

Growing Up to Save the World: Christ and the Fantasies of Boyhood

Vandana Saxena

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Nottingham (Malaysia Campus)
Vandana.Saxena@nottingham.edu.my

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate link between the story of Christ and the contemporary constructions of adolescence boyhood through a careful study of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Though the success of the series can be seen in terms of the general trend of the resurfacing of religion in the current world order, the paper argues that the series attempts to revise and reconfigure the scriptural narrative by integrating the themes of boyhood and bringing in contemporary cultural and secular concerns. The story of boy-to-man transition echoes the story of Christ: his life, the temptations, the ordeals, and ultimately the sacrifice and resurrection. Linked with discourses of adolescent angst and defiance, the scriptural story acquires a potential for active political and social intervention.

Keywords

Adolescence, boyhood, Harry Potter, Young adult fantasy, Masculinity, Christ

Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will certainly not enter it. (Mark 10:13-16).

Christ's admonition to his disciples establishes a close link between the child and the Kingdom of Heaven. It situates a child centrally in the Biblical narrative of redemption and salvation of mankind. In the Christian 'holy family', Christ himself appears as the child of mysterious origins, growing up to save the world. This article explores the ways in which boyhood and growth in J.K. Rowling's coming of age series, the *Harry Potter* books, is linked with the Christian gospel. By interlinking growth and development with the Christian themes, this young adult fantasy portrays its boy hero as an

embodiment of hope; his growth becomes an epitome of promise of communal salvation.¹

Being saved by an adolescent hero is a meta-narrative in which religion overlaps with the impulses of heroic fantasy. The coming of age patterns of the young protagonists — the perilous quest, the dangerous encounters, journey to the land of the dead, the subsequent fight with the forces of darkness and finally the ascension of hero — these stages echo the life of Christ, his miraculous birth, the exile, the temptations and the miracles, his sacrificial death and finally the resurrection and ascension to heaven. Therefore, Tolkien points out that “The Gospels contain a fairy story, or a story of larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy stories.”²

Rowling’s series projects its boy hero as the savior of the magical world, an adolescent who challenges the established norms and conventions; he is the savior and the scapegoat whose sacrifice is the necessary condition for the survival of humankind. Rebellion, angst and deviance, which mark adolescence, become the traits of the savior. Hence rather than an enraged male savior harrowing hell or the 19th century ‘feminized’ images of Christ as a friend of the sick and the destitute, Rowling’s coming of age narrative presents the savior as an adolescent boy. His growth is fashioned on the pattern set by the scriptural narrative. At the same time, the story of Christ is imbued with the social and secular concerns in which contemporary adolescence is situated.

So the Christian gospel retold in the coming of age fiction merges the contemporary ideas of growth, especially the growth of young boys, with the progress of a Christian pilgrim towards salvation. Harry Potter comes of age by saving the world. He does so by embracing death and returning back to life to fight evil. The plot is set in motion by the mother sacrificing herself for her son. Lily Potter’s sacrifice has repercussions that resonate through the series. It saves Harry on the night of his parents’ murder; the sacrifice resurfaces again and again to save Harry till he in turn sacrifices himself out of love and for communal welfare. As the hero grows, he forms bonds of love and friendship which set him apart from the Dark Lord who likes to work alone. Love, loyalty,

¹ The scriptural narrative of the savior and the heroic fantasy are quintessentially male narratives. While they overlap in their androcentric nature, this overlap, as discussed later, problematizes the gender bias in-built within the two narratives.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, London: Unwin Books 1964, 62.

and sacrifice help the forces of good to overcome evil. The sacrifice at the end of the series not only enables the resurrected savior to vanquish the Dark Lord, it also makes Harry the 'master of death', the one who 'does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying'.³ This victory that Harry's sacrifice enables echoes the Biblical epitaph on the tomb of Harry's parents: 'the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death' (1 Cor. 15: 26). The epitaph links the growth of the boy savior with the Christian gospel wherein the progress towards adulthood is patterned on Christ's victory over death through sacrifice. The epitaph of Dumbledore's tomb 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be' (Mt. 6:21) reiterates the theme of love and loyalty that guides the arduous journey of the savior. These direct references to the New Testament not only illustrate the Biblical underpinnings of the series; the intertextuality also enables a reinterpretation the scripture by situating it alongside a 20th century narrative of adolescent growth. Contemporary conceptions of adolescence and boyhood are segued with the themes of Christian *paideia*, process of growth, character formation and acquisition of knowledge whose end is fellowship and imitation of Christ. All these are situated in the contemporary context wherein Christian themes co-exist with intensely political and social themes like racism, terrorism and capitalism.

