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Liminality and Communitas: Harry Potter and *rites de passage* in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract: The onset of the age of Information technology has opened uncharted areas of experiences which along with its scattering and questioning of relevance of older forms of genres has made a revaluation of literary aesthetics imperative. The success of Harry Potter series in attracting a wide readership has thrown open an interesting debate concerning the use of generic nomenclature of children's literature for it. In terms of readership, protagonists and the mythical/philosophical background, Pottermania transcends narrow confines of children's literature and makes frequent forays into adult young world. Dismissal of it as a new fad for childish adults, limited only to those people who live a sedentary and superficial life of fantasy, as suggested by critics like A.S. Byatt, seems inadequate in its scope and critical acumen.

It appears imperative that critics need to focus on Young Adult (YA) literature as a distinct genre to explain the periodic rise and popularity of books like Harry Potter series representing lives of young people who exist at the boundary of childhood and adulthood. The liminality of their existence makes them capable of crossing over to child psychology while retaining an adult perspective over things about them. This twilight region is as much capable of putting its faith in magic and rituals as it does in scientific gadgets; celebrates the value and inevitability of romance, while anticipating the complexities of human love. Young Adult literature thus exists at the borderland of children and adult classics and borrows narrative strategies, thematic concerns and treatment from both of them. My paper would trace the salient features of Young Adult literature and would examine how the characters, incidents, narrative technique and structure of the Harry Potter series uphold a vision of the world whose value lies in its liminality— straddling magic and



rationality, childhood and adulthood, magic castles and contemporary London. Further, the situation of Young Adult literature in a world of Information technology becomes an interesting site for understanding how hybrid formation and mutation are postmodern aspects of any new art form, affecting its growth and sustenance in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Liminal, Young-Adult literature, rites de passage.

Literature like a Protean being has an ability to assume multifarious forms and manifestations and the literatures in the wired world of today are examples of how this vital form of human communication can reshape itself according to the socio-political, economical and technological advances. While the outer forms of manifestations of literature has mutated and realigned itself to the governing conditions, the inner form has remain faithful to imitation of whatever is intrinsic to human nature. While on one hand new experiments in literary craft betoken human versatility to find new mediums of their expression, there is always something which goes to the primitive impulses and desires in human community. My paper seeks to trace some fundamental patterns behind the popularity of Harry Potter series and the appeal of Young Adult literature by aligning them with some anthropological insights into rites-de-passage as observed by William Turner and Arnold de Gennep. For it I presume that liminality and the consequent desire for communities is a fundamental human situation which can be fruitfully applied to the desire in human psyche for discontinuity with structural existence. The tug of unknown and mysterious thus can be seen as a primitive impulse in human mind for ambiguity and status reversal.

The wonder of A.S. Byatt, a well known British critic expresses a dilemma which is prone to become a cliché whenever a work like Harry Potter appears. The critic exclaims:

What is the secret of the explosive and worldwide success of the Harry Potter books? Why do they satisfy children and—a much harder question—why do so many adults read them? I think part of the answer to the first question is that they are written from inside a child's eye view, with a sure instinct for childish psychology. But then how do you answer the second question? Surely, one precludes the other. (Byatt 1)



The bewilderment is natural, there are facts which confuse even the hard boiled purist critics who tend to dismiss the enchanting world of Harry potter as written for “people whose imaginative live are confined to TV Cartoons, and the exaggerated (more exciting, not threatening) mirror-worlds of soaps, reality TV and celebrity gossip” (Byatt 1). The popularity of Harry Potter series which cuts across geographical and age barriers brought to fore the necessity of taking a critical look at Young Adult literature as a potential source of understanding the power of literature and how it can appeal to human mind. Though having its own audience and used as a vehicle for instructing young minds, the YA literature didn’t quite get the spotlight it deserved. Whenever some outrageously famous series like harry Potter is noticed, it arouses some interest but is as speedily forgotten as it occurs. Most of the literary critics tend to dismiss these successes as a result of fickle minded readers’ obsession with whatever is sensational and catchy. Dismissing it as a passing fad wouldn’t explain it power, however transient it may be and one suspects that there is something beneath the surface which periodically appeals to the imagination of readers and which has not been properly explored despite a plethora of critical theories in contemporary times.

