

Orientalism and Gender: Stereotypes of Asian Girls in Harry Potter

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Abstract. The Harry Potter series features characters from diverse racial backgrounds, yet J.K. Rowling's portrayals reveal different attitudes toward them. This paper investigates how the portrayal of Cho Chang reflects stereotypes of Asian girls and how the theory of orientalism contributes to the stereotype's emergence. The name Cho Chang evokes an image of fragility and constant weeping girl, hinting at an underlying bias. In the narrative, her beauty—framed as an “Eastern charm”—often overshadows her notable Quidditch skills. Although she is portrayed as both academically and athletically talented, she hesitates to confront the Dark Arts. Collectively, these traits construct a character situated within the broader framework of orientalist ideology. Through close reading and textual analysis, this study finds that Cho Chang's depiction perpetuates the “fragile, exotic Asian girl” stereotype which reinforces cultural biases. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of racial representation in children's literature and highlight the importance of more nuanced portrayals of minority characters.

Keywords: Harry Potter, Asian stereotyping, gender study, Orientalism

1. Introduction

The Harry Potter series contains various characters from different races and cultural backgrounds. The main characters in Harry Potter are predominantly white, such as Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ron Weasley, depicted as white British characters. J.K. Rowling seems to accept whiteness as norm in relation to the issue of race [1]. A few non-white characters include Dean Thomas (black), the Patil girls (Indian), and Cho Chang, who is Asian. Interestingly, the non-white characters are in the non-important character group [1]. Although the story is set in a virtual wizarding world, there are many reflections of social concerns about the real world. One significant area of concern in Harry Potter is the portrayal of Asian women in the series. Stereotypes and subtle forms of discrimination can be found in Cho Chang's character. So, to discuss the stereotype of Asian girls in Harry Potter, Cho Chang is the central character of the analysis. To dive deeper into female Asian stereotypes, the framework of orientalism reveals that many stereotypes about Asians are not random but historically constructed to reinforce power imbalances.

2. The stereotypical representation of Asian girls under Orientalism

Orientalism has first been brought up by Edward W. Said, which is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [2]. His idea of Orientalism is not simply a judgment that the West is wrong. Instead, it carefully examines how the West, through books, art, and media, represents the “Orient” as strange, less important, and very different. Said explains that these representations are not neutral or harmless. They are part of a system of power that supports colonization, empire building, and political control. In this way, knowledge about the East is connected to power. Western views of the East help keep the West’s control over it. Orientalism is a way of speaking and thinking that creates and maintains stereotypes. These stereotypes make it seem natural or right for the West to have power over the people and lands of the East.

Stereotype, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is a standardized mental picture held in common by group members and represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment [3]. There are different understandings about this term. “Stereotyping is the process of constructing misleading representations of a minority racial group by defining members of the group by a small number of characteristics.” [1] In most Western’s eyes, Asian girls are orientally charming. In the literature, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, the stereotype of Asian women are academically superior and submissive. One of the main characters in the book is Waverly. She has shown significant talent in chess from a young age and has won many international awards. Waverly’s apparently Chinese proclivity for chess presciently anticipates, of course, the modern stereotype of the Asian math genius whose racial inheritance consists of a nearly superhuman capacity for the tedious labor of calculation and an analogously inhuman appetite for play [4]. However, her mother, Lindo Jong, forces her to play too much, so she quits playing to show her anger. This reflects that Asian parents desire their children to be on top of others, in other words, academically superior. The stereotype of Asian women as submissive is still evident in Rose Hsu Jordan’s remark, “Ted, you decide.” This paper will focus on three key stereotypes embodied by Cho Chang.

2.1. Bias from the setting of the character

An essential starting point for analyzing the character of Cho Chang is her name, which carries with it not only cultural significance but also more profound implications that may unintentionally reflect bias and prejudice. “Cho” does not exist in the Latinization program of Chinese characters in the People’s Republic of China. However, foreigners use many forms of pinyin: Chinese strokes, Latin letters, Slavic letters, mixed forms of several letters, shorthand, patterns, etc. Considering J.K. Rowling is not Chinese and is not an expert in Chinese language studies, it is acceptable to say that Cho Chang is a Chinese girl. However, this fact cannot deny that J.K Rowling did not put in as much effort as considering the source of the name, like other characters in *Harry Potter*. As a result, many readers are outraged over Rowling’s apparent slip-up, one saying, “I have pretty much lost respect towards JK Rowling as a person. I believe she should not have written just one Oriental character and write her poorly as she did” [3].