As an inversion of the story of the savior, the life of Voldemort, the Dark Lord can also be reframed within the scriptural narrative. Voldemort first appears in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, in a shadowy form that he was reduced to after his first encounter with Harry; he is drinking the blood of a unicorn — a traditional symbol of Christ. Firenze, the centaur, tells Harry that 'it is a monstrous thing to slay a unicorn.'

The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches our lips.⁴

Firenze echoes St. Paul's insistence that 'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body' (1 Cor. 11:29). His return to life in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is an inversion of the Christian sacrifice which is oriented towards the community. Voldemort's return is brought about by the suffering and fear of his

³ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, London: Bloomsbury 2007, 608.

⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, London: Bloomsbury 1997, 188.

followers. While Harry's growth is characterized in terms of growth in capacity for fellow feeling and love, Voldemort's quest of power and immortality is defined in terms of isolation, self sufficiency, and also in terms of fragmentation of the self by repeatedly splitting his soul. Dumbledore tells Harry, 'you will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.'⁵ While the sacrifice enables Harry to live through death, Voldemort's soul, split and maimed by repeated acts of evil, anchors him to life, albeit a cursed one.

These preoccupations with the nature of soul, death, and resurrection, the themes of love and fellowship and the use of allegorical symbols like the phoenix and the unicorn establish the link between the *Potter* series and Christian theology. Though religion has always been an integral component of children's literature, the popularity of the *Potter* series among readers of all ages, Christians as well as non-Christians, can be seen as an indication of an increasing preoccupation with religion or 'the new visibility of religion in the public sphere.'⁶ Neumann sees the popularity of the *Potter* series as 'constitutive of the general resurfacing of religion in Europe and the United States', 'heralding an individualization of the religious.'⁷ Readers like John Granger have linked the popularity of the series with its essentially Christian content: 'their ability to meet a spiritual longing for some experience of the truths of life, love, and death taught by Christianity but denied by a secular culture. . . . That the Harry Potter stories 'sing along' with the Great Story of Christ is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness.'⁸

At the same time, the resurgence of religion in the series is marked with attempts to reinterpret the scriptural text by integrating contemporary secular concerns; global capitalism, consumerism, the concerns of terrorism and racism — all these frame Harry Potter's coming of age.⁹ By projecting an

⁵ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, London: Bloomsbury 2005, 277.

⁶ Graham Ward, 'The Future of Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/1 (2006), 179–186 at 183.

⁷ Iver B. Neumann, 'Pop Goes Religion: Harry Potter Meets Clifford Geertz', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (2006), 81–100 at 81.

⁸ John Granger, *How Harry Cast his Spell: The Meaning Behind the Mania for J.K. Rowling's Best-selling Books*, London: Tyndale 2008, 2.

⁹ Ostry, Carey and other scholars have discussed the concerns of racism and blood purity as the central themes of the *Potter* series. Critics like Smith and Elster have discussed the colonialist conventions of the British boarding school narrative that Rowling employs. Elsewhere, I have discussed the uneasy juxtaposition of multiculturalism and the colonialist themes of the Boarding

adolescent in the role of the savior, the series conjoins the current constructions of adolescence with the scriptural narrative. The contemporary discourses of boyhood and adolescence describe them in terms of defiance and resistance. Harry and his friends upset the official hierarchies of the magical world as they fight the dark forces. Rowling's adolescents take agency and find means 'to extend their power and control outside their prescribed roles, unlike traditional child characters who are more at the mercy of their world's institutions and rule(r)s'.¹⁰ This deconstructive potential of adolescence, the political and social critique of the adult world it enables, modifies and rewrites the scriptural narrative of the savior. It enables a creative revisioning. McClure, in his study of authors like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, has underlined the dialogical nature of project of 'resacralization' in contemporary fiction: the alternate worlds of contemporary fiction 'make room in the worlds they project for magic, miracle, metaphysical systems of retribution and restoration; that they explore fundamental issues of conduct in ways that honor, interrogate, and revise religious categories and prescriptions; that their political analyses and prescriptions are intermittently but powerfully framed in terms of magical or religious conceptions of power'.¹¹ Similar postmodern project frames contemporary heroic fantasy that centers on the figure of an adolescent boy savior.