Literary world is sustained over hierarchies between different genres and these hierarchies are sustained through our strict adherence to what is literary and what is perhaps less literary. Thus any literary work which celebrates and falls within the exacting boundaries of these defining parameters is only qualified the attention of critics who then evaluate it on the basis of pre-existing formulations. The children’s literature has customarily dismissed as not worthy of serious critical attention so far and has been often seen as underdeveloped form of literature. Situated in the crevices of children and adult literature, Young adult literature has been a neglected genre which needs serious critical attention. The neglect of YA experience by the adult world lies in its viewing this important phase of human development as childish or immature which is superseded by the later development. Elaine Quinn rightly notes in this connection:

Once readers move beyond age appropriate fairy tales, they are expected to give up their child-like fears and fascinations with the strange, eerie, and unknown while disciplining themselves to ‘rationally recognizing the dangers of these disrupting forces that intrude on their humanity. The inclination is to dismiss stories of the supernatural, surreal, or fancy as



either immature daydreams of immortality, poorly contrived romances of horror, fluff of the imagination or, even worse, as solipsistic, self-referential texts. Unfortunately, in the haste to dismiss “unrealistic” genres of books, we miss important understandings of adolescent thinking and identity construction while remaining blind to the flawed, linear nature of the developmental theories surrounding them.’(Quinn 51).

The idea of linear progression of human psyche akin to linear progression of human history relies on enlightenment idea of rational faculty as the sole guide of human development. It neglects the multiagency and heterogeneity of human existence. Cindy Lou Daniels advocates that this reappraisal of Young Adult literature needs a development of alternate critical strategies for it which should align itself “to acknowledge the differences in the literary craft itself” (Daniels 79).

The peculiar situation of YA literature straddling two poles, viz. a world of child and an adult world gives it some of its characteristics. In words of Robert Bittner, “literature for young adults is a literature of fluidity, conforming to the experiences of young people in specific contexts and shifting with changes in socio-political ideologies. For young adults, this literature is an escape as well as a comforting reflection of life” (Bittner 32). The liminality of this existence makes it a part of those experiences which have been neglected for so long and which make itself feel in its most power impact on human psyche. An evaluation of these impulses would explain to a certain extent the appeal of literature for human mind and how and how it is related to an exploration of unknown and uncharted.

The appeal of Harry Potter for a modern reader lies in its unique position as representing appeal of liminality and *communitas* to human psyche. William Turner’s interpretation of ritual process has its foundation in Van Gennep’s discussion of liminal phase in *rites de passage*. Drawing heavily on his field work in Ndembu tribe of northwestern Zambia, Turner constructs some distinctive features of ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas.’ The notable hallmarks of ‘liminality’ as explicated by Turner are its ambiguity, unstructurality and transmutation. In the words of Turner:

The attributes of liminality or liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classification that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are



neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner, *The Ritual* 95)

Young adult literature is in itself a rites de passage and is about “life, its histories and potentialities, transformations and choices; it is about conflicts between the claim of the individual and the claims of culture (Freud); it is about life’s fantastic flux of being. It is about new beginnings and other directions” (Proukou 62). The parallel between the phase of adolescence and rites de passage described above is quite obvious. On the level of human growth, it shows the same characteristics which are shown by an initiand in the rites of passage. Katherine Proukou rightly asserts:

The separation from childhood is a complex trial, begun in adolescence and symbolic of all transformations of consciousness, particularly from one state of understanding to a higher or clearer one: A reason why adolescence is worthy, according to Joseph Campbell, of the elaborate rites of primordial societies, who celebrated it. These rites forced the child [...] to give up its childhood and become an adult—to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo. (Proukou 63)

YA literature is a liminal literature due to its positionality between distinct genres of literature viz. children and adult literature as the experiences depicted in YA literature belong to the threshold between children and adult. In words of Vandana Saxena, “adolescence itself can be seen as the liminal space of magical realism. An adolescent can be seen as an “other,” an outsider to the categories of child and adult, embodying the gap between the two states of being in the chronology of growth.” (Saxena 43). The important properties which Turner ascribes to liminality are ambiguity, a disregard for classifications and a *trishanku* like state—“those who pass from one zone to other waver ‘between two worlds’ in a ‘symbolic and spatial area of transition’” (Bruster 39).