To prove that point, some background information will be shown about the author, J.K Rowling, who graduated from the University of Exeter. She majored in French and classical literature during her college studies. So, many of the characters' names, places, and spells have potential meanings in her books. For example, Hermione’s name comes from Hermes, a character from Greek mythology. In myth, Hermes functions as the emissary and messenger of the gods. Moreover, The Ancient Greek god Hermes was the patron god of merchants, thieves, and travelers. He is also the messenger

of the gods and the conductor of the dead to Hades [5]. This fits the setting in which Hermione is a helper and backup for the main character, Harry. So, it is evident that Hermes's talents and pearls of wisdom are also shown in Hermione. Despite the Greek mythology, the queen in *The Winter's Tale* by Shakespeare is also called Hermione. She had been wrongly accused of having an affair with King Leontes's friend Polixenes. This fits with the plot, where Ron is jealous of Harry when he is closer to Hermione than he is.

Another clear example of a thoughtful female character's name is Ginny Weasley. Her full name is Ginevra Molly Weasley. Ginevra is the name of King Arthur's wife, and King Arthur is considered the savior of Western civilization. This matches perfectly with the setting in that Harry Potter is the chosen one. So, it is clear that Harry and Ginny will be together in the end when they first meet at King's Cross Station in chapter 4 of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. This suggests that the breakup between Cho and Harry soon after their relationship is unsurprising.

In order to show the racism of J.K. Rowling towards Asian girls, it is pretty unfair only to consider these main characters because they tend to have more comprehensive background information. So, another name for a female character who is also considered a supporting part of the book is given here—Luna Lovegood, a girl described as mysterious, dreamy, and ethereal. “She had straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look.” [6]

This is the description of her physical appearance. Regardless of the context's expression, features from her name acts as a clue to her characteristics. Luna means the moon in Latin, which is often associated with intuition, mystery, solitude, and introspection. As a character with a unique personality, Luna often gives off an aura of mystery and a sense of being somewhat isolated. In the story, she is portrayed as someone who seems “strange” to the outside world, but in reality, she possesses profound wisdom and insight.

“Yes,” said Harry, as his scar gave another painful prickle, “and I’m sure Sirius is still alive, but I can’t see how we’re going to get there to help him.”

...

“Well, we’ll have to fly, won’t we?” said Luna in the closest thing to matter-of-fact voice Harry had ever heard her use [6].

Harry is in a tense situation in this scene because the pain in his scar tells him Sirius is in great danger. However, he is hopeless because he can not arrive there to save him due to reality. Astonishingly, Luna is the first to calm down and detach from the solution: flying to the rescue. Although she seems odd and dreamy in her appearance, she is really helpful in emergencies.

So, there is enough evidence to prove that J.K. Rowling has not put effort into considering the name of Cho Chang. Moreover, an even worse conclusion is that J.K. Rowling might be racist towards Chinese people. The name “Cho Chang” starts with the letter “ch,” which is the same beginning as “Ching-chong.” This is a derogatory term used by Westerners for Chinese people. Moreover, the pronunciations are similar as well.

2.2. Grace outshining the game

Apart from the naming difference, other stereotypes of Asian girls are evident when compared with the white characters. The comparison of Cho Chang and Ginny Weasley will clearly show that Cho's flying abilities are weakened. As they are both really pretty, Cho's beauty seems to outweigh her inner abilities. This depiction reflects broader stereotypes about Asian women, where their outlook attractiveness is often highlighted at the expense of their depth and personal skills. The stereotype of being beautiful and submissive is shown in this.

Many foreigners often perceive Asian women as possessing a unique “Eastern charm” or exotic beauty, a stereotype rooted in centuries of Western fascination with the “Orient.” In the Harry Potter series, the Asian character is portrayed differently in their act and appearance. The first description of Cho Chang appears in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.

Harry couldn’t help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captions, and he felt a slightly lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn’t think had anything to do with nerves [7].

From this quotation, we can see that Cho Chang’s character fits perfectly well with the stereotype of orientally beautiful. Cho’s first appearance has left an excellent impression on Harry’s heart. Furthermore, this hints at the beginning of Harry’s love life. Moreover, that is why the character of Cho Chang exists: to help Harry mature in romantic relationships. Ginny, Harry’s second girlfriend and wife, has had more relationships than Harry. So, it is essential to set a character for Harry to go through all the steps in a relationship, including the first kiss, dates, etc. So, Cho is like a guide for Harry in his relationship development.

