
Hybrid¹ and (Post) Human Bodies in J.K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*

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Abstract: The charisma of J.K. Rowling is not going to die out despite the advent of new experimental techniques in the mode of storytelling. Her fantasy novels mirror the society we live in today. Genre fiction has been subject to a variety of en vogue critical approaches. Both the text and the cinematic adaptation of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* can be read in the light of poststructuralism and posthumanism. Firstly, I will summarize the two forms of storytelling. Secondly, I will examine how the nonhuman is conceptualized, then explore the relationship between Nick Scamander and his magical creatures. Lastly, I will adopt the aforementioned theoretical tools to examine how J. K. Rowling addresses the human/nonhuman binary and the metamorphosed/transformed body.

Keywords: posthumanism, hybrid, non-human, creatures

1. INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism sometimes also called transhumanism is the view that we ought to try to develop - in ways that are safe and ethical - technological means that will enable us to transcend our biological limitations. It is also understood as a critique of humanism, emphasizing a change in our understanding of the self and its relations to Nature. Nick Bostrom says posthumanism "derives directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment" (Wolfe xiii). William S. Haney understands posthumanism as "a human-technology symbiosis" (2).

The possibilities of posthumanism are explored not only in science fiction but also in fantasy. Fredric Jameson opines that fantasy is "a celebration of human creative power and freedom which becomes idealistic only by virtue of the omission of precisely those material and historical constraints" (66). He notes, "Magic, then, may be read not as some facile plot device but rather as a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunned human organism in the present" (66). In other words, magic is a revelation of human potential. Fantasy provides a new kind of posthuman: the metamorphosed body or the hybrid body. Like SF, it provides a radical reimagination of the human body. Marshall Brown marks modernity as, partly, "an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world" (qtd. in Moen xiv). The cinematic adaptations of fairy tales show all these "by highlighting the marvels of technology, the enchantments of consumer culture, the transformative potentials of social mobility and other apparently wondrous facets of modern life" (Moen xiv). So does the cinematic adaptation of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

2. THE TEXT AND THE CINEMATIC ADAPTATION

Besides the Harry Potter books, Rowling has books-*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *Quidditch Through the Ages*, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* to her credit which are set in the Harry Potter world. Moreover, one can get her regular updates on the wizarding world on Pottermore. It is through Pottermore that fans can sustain their desire for Harry's magical world. These books are not as popular as the Harry Potter books. These companion books function as a niche and are written by keeping the market in mind. Harry Potter series is regarded as an event in the history of publishing. Susan Gunelius notes, "This was a time when children were not spending their time reading. Instead, television and video games were the hobbies of choice for children." (13). The Harry Potter series brought children and adults back to reading. The publication of *Fantastic*

¹The term hybrid is used to refer to an entity that is a synthesis of human and non-human.

