

## **House-Elves in *Harry Potter*: Slaves by Themselves**

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**Abstract:** The research examines the behaviour of house-elves in the *Harry Potter* books. The objective is to understand and examine why the house-elves remain as slaves to wizards even though they have superior magical capabilities. Using the Marxian theory of false consciousness, the theory of Obedience according to the research experiment conducted by Milgram and Durkheim's Theory of Mechanical and Organic Solidarity, the research identifies behavioral elements in the House-elves that played a role in their oppression. This will throw light on social issues like dominance and violence of communities and its perpetuation through centuries and generations

**Keywords:** House-elves, False consciousness, *Harry Potter*, Slavery, Wizards.

The *Harry Potter* books by JK Rowling have carved a whole generation of magic loving fans worldwide since its first release in 1997. The book explores a world of magic that is enshrouded within Britain in the '90s. The ability to use magic and the presence of magical creatures is what separates the two worlds. JK Rowling, in her books, draws many parallels between the social and economic conditions of the real (muggle) world and the magical world, highlighting many social injustices. The social class hierarchy and slavery within the wizarding world is one such issue that the *Harry Potter* books illuminate.

The existence of slavery has been dated back to pre-historic times. The word 'slavery', immediately brings to mind a vivid picture of a cruel master punishing his slave, who is trembling with fear, helplessly yearning for his freedom. In *Harry Potter*, a house-elf is a magical being that is enslaved by old wealthy wizard families and works in their vast mansions. The house-elves in the *Harry Potter* world are considered inferior races by the wizards and are forced to slave away for a wizarding family their whole life.

The social hierarchy in the magical world is not the same as its counterpart. Unlike the human versus animal hierarchy of the muggle world, the wizarding world encompasses non-humanspecies that have intelligence similar to or beyond the wizards. House-elves like many other magical beings in the wizarding world – like Goblins and Centaurs – possess the ability to think, reason, introspect, and comprehend their emotions. This makes them different from the other magical creatures that are analogous to what the non-magic humans call ‘animals’.

Therefore, the wizarding society’s treatment of the house-elves cannot be misinterpreted as mere domestication of animals in lieu of slavery. Social dominance is substituted for willing enslavement, and the house-elves are acculturated into being pawns for their masters.

Every discourse of slavery starts with the imbalance of power. The dominant group overpowers the weaker section through physical, economical, political, or scientific strength, thus emerging as the ‘Master’. However, in the wizarding world, the ability to do magic determines one's social power. Thus, those with superior magical abilities dominate the others. What is surprising in the wizard-elf domination is that unlike the other discourses of slavery, here the oppressed is the ‘magically superior’ group in the equation. The magical superiority of the house-elves is explicitly stated throughout the novel series.

The study aims to examine the enslavement of the race that has superior magical powers, the role of house-elves in their enslavement, and the elves’ perception of freedom and happiness in the *Harry Potter* books, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This way the research attempts to understand the psychological effects of dominance and violence on those who are suppressed and exploited in society.

Various studies on *Harry Potter* talk about the slavery of the house-elves and their plight. Peter Dendle talks about deep human and animal relationships in the world of *Harry Potter*, which is very exploitative for the animals. Susan Howard looks at the series as a postcolonial narrative, while Kellner reads the series in a feminist light. But, there seems to be a gap in understanding the role of the elves in enslaving themselves into the system and its perpetuation for generations.

Using the Marxian theory of false consciousness, the theory of obedience, with reference to Milgram's experiment on Obedience and the theory of Mechanical and Organic Solidarity by Durkheim this research will focus on how the elves are enslaving themselves along with the wizards.

The house-elves in *Harry Potter* are in a state of false consciousness where they believe that their only goal in life is to serve their master. This slave identity is so deeply ingrained in them that they begin to take pride in their status.

False consciousness is a term originally used by Marxists to show how the bourgeoisie hides the true relations between the classes and societies that mislead the proletariats to believe in the oppressive system. This resonates with the ignorance of the house-elves about their state and the wizards misleading them about their status in society due to which they fail to recognize their worth and despise anyone who tries to liberate them from slavery.

The books clearly establish the position of the house-elves as the ‘inferior other’ starting from their appearance. Rowling introduces the elves in the second book, *The Chamber of Secrets* as a little creature with bat-like ears, huge bulging green eyes, and wearing something that seemed to be a ragged old pillowcase (Rowling, *The Chamber of Secrets* 12).