The world of Harry Potter is situated between two worlds, he is born in a Magical world but after his brush with Lord Voldemort, he has to live in a muggle world. Harry’s frequent journeys from magical world to the muggle world give him a unique position from which he can see and evaluate both the worlds. Despite his unique position as *The Boy Who Lived*, Harry has to return from



Hogwarts to his uncle's home at Privet Drive during his summer holidays to maintain the charm of protection alive. The transition from one ritual state to another i.e. his being an adult at the age of seventeen is full of much significance in the novel as whenever he attains maturity the charm protecting him from death at the hands of Lord Voldemort will vanish making him vulnerable.

Liminalities are further attributed by, what Turner calls as "blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness" (Turner, *The Ritual* 96). It implies the vision that "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (Turner, *The Ritual* 97). Harry's disregard for socially inferior is perhaps his chief characteristic which separates him from the highly hierarchised world of Wizards. In the world of Wizards, house elves like Creacher and Dobby are treated as slaves and worthless beings by people such as Malfoys who do not consider them as beings with any feelings or sentiments. Even Harry's godfather Sirius Black did not treat Creacher which leads to his treachery against him and eventually to his death. Lord Voldemort considers it beneath his notice to give attention to magical powers of house-elves. The goblins are seen as worthless beings and are treated in a contemptuous way. Harry's attitude towards all the socially inferiors is markedly different from other wizards. His sympathy for Dobby earns him a friend who saves him from Malfoy manor. Harry's sorrow at the death of Dobby is genuine and he decides to bury him by digging a grave with his own hands, instead of using magic making even goblin Griphook exclaim:

'You buried the elf,' he said, sounding unexpectedly rancorous. 'I watched you, from the window of the bedroom next door.'

'Yes, ' said Harry.

Griphook looked at him out of the corners of his slanting black eyes.

'You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter.' [...]

'If there was a wizard of whom I would believe that they did not seek personal gain,' said Griphook finally,' it would be you, Harry Potter. Goblins and elves are not used to the protection, or the respect, that you have shown this night. Not from wand carriers.'" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 393-94).



One aspect of liminality is its role reversal which is purported to invert hierarchy in social structures and thus through its “withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs” (Turner, *The Ritual* 167). This role reversal usually takes place with the initiand being vilified by the commoners before his ritual elevation to the higher status. On a symbolic level this inversion of roles, might be responsible for emphasizing a warning to the chief-elect about the lure of power and value of humility with which he is supposed to bear the staff: “Rituals of status reversal, according to this principal, mask the weak in strength and demand of the strong that they be passive and patiently endure the symbolic and even real aggression shown against them by structural inferiors” (Turner, *The Ritual* 175-76). Despite his being born with a popularity Harry has to live on the fringes of insult and neglect. It is what makes him immune to the trappings of ego and power. Dumbledore’s comment on power are quite relevant as they depict power as infectious from which only a person who has no desire for it but on whom it is thrust: “I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation. It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those, who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well” (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 575).

Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, in *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, define YA literature as the “quintessential literature of the outsider who is too often rendered invisible by society” (Bittner 32). The power of the weak over the politically, economically or physically powerful lay in another sociological process which Turner observes in tribal society where the conquered tribes acclaimed mystical power over the politically superior tribes. The defeated ones became the part of tribal societies by claiming spiritual and moral powers which terrified the powerful ones and thus created a kind of anti-structure within the tribe, which controlled and displaced the political manifestations of power by the powerful one. This process of realignment of powers is not overtly conscious one and operates on the level of symbols and rituals. Further, this power is not used individually but for the welfare of the society as a whole—for rains, for fertility etc. and its function is to have a kind of egalitarian societal system. Turner calls this identification of political weaker with moral,



mystical and ethical sentiment of the society as “the powers of the weak” (Turner, *The Ritual* 109). Harry Potter is not an accomplished wizard like Voldemort, he is at his best a moderately gifted wizard. Yet he possesses a power which a wizard like Lord Voldemort is unaware of. It is the mystical power of love which is exemplified by his mother’s sacrifice for him. Harry showcases the strength of the mystical strength of friendship, love and loyalty which enables him to defeat more powerful and skilled death-eaters again and again throughout the novels.

Liminality is also attributed by the juxtaposition of “‘open’ as against ‘closed morality’, the latter being essentially the normative system of bounded, structured, particularistic group” (Turner, *The Ritual* 110). In words of Turner: “Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edge men’, who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination” (Turner, *The Ritual* 128). Patrick Jones while describing a salient feature of Young Adult literature points to the non-conformity as its chief feature: “Indeed, this is a literature full of misfits, iconoclasts, freaks, geeks, and more than a few nonconformists. The non-conformist teen, like Jerry in *The Chocolate War*, is on the outside due to a deliberate choice. The choice is normally to remain true to an inner code, rather than submit to the rules, regulations, or pressures of a larger group, whether it be, classmates, or society. [...]They’re iconoclasts, rebels, and deviants. Deviants not sexually, but because they deviate from the formal and normal” (Jones 13). Harry is a subversive power in the novels, “a determined rule-breaker” (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 545). He frequently breaks the rules of Hogwarts through his forays in the castle. He is rightly described as “breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way” (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 241) during his encounter with the snake in Chamber of Secrets, as is asserted by Professor McGonagall. This inversion of rules is common to a group of people who are portrayed as the moral center of the novel. Harry’s father James Potter, Sirius Black and Lupin too had no regards for rules. There is a strong affinity between characters who flout rules and their presentation as antithesis to other group of characters such as professor Snape and Malfoys who are law abiding and are represented as evil. James and Lily Potter die because they put more faith in their friends than in secrecy. Harry too judges people not on the basis of their credentials but on their openness of heart.



While differentiating community from 'communitas' in the former's hierarchal and rigid stature and the latter's flexible and changeable forms, Turner asserts: "The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchal system of politic-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'. The second which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of ritual elders" (Turner, *The Ritual* 96). The distinction between communities and 'communitas' is that of between a rigid structure which becomes immune to change and a flexible one which allows for different permutations and combinations. 'Communitas' sustaining on the transitional state of liminality, question the assumed notions of hierarchical structural superiority within rigidified social conventions which are challenged, subverted and brought to the scrutiny of public.

The connection between the polluting aspects of liminal periods and societies' abhorrence for whatever is hybrid is fundamental in understanding why certain genres of art, groups of people and periods remain neglected or seen as having dangerous potentials. The answer, according to Turner, lies in the fact that "from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of 'structure', all sustained manifestations of 'communitas' must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions and conditions" (Turner, *Process* 109). Elaine Quinn analyses YA heroes as potentially dangerous for society as they refuse to be assimilated into the pattered nature of societal expectation: "Pathologized as deviant, ascribed with endless maladies that capitalize on societal anxieties and intolerances, and diagnosed as irrational, dependent, and non-conforming, young adults are viewed as dangerous and unpredictable aberrations that must be cured of their reckless natures. In a word, they are transgressors, who blatantly resist their assignment to "normal" cultural boxes" (Quinn 50). The axis around which the Harry Potter novels revolve is antagonism between pure-bloods who consider themselves as the rightful heir of magical powers and mudbloods who are from muggle families possessing magical ability. Along with mudbloods are aligned half-bloods, one of whose parents has been a muggle. The mudbloods become a victim of oppression under the regime of Lord Voldemort who appoints



himself as the champion of the pure-bloods. Even the mention of mud-blood arouses strong emotions who are considered as thieves of magical power. This hatred of non-magical people stems from the fact of their being hybrid ones, neither here nor there, existing between muggle and magical world.

