
**From Passivity to Assertion: A Comparative Discourse of Intellectual Agency
in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and J.K. Rowling's *Hermione Granger*****Rapaka Sushmitha**

Research Scholar, Government City College, Hyderabad

Dr. B. Krishna Chandra Keerthi

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government City College, Hyderabad.

Abstract

Contemporary children's literature increasingly portrays young protagonists who move from passivity to assertion in response to oppressive familial, social, and institutional structures. This article offers a comparative study of Matilda Wormwood in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988) and Hermione Granger in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007), focusing on how intellectual agency enables resistance and empowerment. Both characters are initially situated within environments that silence and marginalize them—Matilda through parental neglect and authoritarian schooling, and Hermione through social prejudice and rigid institutional hierarchies within the wizarding world. Their early passivation is characterized by obedience, emotional restraint, and the internalization of disciplinary norms.

The study argues that knowledge, rather than physical force, functions as the primary mechanism of self-assertion in both narratives. Matilda's exceptional intelligence, symbolically manifested through telekinesis, facilitates her confrontation with Miss Trunchbull's tyrannical authority, transforming silent endurance into decisive rebellion. Hermione's assertion develops more gradually through ethical reasoning, political awareness, and sustained resistance to unjust institutional practices, particularly those of the Ministry of Magic. While Matilda's rebellion is swift and symbolic, Hermione's is ideological and prolonged, reflecting differing narrative strategies of empowerment. By privileging intelligence, moral clarity, and critical thinking, both texts subvert traditional power hierarchies and reimagine childhood agency as an active and transformative force.

Keywords: Passivity, assertion, intellectual agency, institutional power, childhood empowerment

Introduction

Children's literature has undergone a remarkable refinement in its representation of childhood, moving away from depictions of children as passive recipients of adult authority toward portrayals that emphasize agency, resistance, and ethical consciousness. Scholars such as Perry Nodelman argue that modern children's texts increasingly expose the power structures that govern childhood and allow young protagonists to challenge them through

critical awareness (78). This shift reflects a broader cultural reassessment of childhood as a space of potential agency rather than helpless dependence.

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series exemplify this narrative evolution. Both texts feature child protagonists who begin their journeys in conditions of silencing and marginalization yet gradually assert themselves through intellect and moral reasoning. Matilda Wormwood is neglected by her parents and subjected to extreme authoritarian control at Crunchem Hall, while Hermione Granger navigates social exclusion, blood-based prejudice, and institutional rigidity within the wizarding world. Despite their differing narrative contexts, both characters demonstrate that knowledge can function as a powerful means of resistance.

This article examines how Dahl and Rowling construct the movement from passivity to assertion through intellectual agency. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and contemporary children's literature criticism, the study argues that both authors reimagine empowerment as ethical, knowledge-driven resistance rather than physical dominance. Through a comparative analysis of Matilda Wormwood and Hermione Granger, the paper highlights how modern children's literature positions knowledge as a transformative force capable of challenging oppressive systems.

Aims of the Study

1. To examine the transition from passivity to assertion in *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series through the lens of intellectual agency.
2. To analyze how knowledge and ethical reasoning function as instruments of resistance against oppressive familial, social, and institutional structures in children's literature.
3. To explore how Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling reimagine childhood agency by privileging intellect over physical power or adult authority.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the mechanisms of passivation and disciplinary control operating in the lives of Matilda Wormwood and Hermione Granger.
2. To compare the modes of intellectual assertion employed by the two protagonists within their respective narrative and institutional contexts.
3. To examine the role of education, literacy, and critical thinking in facilitating resistance and empowerment in both texts.
4. To apply theoretical perspectives from Foucault, Freire, and children's literature criticism to interpret power, discipline, and agency.
5. To demonstrate how contemporary children's literature constructs ethical, knowledge-based resistance as a transformative force.

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, comparative literary analysis** to examine the movement from passivity to assertion through intellectual agency in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). The research is grounded in **textual analysis**, focusing on close reading of selected episodes, character arcs, and narrative strategies that foreground knowledge, ethics, and resistance.

Primary texts include *Matilda* and selected volumes from the *Harry Potter* series, particularly *The Philosopher's Stone*, *The Chamber of Secrets*, *The Goblet of Fire*, and *The Order of the Phoenix*, as these texts most explicitly depict institutional authority, disciplinary practices, and ethical resistance. Key scenes involving educational spaces, disciplinary figures, and moments of character assertion are analyzed to trace the protagonists' transformation from silence to agency.