Harry, as someone who grew up in the muggle world, is not familiar with the magical creatures and the social hierarchy in his new world of magic. When Harry asked Dobby the house-elf to sit down, the elf’s reaction was pure horror. The elf was not used to being recognized as a being worth respect and attention.

The house-elves are considered as lower beings and were reduced to the status of slaves by the wizards. The house-elves are required to do anything their master orders them to do. Many old wealthy wizard families kept a house-elf to do their domestic chores. Even the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where Harry goes to school, has house-elves working in its kitchen. This is clear when the Nearly Headless Nick (the house of Gryffindor) replies to Hermione’s inquiry about house-elves in Hogwarts as, “Certainly, the largest number in any dwelling place in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred” (Rowling, *The Goblet of Fire* 161). She is very surprised to learn that there were house-elves in the school, as she had never seen one. Nearly Headless Nick tells her that, Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they? ... They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning ... I mean you are not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there. (Rowling, *The Goblet of Fire* 182)

In the books, Hogwarts stands as a symbol of social inclusiveness and harmony. Hence it is quite unexpected to see elves treated as slaves in the school. They work their entire life with nothing received in return for their services. They are not paid any money nor given any favor. Even though the elves are not mistreated by the school, the fact that they remain, slaves, highlights how insignificant their enslavement is within the magical community. The elves’ identity is nearly non-existent to the extent that being invisible to the other members of society is considered as the mark of their efficiency as a house-elf.

The house-elves are beings that possess magic beyond the knowledge of the wizards. Wizards are limited to their ability to perform magic using a wand. Though they can perform a few spells without the aid of a wand it is limited to a handful of skilled and powerful wizards. The house-elves on the other hand are not dependent on a wand to do magic.

Dobby stood up to his former master, Mr. Malfoy to save Harry’s life. In the events that happened after Harry tricked Mr Malfoy into freeing Dobby, he attempts to attack Harry:

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backwards...He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long threatening finger... Lucious Malfoy had no choice...and (Mr Malfoy) hurried out of sight. (Rowling, *The Chamber of Secrets* 357)

This establishes that Dobby was magically powerful that his master all along, but simply refused to stand up for his own freedom and rights.

To further demonstrate the house-elves magical superiority, the books mention that they can easily apparate and disapparate (the magical ability to disappear and reappear almost instantly at another place) within the grounds of Hogwarts while Wizards cannot, as Hogwarts is protected by various enchantments to ensure the students' safety (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 161). This restriction on apparating within the grounds is not just limited to students and other ordinary wizards. Even Dumbledore (the headmaster of Hogwarts) and Voldermort (most feared dark wizard) who are said to be among the greatest wizards ever lived did not have the power to break the protective charms of the school and apparate within the property. This indicates that the elves' magic is different and more powerful from the magic of the wizards. Their magical powers give them the agency to break away from the hegemony of the wizards. So why did the elves remain slaves for centuries?

The elves in *Harry Potter* are not happy with the idea of getting freedom. They prefer to remain faithful slaves to their masters than to be freed. According to the books, the only way the house-elves can get freedom is when their master presents them with clothes; which is something that hardly happens in the wizarding world. Nowhere in the series is it mentioned that the house-elves are bound to their masters by any form of magical contract. Therefore, it is solely the house-elves' own law that binds them to eternal slavery.

When Kreacher (the house-elf that served the upper-class family of the Black) said, "The house-elf's highest law is his master's bidding" (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 161) it indicated how much they have internalized their slavery and their position as a slave. They have forbidden themselves from using their own power of magic against their masters out of loyalty. Their obedience has transferred their community to mere puppets in their masters' hands.

The house-elves in *the Harry Potter* series have internalized the wizard's idea of inferiority and therefore adhere to the system. The elves are in a state of false consciousness, where they believe that their only purpose in life is to serve their master. They have internalized it so much that getting freedom was associated with dishonour and an insult.

The elf community is in 'love' with their work as slaves to do household chores. In the *Goblet of Fire* Dobby says, "Dobby likes freedom Miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better" (331). Dobby, even as a free elf is unable to think beyond identity as a house-elf. Even though he was free from his masters, the Malfoys, he again took a job as a house-elf in Hogwarts with the only difference being that he now wanted to be paid for his work. This is because more than his physical self, it was his mind that was enslaved by wizards. The elves are handicapping themselves by self-categorizing their community as the 'inferior other'. They are then self-fulfilling this idea that their circle of work identity is restricted to being a house help.