school genre in the series. Similarly, the issues of capitalism and consumerism have been discussed in detailed by Appelbaum and Oakes. Elaine Ostry, 'Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision of J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales' in Giselle Liza Anatol (ed.), *Reading Harry Potter*, London: Praeger 2003, 89-102; Brychan Carey, 'Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and Historical Contexts of J.K. Rowling's Antislavery Campaign' in Anatol (ed.), *Reading Harry Potter*, 103-116; Karen Manners Smith, 'Harry Potter's Schooldays: J.K. Rowling and the British Boarding School Novel' in Anatol (ed.), *Reading Harry Potter*, 69-78; Charles Elster, 'The Seeker of Secrets: Images of Learning, Knowing and Schooling' in Elizabeth E. Heilman (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, London: Routledge 2003, 203-220; Vandana Saxena and Angelie Multani, 'Plotting Hogwarts: Situating the School Ideologically and Culturally' in Bill Ashcroft and Ranjini Mendis (eds), *Literature of Our Times*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2012, 469-484; Peter Appelbaum, 'Harry Potter's World: Magic, Technoculture, and Becoming Human' in Heilman (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, 25-52; Margaret J. Oakes, 'Flying Cars, Floo Powder, and Flaming Torches: The Hi-tech, Low-Tech World of Wizardry' in Anatol (ed.), *Reading Harry Potter*, 117-128.

¹⁰ Drew Chappell, 'Sneaking out After Dark: Resistance, Agency and the Postmodern Child in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series', *Children's Literature in Education* 39/4 (2007), 281-293 at 282.

¹¹ John A. McClure, 'Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41/1 (1995), 141-163 at 143.

Adolescence, Growth and Jesus Christ

While the theories of secularization insisted on the gradual recession of religion from the public spheres, Christianity has retained its firm hold on English children's fiction. From the early chapbooks to the 19th century Evangelical literature and the popular fictions of the 20th century, Christianity has been an inseparable part of the projects of growth, character formation and identity politics that power children's and Young Adult fiction.

The story of Christ is interlinked with the fictions of adolescence and boyhood through several structural and thematic links. The otherness that marks the category of adolescence also links it with the scriptural narrative. An outsider to childhood and adulthood, adolescence is a gap between the two categories. It is often defined in terms of pathology — a stage of raging hormones, mood swings, curiosities, and perversities. A boy embodies all that is the other of a rational grown-up adult, an outsider to the norms and conventions that govern adulthood. This otherness blends with the scriptural portrayal of Christ. In the gospels, Jesus is portrayed most often and most obviously in the role of stranger, an outsider. Like the adolescent movement outside the family unit, Jesus and his followers live an itinerant lifestyle, without belonging to any cohesive social unit. The presence of these outsiders disturbs the structures and orders of the familiar world. In a similar manner, adolescence by its rebellion and defiance, upsets the frameworks of the customary order, forcing it to introspect and reform. Caputo characterizes such intrusive otherness as the characteristic presence of Christ, the savior: 'into the sphere of the "same" . . . bursts the "advent" or the "event" of the "other," of the "coming of the other", which makes the same tremble and reconfigure'.¹² Magic, a unique set of skills possessed by the adolescent protagonist, reinforces the disruptive or deconstructive potential of an adolescent savior that 'delivers the shock of the other to the forces of the same, the shock of the good (the "ought") to the forces of being ("what is")'.¹³

The fluidity of the categories of adolescence and boyhood also undercuts the portrayal of Christ as an adult male savior. Scholars like Luce Irigaray have underlined the totalization of the masculine principles and the exclusion of the others (others in terms of sexuality, race, gender or age) in the traditional Christian theology. The image of God, the monarch, Irigaray insists, creates an

¹² John D. Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academics 2007, 26.

¹³ Caputo, 27.

image of self-contained, solitary divinity, which is ultimately a projection of 'paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable'.¹⁴ While Irigaray discusses the exclusion of the feminine other from the discourses of Christian theology, the paradigm also applies to condition of boyhood — another 'other' of the adult manhood — young, impetuous, lacking in understanding and rational judgment.

The stories of fantastical boyhood undercut the androcentric bias inherent to the traditional interpretations of the theological narrative. In Victorian and Edwardian fantasy, the images of an androgynous, a-sexual boy savior, caring, sensitive and sympathetic, established the link between Christ and the cultural construction of boyhood, idealizing it as a 'refuge from excesses of adult masculinity'.¹⁵ Hence, androgyny 'was an essential tenet of evangelical books for boys, or for boys and girls, because the same system of values had to apply to both genders; religion was not for women only'.¹⁶ This androgyny marked the polymorphous state of boyhood; it marked the child as an 'other' of the adult men and women, like Christ, who is divinized, as an embodiment of 'male' traits like bravery, leadership and courage, as well as 'feminine' ones like caring and loving the poor, the sick and the children.¹⁷ Such androgyny foregrounded in the fictions of Charles Kingsley, Edith Nesbit and George Macdonald was implicit in the varying images of childhood innocence as opposed to adult egotism, selfishness and conflict.

Harry Potter, the contemporary boy hero not only embodies androgyny in a literal manner (his bodily resemblance to both his parents is repeatedly emphasized throughout the series); the series problematizes the gender binary implicit in the concept of androgyny and upsets the gendered narrative of the Christian savior. The miraculous birth of Christ is retold in terms of the events that happen on the night of James and Lily Potter's murder. One year old Harry is given a lease of life when he survives the killing curse through the sacrifice of

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, 'The Question of the Other', *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995), 7-19 at 7.