Interestingly, there could be thousands of girls in Harry Potter, so why does J.K Rowling have to choose Cho Chang to make her Harry’s first crush? You can say that J.K Rowling believes Asian girls are orientally charming because she is the only person in Harry Potter who is Eastern Asian. However, let us look at the other descriptions of Cho Chang. “It is Cho Chang. She’s a fourth year, and she’s pretty good....” [7]

This is when Oliver Wood tells Harry that Cho is excellent at seeking the Golden Snitch. Nevertheless, look what she did in the match.

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was tailing him closely [7].

Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him [7].

Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho following him.... She decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself... [7].

I found this part weird after reading it. Why does an excellent seeker make up her decision to follow Harry’s trace when finding the Snitch? Furthermore, come to think of this, this fits perfectly well with the stereotype of Asian girls. From all these contexts, the submissive trait is obviously shown in Cho. An analysis of the orientally beautiful traits suggests that Cho embodies the ideal wife figure for a white man. Asian American women are often depicted in academic and mainstream discourses as introverted and submissive, limiting their subjectivity and diversity, reflecting the enduring influence of Orientalism [8]. Asian women are prized for their beauty and serve as a form of status symbol for their husbands, which is deeply ingrained in some Western perceptions. According to Dr. Mukkamala, the senior staff psychologist at the University of California, the participants of her survey of adult women who self-identified as Asian Americans said that Asians are expected to look cute and small [1]. Another reason the character Cho Chang exists is to set off Harry as an excellent seeker and convince the readers how heroic he is. Asian wives are in a weak position in society, and all their job to do is to obey their husbands and make them happy. This is the belief of many Westerners that they must rely on their husbands to live. Her role is to stand out the greatness of the main character, Harry. In comparison, Ginny, Harry’s second girlfriend, is an excellent chaser. Let us see how she performed in Quidditch and analyze her role in the book.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. Her imitations of Ron anxiously bobbing up and down in front of the goalposts as the Quaffle sped towards him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold, kept them all highly amused. Harry, laughing with the others, was glad to have an innocent

reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because he had not been keeping his eyes on the Snitch [9].

Ginny is described as a dynamic and lively person. Moreover, it shows how much Harry is attracted to her from being hit by the Bludger when he gets distracted by Ginny, and it also shows how attractive and popular Ginny is, so Harry might lose his chance if he does not act quickly.

This supports J.K. Rowling's belief in feminism, which means girls could be colorful individuals when they live on their own. Feminism encourages us to acknowledge how personal and political motivations shape our understanding, fostering self-awareness that challenges complacency in both thought and action [10]. Ginny is the representative character that J.K. Rowling shapes to support her belief in feminism. Ginny is an outgoing sports girl, as shown in this excerpt. Her Quidditch performance aligns with her strong-willed personality, reinforcing her as a capable and assertive female character. Confidence and justice are what she supports. She has turned from a shy girl who blushed when talking to Harry into a confident young woman. She plays an active role in the fight against Voldemort, especially as a member of Dumbledore's Army and later in the Battle of Hogwarts. Moreover, Ginny fights against death eaters with Harry and the others in the Department of Mystery and shares the glory of victory.

However, Cho has not made any contribution to the fight against Voldemort. To some extent, she also played a negative role because she let her friend Marietta Edgecombe join Dumbledore's Army, and her friend betrayed all the army members. What is worth is that Cho believes this is just a small mistake. She did not notice how important the DA meant to Harry. For Harry, DA is like a door to the real risky wizarding world. Furthermore, DA also has crucial meaning to all the student members because, due to The Ministry of Magic's distortion, DA is the only way for them to learn proper magic and fight against evil. However, Cho Chang considers this DA meeting an opportunity to meet her crush, Harry. She did not take this seriously. And that is part of the reason why Harry wants to break up with Cho. Her distorted values, like disloyalty, make her a girlfriend who can not be trusted.

2.3. Academically smart but fragile to stand up and fight

From the background information about Cho Chang, it said that she belongs to the House of Ravenclaw, which values wisdom, intelligence, creativity, and learning. This also fits the stereotype that Asian people are excellent in academic performance. Asian families tend to prioritize education over social activities. These intense study habits and high academic achievement could lead to emotional vulnerability due to a lack of communication with peers and friends and experience of life. So they are eager to find someone to support their social needs and are thankful and submissive to whoever has helped them. This contributes to the portrayal of her as fragile and dependent. Moreover, J.K. Rowling wants to express more through Luna's last name, "Lovegood." This is a compound word that adds love and good together. The name conveys an optimistic, idealistic vibe and symbolizes Luna and her family's Outlook on life—they are filled with love for the world and are open to embracing and accepting all things different. In contrast, Ginny Weasley's character again to compare with Cho's emotional fragility. Her character evolves into someone strong, self-sufficient, and ready to support Harry without losing her own agency. The stereotype of academically superior and submissive Asian girls is shown in this section.