With the kind of magical qualities Dobby has, he is perfectly capable of doing almost any other magical job, but the idea of his destiny to be a house-elf has been so deeply ingrained in him that he is unable to think of doing anything else. The job of a house-elf does not require the use of special magic except for the basic magic that is required to dwell in the wizarding world. Dobby's idea of freedom is very different from the slaves we see in the muggle world.

Dobby's idea of freedom was restricted to his freedom to choose his new master and get paid for his work. He was ready to serve his 'new master' in Hogwarts in the best way possible. Even though this can also be attributed to their sincerity towards their job, the house-elves are going overboard with their submission to the wizards paving the way to complete servitude.

In one of Frederic Engel's letter to Franz Mehring dated 14 July 1893, he writes, "He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination ...he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought" (Engels). Here Engels is referring to the proletariat who believes that the situation he is in right now is the way things should be and accepts such ideologies without any thought. This lack of thought and complete surrender to such imposed ideologies is what is meant by 'false consciousness' in the paper. The house-elves here can be equated to the proletariat who are unable to question the Bourgeoisie and their dominance in the society, as they have very well ingrained this hierarchy.

In the *Goblet of Fire*, the house-elf Winky is ashamed of her freedom as she considers this to be a marker of her inability. "Winky is not getting paid... Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"(Rowling, The Goblet of Fire 331). This is what makes the slaves in Harry Potter different from the other slave narratives. The slave narrative revolves around the injustice of the institution and the yearning for freedom and free will. But, here the idea of being freed by their master is equated with an insult to their identity

and existence. This makes us think that here, it's not the wizards that have enslaved the elves, but it is an institution upheld by the oppressed with great fervor.

The elves are not the only human-like creatures in the wizarding world. But are the only ones to be enslaved by the wizards. The Goblins and Centaurs are aware of their magical powers. The centaurs especially consider themselves to be superior to the wizards with their ancient wisdom. While a Centaur and Goblin consider it a disgrace to serve the wizards, the house-elves seem to raise the pillars of house-elf slavery higher. Not only do they consider their freedom to be an insult, but they despise anyone who tries to free their minds from the clutches of the wizards.

Those who stand for the elves' liberation are viewed as evil and heartless individuals as opposed to the common idea of freedom giving happiness. When Hermione asks the elves in the Hogwarts kitchen to stand up for their rights, instead of being cheered as a hero she is thrown out of the kitchen. "The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she was mad and dangerous" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 468).

The house-elves in Hogwarts enjoy working every day of their life. Their masters' happiness is their satisfaction. But this satisfaction is the result of false consciousness about their freedom. No individual who is completely aware of his/her rights to live a free life will be happy being a slave. For some other elves like Kreacher, the servitude mentality is very strongly rooted in him that he is willing to offer his life for his master. Kreacher's life ambition is to be beheaded and hung on the walls of his mistress's house just like his ancestors (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 72).

They consider this to be an honour rather than an act of violence. Such violence against their community is viewed with reverence and respect by the house-elves. Engels again in his letter to Mehring in 1893 writes, "Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors" (Engels).

Here Kreacher is very rigidly abiding by the strong ideologies that he inherits from his ancestors. He is incapable of questioning this ideology. Even though he is aware of the status of his community as menial creatures, the problem lies in the fact he refuses to even try to uncover the cause and origin of this practice and break free.

In the book, *The Order of the Phoenix* Sirius Black threatens Kreacher with clothes as a form of punishment. Cloth, the symbol of liberation is seen as a threat by the elves. When Hermione suggests that Sirius set Kreacher free he says, "the shock would kill him" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 103). They like their state of misery and ill-treatment. They fail to realize



that their enslavement by the wizards is a direct result of the wizards' hegemony and not because of their inferiority.

Later, in the *Order of the Phoenix*, when Hermione started hiding clothes around the common room hoping to liberate unsuspecting house-elves, Dobby informs Harry that "none of the other house-elves in Hogwarts will clean the Gryffindor Tower, with all the socks and hats hidden everywhere" (342), as they consider it to be an act of insulting and not liberation.

The article "*Biopolitics, dominance and critical theory*" says, "According to the critical theory, people are dominated by a false consciousness created and perpetuated by capitalism in order to preserve the hegemony of those in power" (Meyer; Emerick 1). Therefore the elves are kept in their false consciousness so that the dominance of the wizards will never be questioned. A few people like Hermione want the elves to be freed and try various means to give them the freedom they deserve. But, instead of joining her and fighting for their freedom and their dignity, the elves chose to support the system.