¹⁵ Nelson discusses the theological subtext that saturates 19th century fantasy. Books by Charles Kingsley, George Macdonald, Edith Nesbit and several other writers create varying images of childhood innocence as opposed to adult egotism, selfishness and conflict. Claudia Nelson, *Boys Will be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917*, New Brunswick et al.: Rutgers University Press 1991, 148.

¹⁶ Nelson, 173.

¹⁷ In the androgynous, a-sexual saviors of Victorian fantasy offer a vision where the earthly aspects of growth and development are purged out. In the androgyny that links childhood with Christ, adulthood, maturity and sexual 'awakening' are the intrusions of the adult world that create dissonance: hence Nelson insists that 'what began as a rejection of adult male world ends as a rejection of maturity in any form.' (Nelson, 150).

Lily Potter. Like Herod, Voldemort acting on the prophecy seeks to slaughter the young. While Mary's body subject to the divine word, the prophecy conceives Christ miraculously, Lily Potter inverts the powerful masculine word, the killing curse to give life to her son. Her sacrifice not only saves Harry but also endows him with powers to defeat the Dark Lord. Lily's sacrificial death sets the plot in motion; it also sets up the model for the son to follow. The mother, absent and dead, surfaces repeatedly, upsetting the father-son dyad that underwrites the theological narrative of God, the father, and Christ, the son as well as the oedipal tussles of the heroic fantasy.¹⁸ While the Christian narrative solves the oedipal tussles between the father and the son by an emphasis on love and obedience, the postmodern narrative of the savior like the *Potter* series problematizes the dyad. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry is repeatedly reminded of his resemblance to his father. 'Expecto Patronum', the spell to overcome the Dementors, the demons of despair literally means 'I throw forth a guardian.' It channelizes the love and protection of the father; Harry's protector (the *patronus*) is a stag, an animal form that his father, James Potter, would assume in his youth. The stag is an important symbol of divinity in British and Celtic mythology. In Celtic mythology the stag is also the symbol of Cernunnos, the God of plenty and the Lord of Beasts. The appearance of the stag indicates other-worldliness, earthly fertility and cyclic rejuvenation hence linking it with the notion of a savior.¹⁹ At the end of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the stag *patronus* chases away the Dementors and the soul crushing despair they embody. It saves Harry and Sirius Black from the Kiss of the Dementors which signals damnation for the soul, a soulless existence. The *patronus* also links Harry to his dead father, James Potter who could take the

¹⁸ Anguish of ancestry is central to the story of the hero, in terms of structure as well as the content. Psychic normality lies in overcoming this fantasy of rivalry with the father by giving up the incestuous desire for the mother and identifying with the role of the patriarch. Hence as scholars like Propp, Frye and Campbell point out, Oedipal complex and its successful resolution seem to define the stories of coming-of-age. However, the Christian subtext of the series, as well as the postmodern concerns with instabilities of identity and selfhood problematizes the narrative of oedipal rivalry. An adolescent hero constantly negotiates through a variety of role models and ego-ideals in his quest for growth and maturity. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of a Folktale*, translated by Laurence Scott, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 1968 [1927]; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1949; Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1973 [1957].

¹⁹ In a scene from Chretien de Troyes' version of the Arthurian cycle, Arthur wants to hunt the white stag as a ritual to consolidate his kingship. The stag appears frequently around Arthur's court, heralding knightly quests. C.S. Lewis uses the motif in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The Pevensie children go hunting for white stag who is fabled to grant wishes. It appears at the borders of the two worlds as the children cross over from Narnia to Digory Kirke's wardrobe and back.

form of a stag. In the encounter with the Dementors at the end of the book, the deliverance comes in form of Harry's union with his father: 'I saw me but I thought I was my dad!' Dumbledore explains that 'Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus?'²⁰ Sirius, his father's friend, tells Harry that he is truly his 'father's son'.²¹ Later Dumbledore mentions it again: 'I expect you're tired of hearing it, but you do look *extraordinarily* like James'.²² The repeated emphasis highlights the centrality of the father-son relationship to the text and its resonance with the Christian context of the series.