The study employs an **interdisciplinary theoretical framework**, drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to examine institutional control, Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy to interpret knowledge as emancipatory practice, and contemporary children's literature criticism to contextualize evolving representations of childhood agency. These frameworks guide the interpretation of how power operates within families, schools, and governing institutions, and how intellectual engagement enables resistance.

A **comparative approach** is used to identify convergences and divergences in the modes of assertion represented by Matilda Wormwood and Hermione Granger. While Matilda's resistance is analyzed as symbolic and immediate, Hermione's is examined as gradual, ideological, and politically sustained. This comparison highlights differing narrative strategies while reinforcing the shared emphasis on knowledge-based empowerment.

Secondary sources, including scholarly works on children's literature, fantasy studies, and theories of power and education, are consulted to support textual interpretations and situate the analysis within existing academic discourse. The study does not employ quantitative methods; instead, it prioritizes interpretive depth, theoretical coherence, and contextual analysis to explore how contemporary children's literature redefines childhood agency through intellectual assertion.

Literature Review

Critical discourse on children's literature has increasingly shifted from viewing childhood as a state of innocence and dependency to recognizing it as a site of ideological negotiation and potential resistance. Early critical approaches often emphasized the didactic function of children's texts; however, contemporary scholars argue that such literature actively exposes the power structures governing childhood. Perry Nodelman's concept of the "hidden adult" reveals how adult authority shapes narrative voice and moral perspective even in ostensibly child-centered texts, while also acknowledging that modern children's literature increasingly interrogates rather than naturalizes these power relations (Nodelman 74–78).

The operation of power within institutional spaces has been productively examined through Michel Foucault's theory of discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how authority is maintained through surveillance, normalization, and punishment, leading individuals to internalize obedience and equate silence with virtue (Foucault 170–177). This framework has proven particularly useful in literary analyses of schools, which frequently function as disciplinary environments that suppress dissent while rewarding conformity. Within this context, institutions such as Crunchem Hall and Hogwarts emerge as sites where authority is exercised through fear, regulation, and ideological control, initially producing passivity in child protagonists.

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* has been widely read as a critique of adult authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism. The novel portrays familial and educational institutions that marginalize intellectual curiosity, particularly through the neglectful Wormwood household and the tyrannical regime of Miss Trunchbull. Dahl foregrounds the silencing of the child by depicting Matilda's parents' hostility toward books and learning, establishing a domestic environment that discourages intellectual expression (Dahl 10–12). Scholars frequently interpret Matilda's extraordinary intelligence and telekinetic ability as symbolic extensions of cognitive power, positioning knowledge as a means of resistance against institutional injustice. However, existing criticism often prioritizes the novel's fantastical elements, paying comparatively less attention to the ethical dimensions of Matilda's rebellion and its broader implications for childhood agency.

Scholarly engagement with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has focused extensively on themes of power, hierarchy, and education within the fantasy genre. Farah Mendlesohn observes that fantasy narratives often enable marginalized characters to challenge dominant systems from within, reconfiguring power structures through sustained engagement rather than immediate overthrow (Mendlesohn 113–115). Hermione Granger exemplifies this mode of resistance through her reliance on research, logic, and ethical reasoning. As a Muggle-born student, Hermione encounters systemic prejudice that reflects deeply entrenched social hierarchies, yet she responds by intensifying her intellectual engagement rather than withdrawing into silence (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 89). Her commitment to justice becomes increasingly visible in her advocacy for house-elves, where she explicitly challenges normalized exploitation within the wizarding world (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 224–227).

Paulo Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom provides a crucial pedagogical framework for interpreting knowledge-based resistance in children's literature. Freire argues that critical literacy enables oppressed subjects to recognize and challenge unjust systems rather than passively internalizing domination (Freire 72–75). This perspective aligns closely with representations of learning in both *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series, where reading, research, and dialogue function as acts of empowerment. Knowledge in these narratives is not neutral but ethically charged, enabling protagonists to identify injustice and respond with moral clarity.

Peter Hunt emphasizes that contemporary children's literature increasingly acknowledges childhood as a complex space in which vulnerability and agency coexist. Rather than depicting children as passive recipients of adult instruction, modern texts allow young protagonists to exercise ethical judgment and social critique (Hunt 5–7). Both Dahl and Rowling contribute to this shift by constructing child characters whose authority derives from intellectual and moral insight rather than physical strength or institutional position.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Dahl, Rowling, and childhood agency, comparatively little critical attention has been given to sustained **comparative analyses** that examine the transition from passivity to assertion through intellectual agency. Existing studies often treat *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series in isolation, overlooking the ways in which both texts collectively reframe empowerment as an ethical, knowledge-driven process. By foregrounding intellectual agency as a transformative force, this study addresses this critical gap and contributes to broader conversations about power, education, and the reimagining of childhood in contemporary children's literature.