This sort of behaviour is not new. Such behaviour is often seen in women who are treated inferior and have been oppressed by men and those stuck in the vicious cycle of the Caste System in India. Even though there is no need to stay in such an oppressive system, many choose to remain on their own accord because they believe that it's their destiny. Over the years, such oppression creates an idea of servitude that creates a self-fulfilled vicious cycle that goes on forever.

The idea that Kreacher's ancestors' heads were hung on the walls of his master's home suggests that their whole existence including their physical reproduction is controlled by their masters. All these do not seem to bother the elf community at all. This behaviour could be attributed to their ignorance but more than that, it should be looked at as internalizing the idea of being an inferior race.

It is not that the elves are not aware of their situation. They are aware of what is happening to them but are unable to respond to it due to their own beliefs that bind them. They believe that they are fulfilling their life's destiny, while in reality, the wizards are exploiting them. The elves can do as they wish and the wizards will be helpless if the whole elf community rebelled against them. Therefore, the wizards, keep the elves in false consciousness and ensure that the elves will forever be loyal to them.

The previously mentioned custom in the Black family, to which Kreacher belongs, of beheading the house elves who were too aged to even carry a plate, and displaying it on the walls as a decorative piece reinforces the idea that an elf is only worth living if he is physically able to serve his master. By making it look like an honour to be serving the family the Blacks

assured the loyalty of their house-elves thereby ensuring no upheaval by the elves. This form of complete servitude induced by a false consciousness produces absolute obedience in the house-elves. According to Milgram, "...obedience is a deeply ingrained behavioural tendency, indeed a potent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy and moral conduct" (169). Therefore, in the process of blind obedience, the elves are losing their morale and have nosympathy for anyone or anything; even themselves. An elf has to obey everything his master orders him to do, even if he does not want to.

At the beginning of the sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, after Sirius's death, Kreacher is passed on to Harry as per Sirius's will. But Kreacher does not like it and constantly rebels; however, he is forced to serve Harry against his own will because he 'belongs' to Harry. Such blind obedience can be spotted in every house-elves in the books. On another occasion, Harry sends Kreacher and Dobby to spy on Draco Malfoy. Even though Kreacher does not want to do it, he is forced to obey him. During the reign of Lord Voldemort, Regulus, Kreacher's beloved master orders him to go with Voldemort and he simply obeys. He uses Kreacher to test the security of his Horcrux (usually an object in which a wizard hides a part of his soul through dark magic). He makes Kreacher drink a very unpleasant and painful potion, which induces an intense feeling of thirst. After finding out that his traps and safety measures are successful he leaves Kreacher behind. Kreacher drags himself to the water body next to him to drink water, which is filled with inferi. The Inferi are dead bodies who are enchanted to do things for a wizard through dark magic. Even while he is drowning in the inferi the only thing in his mind is not his safety but his master's command to return to him. Kreacher returns to Regulus only because he orders him to come back after his task. If Regulus had not given such an order the elf would have simply died in the inferi. "Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came home..." (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 161). As mentioned earlier house-elves possess magic unknown to wizards and therefore Kreacher was able to apparate in the cave and save himself from the inferi, whereas a wizard would not have been able to do so. Later Regulus orders Kreacher to take him to that same cave and escape if anything bad happens and orders not to tell anyone about it. This time Regulus drank the potion and drowned in the inferi. But since his master's order was to leave him behind and go home safely, the elf had to obey. Kreacher could have easily gotten hold of his master and apparated home safely, ensuring his master's safe return. Nevertheless, the elf did not use his rationality to perform such an act. Even if it is for the good, he could not disobey his master and did not take a stand of his own. This kind of obedience to authority is found in Milgram's study of obedience where in an experimental set up he studied the extent of obedience in normal American citizens in the presence of an authority. The result was that when ordered by an authoritative figure, people are willing to commit acts that are against their morality and will not have done otherwise. In the experiment, 65% of the participants administered severe shocks to people when ordered by the experimenter. The same theory can be applied here as



well. Kreacher wants to save his master, but his orders to go home safely prevents him from doing what is right,

And he ordered- Kreacher to leave- without him. And he told Kreacher- to go home- and never to tell my mistress- what he had done ... And watched..as Master Regulus... was dragged beneath the water... (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 162)

Helplessly, Kreacher has to watch his master drown. If there is nothing magical binding the elf to his master's orders, then what binds the elves to blind obedience to their own ideology. Kreacher in this situation is so blinded by obedience and his loyalty towards his master that he loses his power of judgment and rational thinking. Besides, Milgram's experiment shows how ordinary people are willing to go to any extent to hurt others just to avoid disobedience; Kreacher is hurting himself willingly at Voldemort's command. Instead of inflicting pain on another human being like studied in the experiment, here, the question is of self-destruction due to obedience.