As the series progresses, the paternal role becomes ambiguous as it shifts from father figures like James Potter, to bullying uncle Vernon, to the reckless godfather Sirius Black. Rather than powerful Godheads, these paternal figures turn out to be flawed role-models whom Harry needs to surpass rather than follow. Even James Potter turns out to be 'every bit as arrogant as Snape had always told him'.²³ Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts is the greatest influence on Harry's boyhood. At Hogwarts, Dumbledore often seems to be omniscient, always aware of the minutest details and events in the school, close at hand when the trouble strikes. Though secretive and mysterious, he is Harry's greatest guardian. As 'the most powerful wizard' in the magical world, he guides and protects Harry and frames his quest towards the last sacrifice. In return, by refusing to digress from the path shown by Dumbledore, Harry proves himself to be 'Dumbledore's man — through and through'. Yet, Harry comes of age by surpassing his God-like mentor. Dumbledore, in the last book of the series turns out to be weak, misguided and hence unfit to save the magical world. His ambition and individualism lead to the destruction of his family.

Harry on the other hand, repeatedly puts himself in danger to protect others — though his 'saving people instinct' often leads him awry,²⁴ it culminates in final act of sacrifice for the magical world. Adney argues that 'masculinity' foregrounded in characters like Dumbledore cultivate 'traditionally feminine qualities in Harry, like being empathetic and nurturing'.²⁵ Aggression, ambition, individualism and belief in one's value systems (qualities

²⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, 313.

²¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, 303.

²² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, 312.

²³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, London: Bloomsbury 2003, 573.

²⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix*, 660.

²⁵ Karley Adney, 'The Influence of Gender on Harry Potter's Heroic (Trans)formation', in: Katrin Brendt and Linda Steveker (eds.), *Heroism in the Harry Potter Series*, Burlington: Ashgate 2011, 177-192 at 177.

which Adney describes as 'masculine') are intricately linked with the qualities like adaptability, empathy and caring that lie on the other end of scale.²⁶ These qualities merge in the figure of an adolescent boy-hero. As manifestations of the relation between the self and the other, love and empathy are central to the narratives of boyhood and adolescence which has been described in terms of growth out of solipsism and into intersubjectivity.²⁷

Grounded in these notions of empathy, love and caring, fellowships and friendships between the hero and his aides and mentors echo the brotherhood of Christ's followers. At the same time, with the location of the narrative in a British boarding school has led the critics and readers to draw parallels between the magical world and the queer subcultures of boyhood and adolescence which, in turn, problematize the Christian context of boyhood.²⁸ Boyhood and its polymorphous sexuality create a queer subtext that underwrites the idea of fellowship. Scholars like Tison Pugh have explored the queer subtext that underlies Harry's close friendship with his friend Ron Weasley who is progressively feminized till he becomes the goal of the quest, the princess, waiting to be rescued in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of fire*. Similarly Harry's relationship with Dumbledore, the headmaster holds room for a platonic but implicitly homoerotic version of desire grounded in giving and receiving knowledge, molding one's character and growth under the guidance of another. Framing the narrative of the savior, such queer subtext reconfigures the notions of brotherhood and discipleship.

Hence in the gender and sexual revisions that boyhood offers, the series reimagines the savior in terms of otherness and difference. Harry, like Christ,

²⁶ Karley Adney citing Sandra Bem's work on psychological androgyny, categorizes leadership, aggression, ambition, competitiveness, independence and individualism as masculine traits; female qualities consist of compassion, loyalty, sensitivity, sympathy and understanding. Friendliness, being helpful and reliable, tact, moodiness, on the other hand, are androgynous traits. (Adney, 178). However, as the discussion illustrates, Harry Potter emerges as a hero, not due to these androgynous or neutral traits, but due to the emergence and co-existence of masculine and feminine traits that disturbs the dualism of gender.

²⁷ Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*, New York: Garland 1999, 7.

²⁸ Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace, 'Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 31/3 (2006), 260-281; Jes Battis, 'Transgendered Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature', *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature* 10/1 (2006), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/93/78>, accessed 4 July 2012; Michael Bronski, 'Queering Harry Potter', *Z Magazine* 16/9 (2003), <http://www.zcommunications.org/queering-harry-potter-by-michael-bronski>, accessed 4 July 2012; Beverly Lyons Clarke, 'Domesticating the School Story, Regendering the Genre', *New Literary History* 26/2 (1995), 323-342.

embodies otherness — in being a miracle child, in being an outsider, in being a hero who defends and protects the weak as well as nurtures and cares for them. But above all, he is the savior like Christ who upsets the erstwhile authorities by voicing the concerns of the weak, the sinners and the outcasts. His friends are the outcasts of the magical world. His first friend in the magical world is Hagrid, the half giant living on the peripheries of Hogwarts after being expelled from the school. In the subsequent book, he helps and is helped by Dobby, the enslaved house-elf. Dobby emerges as one of his most loyal supporters. He also befriends Remus Lupin, the werewolf, a monster of the magical world. While Snape continues to treat Harry and his friends with hostility, Harry is able to sympathize with Snape after getting a glimpse of Snape's childhood: 'It was unnerving to think that the little boy who had been crying as he watched his parents shouting was actually standing in front of him with such loathing in his eyes.'²⁹ Snape's worst memory of being bullied by James and Sirius leaves Harry perturbed:

What was making Harry feel so horrified and unhappy was not being shouted at or having jars thrown at him; it was that he knew how it felt to be humiliated in the middle of a circle of onlookers, knew exactly how Snape had felt as his father had taunted him, and that judging from what he had just seen, his father had been every bit as arrogant as Snape had always told him.³⁰

In the later books, overcoming his rage in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is able to understand the motivations that pressed Kreacher, the much abused Black family house-elf, into betraying Sirius. He is indignant over the idea of Merope's son being left alone since his mother chose death over living for her son. It leads Dumbledore to wonder 'Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?'³¹ Adney points out that Dumbledore by 'making Harry privy to Voldemort's past not only educates Harry on how to defend himself against his great nemesis, but also nurtures in him the very feminine qualities of compassion and sympathy.'³²

Rather than categorizing these as 'feminine' or 'masculine' traits, the series blurs the distinction. Empathy and sacrifice become the acts of bravery and courage; love, as the series progresses, becomes the greatest force of combat. Dumbledore's assertion that Harry's greatest power is his capacity to love rever-

²⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 529.

³⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 582.

³¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, 139.

³² Adney, 183.

berates with Christian doctrine of grace: 'And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you' (1 Th. 3:12). The 'feminine' qualities of love and empathy seem to echo with the feminine image of the savior — the friend of the weak. However, in the series, love is not always nurturing and life-giving, it figures in a variety of disguises — legitimate and illegitimate, requited and unrequited, misplaced, denied or perverted. Talking about Amorentia, the love-potion, potions master Horace Slughorn tells his students that it 'is probably the most dangerous and powerful potion. . . . When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love.'³³ Especially significant in the series is love that is unsanctioned, illegitimate, and extreme. Embodied in a variety of figures and forms — between Dumbledore and Grindelwald, Snape and Lily, Merope and Tom Riddle Senior, and in an obsessive form, even between Bellatrix and Voldemort, love is an amoral force refusing to submit to the understanding based on morality, legitimacy or even spirituality. As Christian agape, the self sacrificing love of Christ for humanity, which humanity, in turn is committed to practice and reciprocate, love becomes a force of combat — the links of fellowship enable Harry to vanquish the Dark Lord.

As manifestations of the relation between the self and the other, love and empathy are central to the narratives of boyhood and adolescence which has been described in terms of growth out of childish solipsism into intersubjective relationships. This process of growth out of childhood reconfigures the narrative of the savior by creating a social and political context for the battle between good and evil. Individual relationships and friendships provide a model of engaging with difference and otherness. Harry's obsession with the Hallows, the instruments of greatest magical powers, comes to end with Dobby's death. He chooses to dig the grave for one of his most loyal friends. Griphook's realization of that Harry is 'a very odd wizard'³⁴ refers to the qualities of loyalty, nurturing, and caring that coexist with bravery and courage. After Dobby's death, Harry chooses to search for the Horcruxes, rather than follow Voldemort's pursuit of the Hallows. His closest friends at Hogwarts are the marginalized students — the Weasleys are constantly taunted for their poverty, Hermione is a 'mudblood', Neville is an easy target for the bullying Slytherins and teachers like Snape. This circle of friendship extends to the outcasts of the magical world — the house-elves, the centaurs, the goblins, the racial others who are marginalized by the hierarchies of power of the magical world.

³³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, 177.

³⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 416.

The hero's friendship with the 'monsters' and 'freaks' of the magical world signals a new kind of alliance which is based on a kind of equality with the object.³⁵ His victory is ensured when the 'others', the marginalized groups of the magical world reciprocate by joining the last battle. In the messianic potential of fantasy to envision and establish a more just and humane order, such inter-subjectivity is central. The sacrifice of Lily Potter, the mercy shown to Peter Pettigrew, the cruelty of the Dark Lord to his underlings — these are the magical deeds that configure and re-configure the story repeatedly.

The series thus re-imagines the savior in terms of otherness and difference. Rather than projecting these as the masculine or feminine traits, the series projects them as the traits of an adolescent savior for whom, the inter-subjectivity and empathy signified by love is also a weapon to combat evil. Adolescence of the boy savior, therefore, becomes a location of possibilities. It offers an embodied critique of the unitive and totalizing principles that underwrite traditional theology with its emphasis on the male Godhead. Rather than a progress to the transcendent Kingdom of Heaven, the series grounds the growth of the boy-Christ in an intensely political and material arena. The problems of the wizard world, as readers and critics have pointed out, are suspiciously like our own.³⁶ The terror unleashed by Voldemort and his Death-Eaters, the swift transformation of Quidditch World Cup revelries into a terror strike, the inadequate response from the political establishment, references to slavery, racism and issues like blood purity situate the narrative in the contemporary world and its political equations.