The lack of stringent configuration in *communitas* prompts derivation of 'spontaneous' and 'immediate' as its governing marks. Harry lives on the brink of moment and is not systematic. He doesn't love lessons much and is in love with Quidditch which hovers on immediacy of experience. His response to others is spontaneous, natural and instinctive.

In instant or spontaneous *Communitas* there is always an impending sense of catastrophe and disaster. There is no doubt that Harry lives on the brink of catastrophe. Each novel brings this sense of doom quite clearly and as we move towards the final part, this atmosphere of disaster gets only thicker. Harry is a scarred boy in the beginning and ultimately he comes to realize that 'one cannot live till the other dies.' The novels begin with a tragedy which colour the subsequent life of the hero.

The underlying linkage between property and structure of the society, where property and individual possessions are the visible forms of commitments and principles on which any society is based, adduces conception of folk theatres as *communitas*. Exploring this association between property and community, Turner observes: "Property and structure are undis severably interrelated, and the constitutions of persisting social units incorporate both dimensions as well as the core values that legitimize the existence and forms of both" (Turner, *The Ritual* 146). Any attempt to break away from the fabric of the society through *communitas* would ultimately pass through renunciation or escaping from the possessions. The impulse to move away from property, to quote Turner again, represents inhabiting "the fringes and interstices of the social structure of his time, and to keep them in permanently liminal stage" (Turner, *The Ritual* 145). Harry has to live with Dursleys in utter poverty. He sleeps in a cupboard and has to borrow clothes of his cousin Dudley. Even when he acquires the wealth of his parents, he is more ashamed to have it. His friendship with Weasleys, who are depicted as quite poor and living in a shabby house, gives him happiness which is not marred by their poor condition. He loves Burrow, the house of Weasleys, despite its poverty:



It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigsty, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several storeys high and so crooked it looked as though it was held up by magic. [...] Round the front door lay a jumble of wellington boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

'It's not much,' said Ron.

'It's brilliant,' said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive. (Rowling, Chamber of Secrets, 29).

If *communitas* seem to lack structure in the modern sense it doesn't mean that they are simply chaotic or bare. The interrelatedness of various components found in *communitas* is in itself a kind of form within which diverse components exist in dialectical relationship. This dialectic exists at the very heart of *communitas* which is essentially the unreductiveness of human person to a single faculty. Turner locates into *communitas* a revelation of the wholeness of our being in communication with the wholeness of others: "Communitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men. Structure, on the other hand, has cognitive quality" (Turner, *The Ritual*, 127). Harry Potter too believes in wholeness of communication. He does not value human beings only on the basis of their cognitive qualities, rather he finds emotional spectrum of human beings as of more consequence than his/her intellectual mapping. That is why in the beginning he rejects Draco and chooses Ron instead. He is brave not calculating which is amply revealed in his various escapades. His friendship with Luna and Hagrid despite their eccentricities attests the fact that for him it is the invaluable, eccentric, impenetrable human personality is more important than materialistic, selfish human beings.

Katrherine Proukou discusses the inherent strength of YA literature in its bringing forth an alternate reality, a reality which does not follow rigid conventionalities of adult world but which appeals to the power of imagination and demolishes the entrenched structuralities of human society as well as human mind, thus becoming a rites-de-passage in itself:

Perhaps the extraordinary success of the Harry Potter series and the recent growing interest and popularity of YA literature in general demonstrate the value of this disposition. For YA



literature presents the world of imagination as real not hallucinatory, feelings as reliable not deceitful, nature as essential not expendable, danger as challenging not demoralizing, enemies as teachers as well as adversaries, and life as a surprising process neither exactly fair nor completely capricious. Young Adult Literature, as a rite of its own, has its own prophetic role. (Proukou 68)

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