

Family relationships, friendships, culture and identity in Okechukwu Nzelu's novel *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* and how their coming of age experience is affected?

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Word Count: 2020

Key Words: family, friendship, culture, neglect, Coming of age

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to explore how Harry Potter's and Nnenna Maloney's coming of age experiences are affected by their family relationships, friendships and culture. The article examines the effect positive and negative family relationships have on Harry's and Nnenna's coming of age experiences. I consider how a change in Harry's and Nnenna's perception alters their family relationships and how this affects them as individuals. In addition to this, the article considers the friendships Harry and Nnenna make and examines their effects. The article also examines how culture affects their coming of age experience and whether there are any similarities between their struggles for social identity.

In this article, I will be discussing *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* by Okechukwu Nzelu and the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling. I will explore how Harry's and Nnenna's coming of age experiences are affected by family relationships, friendships and culture. I will examine how Harry's and Nnenna's family relationships positively and negatively affect their experiences, while also considering how a change in these relationships can alter their perception and transform them as individuals. Both Nnenna and Harry embark on new stages throughout their novels, and I will be considering the friendships that develop along the way

and whether these friendships alter their experience. In conjunction with this, I will be looking at how culture affects Nnenna's and Harry's experiences and discuss similarities between the characters' struggles with social identity.

The *Harry Potter* series is set in Britain between the years 1991 and 1998 and follows Harry throughout his time at Privet Drive and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, with his friends as they face dark wizards and attempt to stop evil plans. Harry is shown to have a strained relationship with his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon and his cousin Dudley from the first book. While Petunia and Vernon were compassionate and attentive to their son, Harry received cruel treatment and is considered non-existent until they have a use for him. Necessarily the Dursley's neglected Harry as he is considered 'small and skinny for his age,'¹ and wears 'sellotaped glasses'² and hand-me-down clothes Dudley no longer cares for, as they rarely spend money on him. Not only this, but Harry was also forced to live in the cupboard under the stairs for most of his childhood and was expected to be seen and not heard unless spoken to.

On the other hand, the first book also sets up the strong relationship Harry will develop with the Weasley's and specifically, Molly Weasley. As Harry ages, Mrs Weasley becomes a mother figure to Harry as from their first meeting she greets with kindness, understanding and love. To add to this, Molly even presents Harry with 'thick hand-knitted sweater...and a large box of homemade fudge'³ when she hears Harry is unlikely to receive Christmas presents from his family. The quote 'That's really nice of her'⁴ shows that Harry appreciated the effort Mrs Weasley took to provide him with Christmas presents. Harry shows genuine happiness to receive thoughtful gifts as he lets Ron keep the present receives from his Aunt and Uncle, which was a fifty-pence piece. As the series continues, we find Harry's relationship strengthening with the Weasley's to the extent where he spends most of the school holidays at their family home, The Burrow, instead of in London with the Dursleys.

During *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* Harry moves into Dudley's old bedroom as he has outgrown the cupboard under the stairs; however, the Dursley's cruel treatment continues to be present in Harry's teenage years. Despite this, we also see Harry becoming more confrontational with the Dursley's throughout the series and he becomes increasingly rebellious. When Vernon's sister insults Harry and his parents, during her visit to Privet Drive, Harry unknowingly uses his magic to blow her up, causing her to float in the sky. Furthermore, when Vernon damns Harry brings her back, he refuses before running away from Privet Drive. In addition to this, during *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry holds his wand under Dudley's neck out of anger after being taunted by him and his friends. The confrontation leads to Dudley's attitude changing as he not only shows signs of fear but also seems to realise his friends and himself have pushed Harry too far. However, shortly after, Harry and Dudley find themselves in the middle of a Death Eater attack, and this is where we see a change in their relationship, which changes Dudley's perception of Harry. Despite the previous altercation and a childhood full of Dudley's cruel treatment and

¹J. K. Rowling, (2014). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, p.32.

² J. K. Rowling, (2014). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, pp. 25-26.

³ J. K. Rowling, (2014). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 215.

⁴ J. K. Rowling, (2014). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 215.

taunting behaviour, Harry puts himself into a precarious position to protect his cousin from his invisible attackers.

A change in a person's perception can have positive and negative effects on those surrounding them and on themselves. While Dudley's altered perception positively changes his attitude towards Harry, it is argued that Nnenna's altered perception of her mother harms herself and their relationship. *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* is set in modern-day Britain and follows seventeen-year-old Nnenna who wishes to connect to her Igbo-Nigerian culture. Nnenna and her mother, Joanie, had a close relationship since she was a child; however, tensions begin to rise after Joanie dismisses the idea of Nnenna studying at university in France. Nnenna's confusion and hurt lead to a confrontation while at a restaurant, which marks the change in their relationship. Furthermore, as Nnenna begins to think about life in France, she also begins to think about her identity and her father's, but as Joanie refuses to talk about him, the pair find their relationship beginning to strain.