The house-elves are living in a false consciousness about their servitude towards the wizards. They fail to realise that if they had the will, they can defy their masters and get away with it, especially if it was for saving his master's life. Since Regulus had ordered him not to tell anyone, Kreacher could not tell anyone the truth about his master's disappearance. He is forced to tell Harry the truth now only because Kreacher is ordered by his new master to do so.

In the case of Dobby, even though Dobby claims to be a free elf, he still finds it hard to talk harshly of his old masters or disobey what his new master says. In *The Deathly Hallows*, Dobby coming to rescue Harry from the Malfoy's house is, again, on the orders of Dumbledore. The house-elf obeys the command without any delay. Even though he knows it is dangerous and will bring back unpleasant memories if he were to meet the Malfoys again, he still goes. He could have chosen not to go, as he is a free elf now. And this finally leads to his death when Bellatrix (Voldemort's ally) stabs him with a knife. Even though this act can also be attributed to his love for Harry, his love for Harry is so much so that he is ready to do anything that Harry asks him to do and is even willing to give up his life for him. Here, Harry is given the status of an unofficial master. Even if the elf feels that his or her master is evil or devoted to dark magic, they still serve them with all respect. According to Milgram, "The subjects do not derive satisfaction from inflicting pain, but they often like the feeling they get from pleasing the experimenter" (178). Dobby knows that his previous owners are pure evil but he cannot or to be more precise 'will not', do anything but obey them. Even though he does not like what he was told to do, nevertheless he is satisfied that he pleased his master.

Even though the majority of the elves are complacent about their situation, Dobby does defy his masters many times to warn Harry of some looming danger. He believes that a house-

elf should be set free at one point in time. He wishes to be freed and live a life of his own as he is not happy with his then masters the Malfoys. However, he does not want to revolutionize it. When Hermione tries to project Dobby as an example to others he is scared he says “Miss will please keep Dobby out of this” (Rowling, *The Goblet of fire* 468). Even though he wants to be free, he still wants to fit in society and does not want to be ostracised. Durkheim in his theory of mechanical solidarity talks about how in primitive societies there existed mechanical solidarity which was derived from kinship ties or through similar work and lifestyle. Everyone in that society moreover did the same job. Likewise, the elves are all domestic workers and nothing else. They feel a kind of closeness through mechanical solidarity. Therefore, even though Dobby achieves his freedom he does not want many others to follow his lead and be ostracised for it. Even though he is a deviant, he remains within the boundaries of the system. He always wants to fit in. This is exactly why all the other elves are also unwilling to be freed. They do not want to do anything or go anywhere that is unfamiliar. They are happy being comfortable where they are and do not wish to move from this comfort zone. Revolting against the system also means moving away from one's comfort zone. Dobby's idea of freedom was never to be free of his social identity as a slave but to have a kind master that did not mistreat him.

In the *Harry Potter* series, the house-elves themselves play a major role in their enslavement. The liberation of the house-elves is never possible as long as they are apathetic towards the exploitations they face. The elves in the series are not concerned about their condition and rather take pride in squandering their lives serving their masters. They are held in a state of false consciousness where they believe that they are inferior beings and they must remain a slave. This also gives the wizards the freedom to justify their cruel and inhuman behavior towards the elf community. They claim that their acts are well justified as the elves are happy being enslaved and so they are doing a favour by enslaving them. The elves should break out of the false consciousness they are in and demand their freedom to be free. They fail to realise that the wizards are degrading their community by making them slave workers. The enslavement is not just within the houses but also in the mind. It is the minds of the house-elves that are enslaved and not their body. Their minds are chained by the ideas induced by the wizards and are unable to think any further. Even though it is normal to like to do a particular job, it is strange that they are also okay with being enslaved and thrashed about. Dobby is the only elf who wants freedom but his idea of freedom is limited to being paid and being called a free elf. He too does not want to do anything that angers his master or defy him in any sense, not because he is afraid of being fired but fearing not being a loyal servant. He does not want to go against the system and ask for a revolution. As long as the elves cherish the idea of being a slave, their condition cannot be altered. They are the masters of their enslavement.

Years of dominance and violence in certain communities like the elves create a sense of psychological inferiority in them. Gradually this idea of oppression gets deeply ingrained in them that it breaks their will and colonises their mind. This changes their ability to break free of the system and they start to accept their fate and associate their oppression with great value. Thus, creating a self sustaining system of oppression that would be perpetuated by the oppressed themselves.

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