Between the Real and the Imagined: Portals in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series

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Abstract: Portals has been defined in The Cambridge Dictionary as "doorways or porches especially a grand or imposing one". Portals in fantasy genre are magical doorways that connect two locations, places that are conceptualised as different – the real and the imagined, or the factual and the counter-factual. There is no end to the places that fantasy can take us. This other world can be reached through certain portals which exist in the real /primary world unknown to the ordinary people who reside within it. Children who travel through the portals to the imagined far-away lands are in reality acting/ reacting subconsciously to the malaises of the real world. The children detect an underlying threat to their real existence and the journey to the fantasy is to counter the threat which will be apparent later on. It is in these strange magical realms and the dangers that they face to destroy the evil powers of a Dark Lord that they realise their abilities. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of seven books published well over a decade provide the perfect analogy for the study of permeable worlds – that of the real–muggle world and the imagined-wizarding world and the portals or gateways between these two places. Such liminal spaces between two worlds come under a totally different classification. They exist in limbo, so to speak, between the real and the imaginary world. Their entrance may be in the ordinary world like the brick in a London pub which opens into Diagon Alley, the one-stop shopping place where you get various magical goods like broomsticks and text books for young witches and wizards to dark evil artefacts. The barrier between platforms 9 and 10 in London station is another example. Such spaces which defy categorisation form a challenge for space theory.

Keywords: *portals, spatial theory, fantasy.*

It was William Shakespeare, the playwright supreme, who stated that "All the world's a stage" and set the ball rolling for the discussion of spaces - real, feigned, or imaginary. Space has had a timely re-emergence in literary and cultural studies in recent years. The spatial turn in literature began during the late 1960s with critics like Gaston Bachelard, Homi Bhabha, and Michel Foucault who argued that space is more important than time and geography is more important than history. Although the nineteenth century had been obsessed with history, Foucault says that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (1).

Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* argues that all writing can be regarded as a kind of cartography. If this is true, then through reading fiction and focussing on the fictional places in a narrative, we can understand the real places. Robert Tally a firm adherent of Geocriticism introduces the term 'literary cartography' and observes that literary texts are the ways by which authors (map makers) draw social spaces. In the literary cartography of the world the London depicted by Charles Dickens, or the Paris of Balzac is as 'real' or 'imaginary' as Minas Tirith of Gondor, the perpetually wintered Narnia, or Yoknapatawpha County. Andrzej Stasiuk says, "The domains of geography and of the imagination, so distant from each other, are more closely related to one another than is folly to wisdom. One reason for this is that to construct worlds, that noblest form of daydreaming, always supposes that one invest in space" (63). This is thus the era of pantopia or total spaces.

The theory on place / space has led to a burgeoning interest in the area of fantasy. J.R.R.Tolkien says that "Fantasy is the making or glimpsing of other worlds" (23). These fantasy worlds are purely imaginary but the author provides details like maps of landscape, addresses of beings who inhabit this world, their mode of travel, or their characteristic behaviour which serve to improve the authenticity of these worlds in the minds of the readers. Polytopy is space understood in its plurality. Polytopic view of space represents for the individual a multiplicity of potentialities- real and imaginary, or fact and fiction. In children's literature which takes recourse to the fantastic and the imaginary, the fictional 'real' and the fantasy land exists, to borrow Foucault's phrase, "side-by-side". This other world can be reached through certain portals which exist in the real /primary world unknown to the ordinary people who reside within it.

 Hence, at the intersection between these two models of representation, a new type of spatiality exists. Portals have been defined in The Cambridge Dictionary as "doorways or porches especially a grand or imposing one". Portals in fantasy genre are magical doorways that connect two locations, places that are conceptualised as different – the real and the imagined, or the factual and the counter-factual. There is no end to the places that fantasy can take us. Children who travel through the portals to the imagined far-away lands are in reality acting/ reacting subconsciously to the malaises of the real world. The children detect an underlying threat to their real existence and the journey to the fantasy is to counter the threat which will be apparent later on. This territorial dialectic manifests itself and operates as a rhythm chosen by the child-hero who is partially freed of the constraints imposed by his environment. It is in these strange magical realms and the dangers that they face to destroy the evil powers of a Dark Lord that they realise their abilities. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of seven books published well over a decade provide the perfect analogy for the study of permeable worlds – that of the real–muggle world and the imagined-wizarding world and the portals or gateways between these two places. Such liminal spaces between two worlds come under a totally different classification. They exist in *limbo,* so to speak, between the real and the imaginary, the third space.