Beasts and Where to Find Them 2001 was preceded by the fame and success of the Harry Potter books. Rowling knows her readers well and their demands. The companion books and *Pottermore* are ways in which she sustains the desire of the fan. The text *Fantastic Book and Where to Find Them* destabilizes the distinction between reality and fiction. The book bears the name of Newt Scamander as its author. Newt Scamander's book is a non-fictional work and it is a prescribed text for the students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It encompasses several notes inside it supposedly handwritten by Harry, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger, and they detail their own experiences with some of the beasts described in the text. Here, Rowling takes up the persona of a fictional character— Newt Scamander— that does not exist at all. She plays with the readers and problematizes the notion of authorial autonomy. The book has its foreword written by Albus Dumbledore, who is another fictional character. The foreword, Newt's biography at the end, the illustrations of Harry and her friends are paratextual² elements. In "About the Author" section of the book, Rowling provides a fictional biography of Newt Scamander. Born in 1987, Scamander graduated from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He joined the Ministry of Magic in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. His profound knowledge of magical creatures³ is overtly reflected in the book where he gives a brief account of the wizarding world's understanding of "Beast", "Being" and "Spirit" and describes seventy-five species of creatures. The cinematic adaptation of the text that came out in the year 2016 deals with Newt Scamander's (played by Eddie Redmayne) trip to New York City which does not feature in the text at all. The movie adaptation revolves around Newt Scamander who arrives in New York with a case full of magical creatures. The creatures, though not all, that escape from the case one by one figure in the text. The book presents Scamander as an influential figure in the magical world and he occupies a privileged position in the magical world. When he is first mentioned in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone*, he is in his late seventies. He is a rather respected figure. In the movie, Newt Scamander takes on a different look. We see him as a young, adventurous, and risk-taking man. He is not the Scamander of the book who has comprehensive knowledge of magical creatures. The movie projects him as a guy who rescues magical creatures and takes care of them like a guardian. Rowling incorporates a new word i.e. "No-Maj" as an equivalent word for non-magical people in the film. The movie features several American witches and wizards. Rowling names the American school for witches and wizards as Ilvermorny. Queenie Goldstein (played by Alison Sudol) and Porpentina Goldstein (played by Katherine Waterston) are two characters from the movie who studied at Ilvermorny.

3. THE OTHERING OF THE NONHUMAN

Humanism asks us to think in terms of binaries. Oxford Dictionary defines beast as "an animal, especially a large or dangerous four-footed one" ("Beast"). The process of othering is linked to the western modernist project, which privileges the rational mind. Cartesian philosophy stresses the fact that our existence is determined by the thinking mind i.e., "cogito". In the words of Peter Barry:

...thus 'man' as the measure of all other things in the universe: white Western norms of dress, behaviour, architecture, intellectual outlook, and so on provided a firm centre against which all deviations, aberrations, variations could be detected and identified as 'Other' and marginal. (64)

Holy Batty writes that "Rowling's texts reveal an extremely complex social structure that is not so different from the problematic, hegemonic power structures of our muggle (human) world" (25). Newt Scamander adheres to "magizoology", the aim of which is to educate the children of the wizarding world about the various classifications of creatures, to "ensure that future generation of witches and wizards enjoy their strange beauty and powers" (Rowling xxxiii-xxxiv). In Scamander's Introduction, he explains that there were several attempts to define non-magical creatures throughout the history of the wizarding world. The first definition, proposed in the fourteenth century, was "any member of the magical community that walked on two legs would henceforth be granted the

²In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gerard Genette defines paratexts as certain number of verbal or other productions such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations.

³It refers to the creatures that exist in the Harry Potter world.

status of 'being', all others to remain 'beasts'" (Rowling xix-xx). This definition proved to be problematic for the wizarding community:

As wizards and witches attempted to consult the papers before them, sundry pixies⁴ and fairies whirled around their heads, giggling and jabbering. A dozen of trolls began to smash apart the chamber with their clubs, while hags glided about the place in search of children to eat. The Council Chief stood up to open the meeting, slipped on a pile of Porlock dung and ran cursing from the hall. (Rowling xx)

The definition of being was later changed and it referred to creatures "who could speak the human tongue" (Rowling xxi). Yet, the definition was still dubious as creatures like trolls and jarveys⁵ could speak a little, yet they could not control their wild behaviour. Moreover, ghosts were disgusted at the decision of the authority as they felt that the committee members excluded the importance of the dead in the magical world. It made centaurs protest against the authority as the very definition excluded merpeople⁶ from the being category as they could not converse in the human language. In 1811, the definition was changed to "any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws" (Rowling xxii). Beasts were classified as any creature that could not comprehend the laws of the magical world. Later, a third category was created, "Spirits", to include the "has-been" ghosts as they could not fit into the categories of Beast and Being. Hence, the status of being was attributed to centaurs, merpeople, vampires, and hags. Scamander is of the opinion that categorization was difficult in the wizarding world. Creatures such as centaurs and merpeople have switched between Being and Beast several times.⁷ The wizarding community's attempt to categorise the creatures is emblematic of the process of othering integral to the real world — how people are marginalized on the grounds of caste, class, gender, race sex, and sexuality.