Adolescence and the discourses of love, empathy and otherness that surround it offer a model of openness and receptivity: it is a condition where the rigid codes of being are undone; where identities are labile and mobile. Kristeva refers to adolescence as "the 'open systems' of which biology speaks, concerning living organisms that live only by maintaining a renewable identity through interaction with another, the adolescent structure opens itself to the

³⁵ Elaine O'Quinn suggests an affinity between the category of monsters and adolescents not only in their deviance and pathology but also in the politics of utopic possibilities and future they engage in Elaine J. O'Quinn, 'Vampires, Changelings, and Radical Mutants Teens', *ALAN Review* 31/3 (2004), 50-56.

³⁶ Judith Rauhofer, 'Defence Against the Dark Arts: How the British Response to the Terrorist Threat is Parodied in J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince"', *International Journal of Liability and Scientific Enquiry*, 1/1-2 (2007), 94-113; Julia Turner, 'When Harry Met Osama: Terrorism Comes to Hogwarts', *Slate Magazine*, 25 July 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2123105>, accessed 4 July 2012; E. Michael Jones, 'Education as Magic: Harry Potter and the Culture of Narcissism', *Culture Wars*, January 2002, <http://www.culturewars.com/2002/potter.html>, 4 July 2012.

repressed at the same time that it initiates a psychic reorganization of the individual'.³⁷ The sacrifice of the boy savior calls for a radical restructuring of the established order.

Boyhood and Sacrificial Death

Harry achieves victory over the forces of evil by submitting to death, sacrificing himself for the welfare of the community, hence enacting Christ's sacrifice for creation. Trites explains that 'in adolescent literature, death is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality, when s/he accepts herself as a Being-towards-Death'.³⁸ Framed within the story of redemption, the boy savior comes of age by sacrificing boyhood. The sacrifice ensures rejuvenation and purification of the existing order. Growth into adulthood, the coming of age is characterized in terms of the sacrifice of adolescence. Imitating the life of Christ, an adolescent, with his lawlessness and indiscipline dies to make way for a mature and responsible adult. The liminality and fluidity gives way to a stable coherent selfhood. The boy savior saves us by becoming one of us. The scriptural narrative of Christ's emergence as the savior, the son of God who ascends to heaven by dying for humankind, overlaps with the story of an adolescent boy who saves the world by 'overcoming' adolescence and becoming an adult. Rather than a fantasy of the adolescent protagonists, the stories reflect the hope and desire of a culture to be saved by its boy heroes. The promise of future offered by adolescence and boyhood resonates with the promise of redemption and grace offered by Christ.

The theme can be traced back to the classical motif of the hero's journey to the Land of the Dead. In the classical parallel, heroes like Odysseus descend to the land of the dead to gain information and insights into the future. In later Christian theology, Christ's descent into Hell or the 'harrowing of the hell' is undertaken to liberate the dead. Hence, the boy hero's encounters with the dead, his victory over death through the sacrifice — these elements sacralize the action and orient the hero's growth along the Christian narrative.

At the same time, the narrative of boyhood inserts the discourses of body, sexuality and sinfulness into the rituals of sacrifice and redemption. Isherwood and Stuart point out the emphasis on body and bodily sensations in Christ's

³⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'The Adolescent Novel', in: John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, London: Routledge 1990, 8-23 at 9.

³⁸ Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2000, 119.

narrative: 'Here was a man who held people, threw things in anger, cursed things making them wither and cherished people back to life. Here was an incarnate/embodyed being.'³⁹ Adolescence is frequently defined in terms of bodily changes during puberty. The male body of Christ which comes from a virginal matter and is unstable; in Eucharist, bread and wine transubstantiate into the body of Christ. Similarly, an adolescent body, mutable during the process of growth and development, is a body in transition. In the narrative of growth and development, this liminal body is sacrificed to attain the state of physical maturity and stability. Coats underlines the centrality of the body in Christ's sacrifice:

On the one hand, the Christ became himself incarnate to redeem the body as such. Thus corporeality itself need not be regarded as abject. He then abjected sin through that body in his death, with his resurrection displacing abjection altogether in that it, first, provides the conditions for a corporeality beyond sacrifice and, second, demands our encounter with the subjectivity of the victim.⁴⁰

Hence the centrality of the body in the Christian theme is established through its sacrifice — it is the human body, the human-ness that the savior sacrifices in order to save humankind. In the magical world of the series, such sacrifice has physical manifestations: Lily Potter's sacrifice lives on in her son's body; it protects him from evil: in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Quirrel, who carries Voldemort at the back of his head, burns on touching Harry, because, as Dumbledore tells Harry:

... love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin.⁴¹

Later in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Voldemort suffers intense pain when he tries to take over Harry's body which carries immense capacity of love and sacrifice; 'he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was

³⁹ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998, 11.