Both Nnenna and Joanie exchanged a lot of hurtful words during the tension between travelling to Paris and about her father. However, in the end, Joanie knew she needed to tell her daughter the truth. The change in their relationship taught Nnenna things about her mother that she did not know, and it also taught Joanie about the strength of her daughter and that her fears were allowing her to create a divide between Nnenna and herself. Similarly, Harry and Nnenna both embark on new stages of their lives. As Nnenna travels to France to study at Sorbonne University, Harry begins on a new life after the defeat of Lord Voldemort. However, the friendships they made along the way stay with them as they move on with their lives. Harry marries his friend, Ginny Weasley and stays in regular contact with his childhood friends Ron and Hermione. Furthermore, the quote 'Maybe. Take care Big D' suggests that as time passes Harry may reconcile with his biological family, and while he would not forgive or forget how they treated him throughout his time at Privet Drive, he would be able to move on.

Also, like Harry, we see Nnenna reconciling with her mother after embarking on a new stage of her life. While she was studying in France, Nnenna begins to explore her Igbo-Nigerian culture and begins to accept her biracial heritage. Furthermore, Nnenna expresses, she is unsure how she feels about the things she has learnt about her mother, the quote 'one day they would forgive each other'⁵ suggests that with time Nnenna and Joanie will once again share a close relationship as they once did. Evidence of this is indicated in the ending of *The Joys of Nnenna Maloney* as the readers find Joanie often visits Nnenna in France and Nnenna partakes in a weekly phone call with her mother. To add to this, Nnenna also sends letters to Joanie, and like Harry, she keeps in regular contact with her best friend, Stephanie; furthermore, Nnenna also keeps in touch with Johnathan, trading recipes and promising to visit.

It is also essential to note that Nnenna and Harry come from two different cultures, one where the land is full of magic and magical creatures, and the other from the mundane world. However, it can be argued that Harry and Nnenna share a similarity between their struggle

⁵ Okechuckwu Nzelu (2019). *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, Great Britain: Dialogue Books.

with social identity. Firstly, throughout the series, Harry struggles with his social status in the muggle world and the Wizarding World as he feels he does not fit in with either of the societies social norms. Harry's reaction to the cruel names Vernon and Petunia called him throughout his time at Privet Drive, such as 'freak'⁶ suggests that above all else, Harry wished to be accepted within his muggle community just as much as he wanted to feel he belonged in his wizarding world. Similarly, the quote 'maybe that retail assistant is only having a bad day.... maybe that security guard follows lots of people around the shop,'⁷ suggests not only did Nnenna feel like an imposture in her community she felt wrongfully discriminated against. Furthermore, the quote 'nobody at that school is anything like me, they haven't got a clue?'⁸ supports the idea that Nnenna felt isolated and misunderstood, while also feeling she did not fully belong there. On the other hand, Nnenna also felt like an imposture in the weekend Igbo language lessons as her lack of understanding and exposure to the Nigerian culture made her doubt her abilities and lower her confidence and self-esteem.

Both characters journeyed through their experiences and learnt that for them to feel that they belonged in the world that surrounded them, they needed to accept themselves for who they were. For Harry, it meant accepting that his tragic start to life and the trauma of his childhood did not define him; instead, it was the choices, actions and the lives he touched that counted. Throughout the series, Harry learnt that his difficult childhood made him more capable than he previously thought and gave him the determination and motivation to prove he was more than what his family and surrounding peers believed him to be.

While for Nnenna, it meant accepting her biracialism and learning that she could find herself without the help of her father. Throughout the novel, Nnenna learnt that her secrets break relationships and that honesty created them, allowing her to rebuild bridges and strengthen her connections with the people around her. By surrounding herself with the Igbo-Nigerian culture and being open to new experiences, Nnenna allows herself to move past her anxieties. Furthermore, Nnenna also surrounds herself with positive people and chooses to see a counsellor which allows her to express her anxieties and move forward with her life.

To conclude, both novels follow young adults on the brink of adulthood and this article has explored how their experiences are affected by family relationships, friendships and culture. We have discussed the effect Nnenna's, and Harry's family relationships had on their coming of age experience while considering how their altered perceptions can change the relationships they share with others. In addition to this, we have also discussed how culture affects Nnenna's and Harry's social identity and the similarities between their struggle with social identity.

Bibliography

⁶ J. K. Rowling, (2014). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 57

⁷ Okechuckwu Nzelu (2019). *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, Great Britain: Dialogue Books, Chapter 2, p 42.

⁸ Okechuckwu Nzelu (2019). *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, Great Britain: Dialogue Books, Chapter 19, p 265.

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