Scamander's book on magical creatures allegedly appeared in the year 1927. In the book, Scamander describes seventy-five species. Niffler, Bowtruckle, Murtlap, Occamy, Demiguise, Erumpent, Graphorn, Mooncalf, are described in the text and they feature in the cinematic adaptation. In the movie, the magical community of the US of the 1920s does not allow the breeding of magical creatures. It considers the beasts responsible for creating havoc in the city. On asking about the purpose of carrying the creatures in his bag, Scamander tells Tina (played by Katherine Waterston) that he is writing a book on magical creatures. A bag represents motherly security (Flottmann 23). Two cases/bags feature in the movie. One belongs to Jacob Kowalski (played by Dan Fogler) who is a non-wizard, and the other belongs to Newt Scamander. While Graves' bag contains bakery eatables, Newt Scamander's suitcase houses a different world which is home to many creatures that are hybrids and non-hybrids. Newt's suitcase provides security to the magical creatures. The case functions as a leitmotif throughout the movie. The suitcase is always in a state of flux. Scamander maintains a friendly relationship with the magical creatures. He rescues, nurtures, and protects them. The text describes the places where one can find them. Nifflers "has a predilection for anything glittery" (Rowling 57). Scamander has a niffler that escapes twice from his suitcase. It causes mayhem in a bank in New York. He finds it in a jewelry shop when it is stealing jewellery. A female erumpent escapes from Scamander's suitcase. It is found in the Central Park Zoo near the hippopotamus enclosure. This female erumpent wants to mate with another animal in the zoo. With the help of erumpent musk (strong liquid that attracts females of the species) and by performing a mating dance, he attempts to coax it back into his case. Some of the creatures help him on many occasions. The bowtruckle is "a peaceable and intensely shy creature" (Rowling 9). The bowtruckle named Pickett has some attachment issues. It hides in the pockets of Scamander's coat. It frees Newt Scamander and Tina from the clutches of the wizards. Swooping Evil fights against the guards at the ministry.

⁴ It is electric blue in colour. It is a very mischievous figure that delights in tricks and practical jokes.

⁵ Rowling defines jarveys as resembling overgrown ferret.

⁶Merpeople live in water. They have the body of a human and the tail of a fish.

⁷The centaurs did not prefer to share 'being' status with hags and vampires. They declared that they would manage their own affairs separately from wizards.

President Picquery laments that the wizarding world is exposed due to the events that happen in the evening. Scamander devises a way to obliterate the entire city. He releases his magical creature Thunderbird Frank to distribute a concentrated potion in the rainfall over the city that obliterates all of New York City.

4. HYBRID AND POSTHUMAN BODIES

In the words of Donna Haraway:

By the late twentieth century in US scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached...Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the thin line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle. (152)

Posthumanism, in Haraway's sense, considers a breakdown between the human and the nonhuman. Rowling describes Acromantula as a monstrous eight-eyed spider as capable of human speech (Rowling 3). A centaur has "a human head, torso and arms joined to a horse' body which may be any of several colours" (11). The centaur can also speak in a human language. It can not only perform human activities but also overcome the biological constraints that are attributed to a human being. Trolls, in the words of Rowling, bear a humanoid appearance and walk upright (xix). The Sphinx, as we know, has a "human head on a lion's body" (77). Manticore, a highly dangerous beast, has "the head of a man, the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion" (54). Merpeople have a humanoid appearance. They can breathe underwater. These creatures defy the ontological difference between the human and the nonhuman and redefine the boundaries between species. They are more advanced and powerful as they have attained a posthumanist stage — they have overcome the biological constraints of human beings.