The third space is as Michel Maffesoli says, "a place one creates in order to leave the place, breaking the links from which this one or that one takes its meaning; they must be in reality or in fantasy, denied, overwhelmed, transgressed" (73). Crossing the threshold of the primary or the real world, the children enter a magical realm, a world with endless opportunities and infinite

dangers where the child learns to encounter and overcome the evil both within and without. The act of stepping across the threshold is therefore by necessity an act of transgression. This transgression is centrifugal taking us away from the heart of the system.

At the threshold an area of paradoxical liminality expands, an area that is at the same time open to the world and masterable to the individual. Instead of representing erasure or *terra nullius* the in-between becomes a site of possibilities and activates the hidden potential of the child-hero. As Michel Serres says, "the in-between shelters the possible, the ghost of a third man". This third man operates via the intersection of points or the two words, "a median space". It is pure fusion and transforms the in-between into a "third space of utopia which can be extended to the world" (97). This intersection is outside the point of perception of an ordinary individual. Such spaces are secret and guarded against external intrusion. Here the individual deploys a supplemental truth protected from the eyes of the world and from its prescriptions. Plurality of inscriptions in space and the polyrhythm that springs from them could form the basis of a sociopoetic approach.

In such cases the primary world is based on the real world while the fantasy world that can be reached through the portal often has symbols and artefacts that can be identified in this world. The muggle and the wizarding world in the Harry Potter saga coexist with various portals in between. Some portals are timely like the Platform 9 ¾ at London station which open only to commute students between King's Cross, London and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. But the brick at the seemingly innocuous London pub opens into Diagon Alley for the magical folk at all times. The wizarding people travel from one part of their world to another using floo powder, brooms, and other magical contrivances like flying motorbike, portkeys, thestrals to more sophisticated means of travel like apparition.

Richard A. Spencer, a historian, in *Harry Potter and the Classical World* observes,

> The magical world of Harry Potter and Greco-Roman antiquity share at least three essential characteristics: the presumption of at least two realms of realities, the seen (which is knowable) and the unseen (which is both powerful and mysterious); a spectrum of varied beings who populate those worlds, and the blurring of distinctions between space and time. (181)

Little Whinging, where Potter lives with his aunt's family, belongs to the ordinary world and no magic can be used there by the wizards since it is prohibited by wizarding law. Those who transgress will be brought to book by the law givers within the magical realm. Rowling has made the place realistic by placing it in the London of the 1990s, in the mundanity of the suburbs, tedium of ordinary workdays, bullying boys in search of prey, and neighbourly window peeping. But right from the beginning of the first book in the Potter series it is given to understand that this ordinary world is only a prerequisite to the 'other world' which will intrude into it in a mysterious and a fantastical way. So the ordinary and the commonplace is only a preparation of what is to come. The extraordinary wizarding world is full of surprises to the novice young wizard and the muggle world pales, and appears lacklustre in comparison. Right from the outset, the muggles live in ignorance, unaware that their world and abilities represent only the merest fraction of what is possible.

But try as they might to keep the balance tilted in the favour of the ordinary, the 'normal', the Dursleys are unable to keep magic from intruding into their lives. The entire non-magical world together loses their boundedness against the uncanny. The magical world spills over onto the muggle world especially after the ascension of the Dark Lord and they are unable to maintain their International Statute of Secrecy which acts as a barrier preventing knowledge of their existence from being known to the muggle world. But the mixed lineages of half-blood witches and wizards prove that the two worlds comingle and the roots of both worlds are, in fact, one. By making the two worlds permeable and accessible Rowling makes the ordinary world permeate with magic, and the magical realm is shown as rooted in the everyday. The magical world is an accurate reflection of society. The boundaries blur as portals are crossed to and fro. In moving from Number 4 Privet Drive to Hogwarts School, Harry moves from a place of isolation and loneliness to a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Train stations are natural liminal points between a traveller's origination and destination. In the final book after Harry has been struck by the killing curse of Voldemort, he enters a space between life and death. He may if he chooses 'go back' or 'go on' according to Dumbledore. My contention is that Harry has transcended the real and the imagined world and accessed a *space* beyond human experience. As Harry prepares to depart he asks Dumbledore if their entire conversation has taken place "in the head". To this Dumbledore replies, "Of course it is happening inside your head, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (723) With this confounding answer Dumbledore obscures not only the material location of the place where they meet, but also raises the question of whether the space is physical or metaphysical. Comparing the moment of the heroic transcendence of Christ from crucifixion to resurrection, Joseph Campbell explains that, "The Paradox of two worlds in one…not only do we have here a masterly passage, back and forth, across the world threshold, but we observe a profounder, very much profounder, penetration of the depths" (197). Like Christ, Harry masters the movement between passages, crossing the thresholds of the worlds. The existence of multiple spaces is essential for the hero to move between places. Michel Serres observation of how a place is ever-shifting, always in oscillation, and can be understood only as "all places in every place and every place in all places" (190) is certainly a truism in this space age.

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