Further research shows that the most frequent sentence used to describe Cho is "Cho is crying." In the fifth Harry Potter book, Cho cries in many situations. When Cho and Harry are alone in the Room of Requirement, she cries. "He didn't know what to do. She was simply standing there, crying silently." [6] When they are dating, she cries. "To his horror, he saw that her eyes were swimming

with tears again, just as they had been after the last D.A. meeting before Christmas.” [6] When she heard Harry had done an interview to tell the truth about the return of Voldemort, she cried. “I’m really, really sorry. That interview was so brave... it made me cry.” [6] Harry is sick of the crying Cho; he hopes that his girlfriend is a brave girl like Ginny. So, even in bed, he guessed Cho was still crying. “Or was she lying in bed, still crying about Cedric?” [6] Moreover, when they are about to break up, Harry suspects Cho will cry in the next second. “Don’t start crying again,” said Harry warningly.” [6]

These descriptions portray Cho as weak and, to some extent, unable to handle problems because her emotions hinder rational thinking. Although very pretty, she lacks the perseverance and courage to be Harry’s girlfriend. In other words, Harry deserves a braver girl like Ginny. Let us examine how Ginny’s characteristics are described to prove that point.

Hermione’s face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry’s gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment they understood each other perfectly... [9]

These quotations can be seen as merely a setup for Ginny’s strength, more prominently showcased in the seventh book when Harry sets off to hunt Horcruxes. “He chanced a glance at her. She was not tearful; that was one of the many wonderful things about Ginny; she was rarely weepy.” [11] Ginny’s bravery is shown through emotional resilience and perseverance, even when faced with overwhelming situations like being forced to break up with Harry in times of severe danger. She does not need to cry to show her vulnerability; her courage comes from her ability to push forward, take action, stay strong for others, and join the fight. For example, Ginny, Neville, and Luna reorganized Dumbledore’s Army after Harry had left Hogwarts. So, she has been doing whatever she can to save the wizard world. This is an entirely different character from Cho’s. What Cho has got is only a pretty face with no substance. She is not resilient and hardly any help in winning the final war. There have not been any descriptions of Cho joining the war. Even Ron’s ex-girlfriend Lavender Brown is mentioned as being attacked by the werewolf Fenrir Greyback. However, Cho, the ex-girlfriend of the main character, has not been mentioned as contributing to fighting against Voldemort. This has enhanced my belief that J.K Rowling stereotypes Asian girls and that they are like showpieces because they are beautiful but useless. The “mysterious” and “submissive” images of Asian American women are frequently exaggerated and consumed as racial/gendered performances, perpetuating colonial and Orientalist legacies [12]. The idea of Asian women being “mysterious” comes from old Orientalist ideas that see them as exotic, hard to understand, and very different from Western women. The label “submissive” is tied to common gender stereotypes that picture Asian women as quiet, obedient, and emotionally controlled. When these traits get exaggerated in literature works, movies, TV, and other media, they seemed turn to be the truth.

3. Conclusion

The image of the “quiet, dutiful daughter” or the “obedient wife” has been perpetuated in media and popular culture. J.K Rowling’s emphasis on Cho Chang’s beauty in Harry Potter has been used to highlight the stereotype of Asian women as possessing a unique “Eastern charm.” However, her portrayal as emotionally fragile—frequently seen crying—and her weakness to stand up and fight against the evil reinforces her depiction as submissive, obedient, and meek. Cho belongs to the House of Ravenclaw, which shows Asian women are often stereotyped as the “model minority,” meaning they are perceived as hardworking, academically successful, and obedient. In conclusion, Cho Chang’s character clearly reflects the feature of a beautiful, submissive, academically

successful girl. These portrayals aren't just harmless stereotypes; they support a way of thinking where the West sees itself as strong, smart, and in charge, while the East is seen as weak, mysterious, and needing to be managed. The character, Cho Chang, serves as a reminder of the persistent and limiting stereotypes that continue to shape the representation of Asian women in contemporary media.

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