Elaine Graham states in *Representation of the Posthuman: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* that "this emergent array of hybrid creatures are arguably monstrous not so much in the horror they evoke but in their exposure of the redundancy and instability of the ontological hygiene of the human subject" (12). Rowling says, "Once a month, at the full moon, the otherwise sane and normal wizard or Muggle afflicted transforms into a murderous beast" (Rowling 83). The uncontrollable animality of werewolves is an unwelcome reminder that transformation leads to instability. It becomes apparent in the transformation of Lupin who cannot control his body and mind after he transforms into a werewolf. In the third book of the Harry Potter series, he attacks Harry and his friends. Lupin is neither werewolf nor human. He can fluctuate between two identities. The case with Credence (played by Ezra Miller) is similar. In the movie, Credence is the adopted son of Mary Lou Barebone (played by Samantha Morton). She is an anti-witch preacher and the fanatic leader of the New Salem Preservation Society or Second Salemers. Credence's biological mother was a witch. He is physically abused by her when he fails to live up to her expectations. She uses his belt to discipline his behaviour. On one instance, Tina assaults Mary with her magic in front of her followers and saves him from beating. Credence is an "obscurial". To avoid persecution, young wizards and witches try to suppress their magic by developing "obscurus". In the magical world, Obscurus is an unstable, uncontrollable Dark force that bursts out from the body of the host, attacks people and then vanishes. While most obscurials die before their tenth birthday, Credence lives into adulthood. An obscurus targets people who are the sources of their host's distress. When an obscurial reaches their emotional and mental breakdown, they can lose control completely and transforms into an obscurus. Credence loses control of his obscurus. It creates havoc in the city. It causes objects to levitate and break without physically being in contact with them. The disturbances are noted both in the No-Maj press (non-magic world) such as "New-York Clarion" and the wizarding press such as "The New York Ghost". The Second Salemers are insulted by Henry Shaw Senior and his son. Credence's obscurus manifests and attacks a fund-raising dinner at City Hall, killing the senator. Credence finds a wand in Modesty's bedroom. Angered, Mary takes it from him and breaks it up into two halves. As she prepares to beat him up, the belt falls from her hands. The obscurus kills both Mary Lou and Chastity. There is instability between the two selves. When Credence is in the human self, he does not harm anyone, not even the woman who asks him not to believe in wizards and witches and punishes him badly for not adhering to her rules and regulations. He is no less than a meek figure who succumbs to her. When he transforms into an obscurus, his body and mind undergo drastic changes.

Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of deterritorialization as defined in *Anti Oedipus* provides a useful framework to understand the experience of the characters that undergo magical transformations. Deterritorialization is defined as "the complex movement or process by which something escapes or departs from a given territory" (Patton 52). Lupin's and Credence's bodies and minds are deterritorialized after transformation. They conceive of themselves as another species. Their metamorphosis redefines and recontextualizes the human body. Nick Bostrom notes: "It [transhumanism] may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods" ("In Defense of Posthuman Dignity"). Though Fukuyama notes that transhumanism liberates the human race from its biological constraints, yet he opines that posthumanism would eliminate the essence of human beings ("Transhumanism"). Rowling's transhuman beings are free from biological hindrances, yet the state they acquire after transformation is unstable and dangerous. It destabilizes their earlier identity and makes them lose the essence of human beings.

5. CONCLUSION

Posthumanism asks us to reconsider what it means to be human. It does not adhere to liberal-humanism; instead, it views humans as embodied creatures with subjectivities that are fluid. All bodies are subject to change and termination. In my paper, I have tried to show how Rowling asks us to reconsider what it means to be human. She considers the classification of nonhumans as arbitrary. She unsettles the human/nonhuman binary by weaving in fantasy in her narrative. The hybrid and posthuman bodies interrogate the established domains of humanism and the human body. She may not agree with some theorists of posthumanism who always consider posthumanism as a liberating force. Though posthumanism is integral to her fantasy works, yet she is skeptical about the liberation promised by posthumanism.

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