events, children's folklores, studies in fairy tales, vernacular folk literature, indigenous studies shall forever remain extremely relevant in underlining the capacity and goals and a methodology that glued communities and nations together.

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