⁴⁰ Karen Coats, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire and Subjectivity in Children's Literature*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2004, 142.

⁴¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, London: Bloomsbury 1997, 163.

your heart that saved you.⁴² Love and sacrifice are thus manifest in the body of the savior. Rather than a spiritual guardian, Lily's sacrifice lives on tangibly, in Harry's blood; it passes on to Voldemort when he takes Harry's blood to return to life. Hence the sacrificial blood of the mother strengthens Harry's links to life in an intricate manner. At the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry is able to survive the killing curse because his mother's sacrifice lives on in his enemy.

The sacrifice therefore establishes a bodily connection between the savior and the saved; the savior lives on in the saved. By repeatedly articulating his/her otherness and upsetting the conventions of power that created the catastrophic situation — the savior shows the way: that 'in a properly understood Christian economy of subjectivity, we needn't sacrifice the body, and we must take into account the particularity of the Other rather than simply use him as our abject support.'⁴³ Sacrificial boyhood in Rowling's series embodies a self oriented towards otherness. It is an antithesis of the coherence and power signified by a male savior. Growing-up involves initiation into the complexities of love, sexuality and mortality — a radical awareness of the otherness and difference. Sacrifice shows the way of being a self for the other, a way of being based on mutuality and inter-subjectivity that leads the boy out of his childish solipsism and the savior to the sacrifice.

Conclusion

The course of Rowling's narrative renders the regenerated 'redeemed' magical world more and more suspect. Even in the post-Voldemort magical world, Hagrid, the half-giant seems to continue to live on the margins of Hogwarts, we do not hear about the liberation of the house-elves. Remus Lupin, the angst ridden werewolf dies in the final battle. Harry's sacrifice, though it saves the community from immediate destruction, does not solve the problems of the magical world. Yet the narrative highlights the importance of the struggle. In *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, when Harry finally understands the significance or rather the insignificance of the prophecy, he displays a kind of religious stoicism in his choice to fight against powerful dark wizards:

⁴² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 743.

⁴³ Coats, 142.

It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew — and so do I, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, and so did my parents — that there was all the difference in the world.⁴⁴

Hence, sacrifice does not redeem the world but points out the way. Salvation lies in the way of being that is oriented towards the community and communal welfare; the boy savior's quest does not end in the Kingdom of Heaven but shows the way. It echoes Caputo's idea of the deconstructive potential of the Christian savior:

In Christianity, Jesus is the way, and being a Christian cannot be more felicitously described than as following "in his steps." The religious heart or frame of mind is not "realist," because it is not satisfied with the reality that is all around it. Nor is it anti-realist, because it is not trying to substitute fabrications of reality; rather it is what I would call "hyper-realist," in search of the real beyond the real, the *hyper*, the *uber* or *au-dela*, the beyond, in search of the event that stirs within things that will exceed our present horizons.⁴⁵

As a contemporary fantasy, the *Potter* series does not merely reinstate the discourse of religion. By modeling boyhood on the scriptural narrative of Christ, it textualizes the meta-narrative, its moral framework of good and evil, right and wrong, and holds them up for modification and for modifying the contemporary contexts. By linking itself with the story of the messiah, fantasy links action to its purpose. Tolkien insists that 'The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed.'⁴⁶ Boyhood contextualized within the Christian framework creates an image of a savior who explores, examines and postmodernizes theology: 'The fantastic becomes a sort of anti-mythic, deconstructive power, threatening the coherence of narrative, and the ambiguous and complex relation between fantasy and religion is highlighted, not resolved.'⁴⁷ Linked to the impulses of subversion, challenge and resistance, the promise of Heaven offered by the boy-savior is disturbing and challenging like adolescence itself.

⁴⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, 271.

⁴⁵ Caputo, 39.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, 63.

⁴⁷ George Aichele and Tina Pippin, 'Introduction', in: Aichele and Pippin (eds.), *Violence, Utopia and the Kingdom of God: Fantasy and Ideology in the Bible*, London: Routledge 1998, 1-7 at 4.

Vandana Saxena currently teaches at the School of Modern Languages and Literature, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus. Prior to this, she taught at the University of Delhi after finishing her doctoral degree at Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD) in 2010. Her book *The Subversive Harry Potter: Adolescent Rebellion and Containment in the J.K. Rowling novels* (McFarland NC 2012) explores the cultural models of growth in contemporary children's and YA fiction and the way popular literature problematizes the cultural presumptions surrounding the notions of childhood, adolescence, growth and so on.