

# Distinct Stratum and Distorted Society : A Study on The Socio-Economic Stratification represented in J.K.Rowling's *The Harry Potter Series*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Harry Potter Series* written by J.K.Rowling marks a new milestone in the milieu of children's literature and young – adult fiction. The story that spans across seven books portrays the predicament of Harry Potter, a magically talented orphan wizard and his adventures in the wizarding world to defeat his arch-enemy Voldemort and to restore order and peace amidst the wizarding populace. Though the primary plot of the *The Harry Potter Series* revolves around the magical adventures of Harry Potter in the wizarding world, it equally consists of many insightful references to the real world scenarios also. Apart from showcasing a fantastic and magical plot, J.K. Rowling had also interwoven certain social, economical and cultural issues in *The Harry Potter Series*. One such effectual and important narrative initiated by *The Harry Potter Series* is, how stratification in a multi cultural society may initiate the prospects of pride, prejudice, exploitation and resultant affliction in a society. With characters representing both the upper and lower stratum of a social order, J.K.Rowling was able to give glimpses on the protracted conflict between the aristocratic class and the proletarian class in a stratified society. This paper, tries to analyze the socio-economic dichotomy of aristocracy and proletarianism represented in J.K.Rowling's *The Harry Potter Series*.

**Keywords:** Aristocrats, Proletarians, Elitism, Power, Exploitation.

Social Stratification is a universal process. Every society exhibits some hierarchy or unspoken order of status which is referred to as social stratification. The process of Stratification is a 'constant' one and it depends on 'variables' like class, wealth, race, power etc. These variables can diverge according to the nature and the needs of the particular society. In *The Harry Potter Series*, the wizarding society is structurally stratified based on variables like core values, blood status, personality traits, wealth, power and so forth. The whole plot of *The Harry Potter Series* is set in a separate wizarding world, which has its own nuances, laws and social stratum and an altogether alternate space to nurture and value the magical sensibilities of the wizardkind.

Social Stratification grades and places the individuals in a certain hierarchy, based on the assessment of various aspects. This stratum of a person determines the privileges and suffering in the society. Individuals may have their own share of talent, wisdom and expertise, which could surpass the labels of

stratums that they are bound by. But an initial and primal assessment and opinion is formed based upon the stratum that they belong to in a social structure. Though the societies and cultures across the globe portray an ideal classless and equal social order, all the well-known societies are stratified and classified in one way or the other.

The complexities and multiple layers of social stratum give rise to inequality and undeniable hierarchy in the social order. This hierarchy gives rise to bigotry and people in the lower stratum of the society are discriminated by the upper class elites. In the case of the wizarding world of Britain, as portrayed by Rowling in *The Harry Potter Series*, the Purebloods consider themselves as elites and hold the uppermost layer of the social stratum. With longstanding affiliation with magical knowledge and practice, they deem themselves to be elites in the social order, though the present wizarding milieu had evolved into a diverse community, open to all blood statuses.

The stratums that consider themselves as elites and of high order in the wizarding milieu, discriminates the other people and treat them as inferiors. This hierarchy derived from social stratification initiates the narrative of inferior-superior discrimination. According to the wizarding world, there is a recurrent superiority of the pureblood, though majority of the witches and wizards are Half-bloods in the contemporary Scenario. Ron Weasley remarks this aspect in *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* as: “Most wizards these days are half-bloods anyways” (Chamber of Secrets 122). Since the primitive wizarding community was made up only pureblood families with magical blood status, they still reckon that the magical knowledge is only meant for them. The superior instinct planted on them through hierarchy, still had a striking influence on their behavior despite the evolution of the society to a more open and secular perspective.

*The Harry Potter Series* also traces the existence of distinction with a same stratum also. This co-existence of two or more divisions within the same stratum as illustrated by Rowling in *The Harry Potter Series* initiates the account of the conflict and struggle between The Aristocrats and The Proletarians. This narrative of Aristocrats versus the Proletarian class emphasizes how the proletarian sect of the society is exploited implicitly and explicitly by the aristocrats who hold the elite status within the hierarchical stratum of the society.

The affluent Malfoys in *The Harry Potter Series* signify the Aristocratic class, whereas the comparatively poor Weasleys represent the predicament of the working proletarian class in a society. Though the proletarian Weasleys work hard for the betterment of the wizarding community, the rewards and privileges were enjoyed by the Aristocratic Malfoys than that of the Weasleys. The Weasleys are characterized in such a way that they represent the typical proletarian working class in the society. Arthur Weasley, the patriarch of the Weasley family, was employed in the Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, under The Ministry of Magic. Though Arthur works for the ministry it is very hard for them to make both ends meet. Moreover, the Weasley family is relatively huge with seven children. The Patriarch Arthur, being the only employed member at the early stages and the matriarch Molly being a stay at home mother, it is very hard for the Weasleys to manage even the education and expenses of all those seven Weasley kids.

With a huge family and only minimal income, The Weasleys suffered a great deal and it is vividly portrayed by Rowling in the first two books of *The Harry Potter Series*. As a result, they were mocked and looked down by the wealthy aristocrats of the wizarding world. In *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, Draco Malfoy mocks the Weasleys for their pathetic condition as: "My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford." (Philosopher's Stone 115-116)

Despite their proximity towards what is right than what is might, The Weasleys could not sufficiently manage their expenses. In *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, Harry explains how the Weasleys are almost in a bankrupt situation and not even being able to afford first hand books and robes for Ginny, the youngest Weasley kid. Harry understood the financial condition of the Weasleys when he happened to visit their savings vault at the Wizarding bank of Gringotts. There was nothing much left in The Weasley's vault and they almost emptied and clean swept the vault to spend for their children's education and expenses. "There was a very small pile of Silver Sickles inside and just one gold galleon. Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag". (Chamber of Secrets 60)

Lucius Malfoy in *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* even mocks at the sorry state of the proletarian Weasley household as: "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?" (Chamber of Secrets 65). From this attitude of Lucius Malfoy, it is evident that The Ministry of Magic is biased and does not award sufficient pay to the workers. But the aristocratic sects of the Pureblood race like The Malfoys, were using their affluence and money as a tool to draw things in their favor. When others relied upon magic and talent, The Malfoys clearly relied heavily on the monetary resource that they possess. The Ministry of Magic, the all governing wizard body was also highly influenced by the authority and affluence of the rich Aristocratic Purebloods.

The Ministry of Magic which had to be objective and equal in treating its people, was highly biased and very much favorable towards people who gave donations and endowments. This stands as an example to show how the aristocrats rely much on their prosperity, and how it could even create a striking impact on the whole society. The Aristocratic Malfoys used monetary affluence as a tool to achieve whatever they wished for, whereas on the other hand the proletarians like Weasleys could not be in any power even though they are loyal and truthful to the Ministry of Magic.

The Aristocrats like The Malfoys uses money directly and the power, authority and influence acquired through money to exploit the society. Though the Malfoys are aristocrats by status and claim themselves to be the elites, they were supporters of Lord Voldemort, the evil and dark wizard portrayed in *The Harry Potter Series*. They were Death eaters, who were a group of people who supported Lord Voldemort when he was in power. The exploitation of the Proletarian class was encouraged by the Ministry of magic, since they were behaving like a puppet in the hands of the affluent aristocrats. Though the Malfoys were more of a social threat since they belong to the side of Voldemort, they were sanctioned special privileges because of their affluence and elite status.

Nevertheless, both the Weasleys and the Malfoys all belonged to the pureblood sect of hierarchy, there is a great difference in their livelihood. The Malfoys are created as a representation of the ruling Aristocrats class who has all the power and financial affluence to influence even the governing body like the

Ministry of Magic. Whereas, on the other hand, the Weasleys were portrayed as poor and they typically represented the status of the exploited proletarian working class in the society. Though poor the Weasleys always stood for what is right and were always concerned about the welfare of the society on the whole. Whereas, the Malfoys were selfish and highly radical in their notions and they were constantly hiding behind the shield of their material affluence.

Moreover, the aristocratic elite attitude even affected the children in the family and they are engulfed in the pride even at a very young age, which is evident by the characterization of Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, even as a child held a hostile and bitter opinion on the proletarian sects of the society, particularly The Weasleys. Even during his juvenile years, he was intoxicated by the pride, self esteem of being an elite and aristocrat. In *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, Malfoy was very much conscious about his social interactions, as he was heavily influenced by the spirit and the attitude of aristocratic indifference seeded by his father Lucius during his formative years. This is evident when Draco warns Harry to be very much cautious regarding his relationships with people and suggests him to consort only with people of affluence and wealth. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with wrong sort." (Philosopher's Stone 116)

Draco Malfoy, had always considered himself as an aristocratic elite belonging to the higher stratum of the social hierarchy of the wizarding world, when compared to the other wizarding families. His advice to Harry, reflects how even from childhood some aristocrats train their children to differentiate people and treat others as inferior. The pride of aristocracy based on power and affluence is passed on from one generation to the other. It affects the perceptions of an individual in building human relationships and it heavily affects the social interaction.

Social interaction between people is very much important for maintaining peace and harmony in any society. This aristocratic attitude breaks the social order by influencing people and initiates the hostile attitude of distinguishing people as inferior and superior. Hence the stratification is more a threat to the society though it claims to nurture the individual talents that build the society. Though on one hand stratification claims to ensure the efficient functioning of society, it directly renders the confluence of power only in the hands of people who belong to the upper and the elite aristocratic stratum. The whole society hence becomes influenced by a handful of people with power and authority. The comparatively powerless and absolutely powerless sections of the people suffer inequality because of the confluence of power in the hands of people who use it only for the sake of their own benefit. If that is the case, a society could never move forward and could never guarantee a proper livelihood to its citizens. By presenting characters that represent the aristocratic and proletarian sects of a socio-economically stratified society, J.K.Rowling through her *The Harry Potter Series* vividly portrays how stratification could affect the harmony of the society.

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