Passivation, Discipline, and the Silencing of Childhood

Passivation in children's literature often functions as a narrative strategy to expose unequal power relations between adults and children. Institutions such as families, schools, and governing bodies operate as disciplinary mechanisms that demand obedience while discouraging dissent. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power elucidates how authority is maintained through surveillance, punishment, and normalization, encouraging individuals to internalize control and equate silence with virtue (Discipline and Punish 170).

In literary representations, schools frequently emerge as symbolic sites of discipline and resistance. Both *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series depict educational institutions that enforce conformity while punishing deviation. Crunchem Hall, under Miss Trunchbull, becomes a space of fear and corporal punishment, while Hogwarts—particularly during periods of Ministry interference—functions as an apparatus of ideological control. These environments cultivate passivity by discouraging critical thought, thereby setting the stage for the protagonists' eventual assertion.

Matilda Wormwood: From Silence to Symbolic Rebellion

Matilda Wormwood's passivation originates in the domestic sphere, where her parents' neglect and hostility toward education deny her emotional validation and intellectual recognition. Dahl explicitly foregrounds this neglect when he notes that Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood regarded *Matilda* as “nothing more than a scab” and dismissed her love of books as “a waste of time” (*Matilda* 10–12). Such language underscores the silencing of the child within an anti-intellectual household.

Matilda's initial silence is therefore not submission but a survival strategy. Reading becomes her first act of resistance. Dahl describes how she “had read all the children's books in the public library by the time she was four” (*Matilda* 18), suggesting that literature provides her with intellectual autonomy and moral awareness. Through books, *Matilda* learns to identify injustice long before she confronts it openly.

At Crunchem Hall, Miss Trunchbull embodies institutional tyranny through physical intimidation and fear-based discipline. Her declaration that children are “like rats” who must be “trained” (Matilda 132) reflects Foucauldian disciplinary logic rooted in punishment and control. Matilda’s telekinetic power—symbolically linked to her intellect—marks her transition from passive endurance to active resistance. When she overturns Trunchbull’s authority by writing on the blackboard, Dahl emphasizes that Matilda felt “a sense of power she had never known before” (Matilda 208).

Importantly, Matilda’s assertion is ethically motivated rather than destructive. By transferring Miss Honey’s stolen property back to her, Matilda restores moral order, affirming that resistance, in Dahl’s narrative, serves justice rather than domination (Matilda 214–217).

Hermione Granger: Ethical Consciousness and Institutional Resistance

Hermione Granger’s journey from passivity to assertion unfolds gradually across the Harry Potter series. Introduced as a rule-bound and academically driven student, Hermione initially equates obedience with safety. Her early insistence that rules must be followed—“We’re not supposed to do that” (Philosopher’s Stone 84)—reflects internalized institutional discipline rather than genuine submission.

As a Muggle-born student, Hermione occupies a marginalized position within a society structured by blood purity. The insult “Mudblood,” directed at her in *The Chamber of Secrets*, exposes the deep-rooted prejudice embedded in wizarding culture (Rowling 89). Although emotionally affected, Hermione responds not with withdrawal but with intensified intellectual engagement, reinforcing knowledge as a means of self-assertion.

Hermione’s ethical awakening becomes explicit in her advocacy for house-elf rights. Declaring that “this is slavery” (Goblet of Fire 224), Hermione challenges normalized injustice, even when her peers ridicule her efforts. This moment marks her transition from individual success to collective ethical resistance.

Her assertion reaches a critical point during Dolores Umbridge’s authoritarian regime. Umbridge’s insistence that students need “theoretical knowledge only” (Order of the Phoenix 243) epitomizes institutional repression. Hermione’s role in founding Dumbledore’s Army transforms knowledge into a communal resource. As she asserts, “We’ve got to learn to defend ourselves” (Order of the Phoenix 347), intellectual agency becomes the basis for organized resistance.

Unlike Matilda’s symbolic rebellion, Hermione’s defiance is sustained and ideological, aimed at dismantling unjust systems rather than confronting a single tyrant.

Comparative Perspectives on Assertion

Matilda Wormwood and Hermione Granger represent distinct yet complementary models of assertion in contemporary children’s literature. Matilda’s resistance is individualistic and symbolic, confronting a singular tyrannical figure within a contained

narrative framework. Hermione's resistance, by contrast, operates within expansive political systems, requiring long-term engagement, negotiation, and ethical compromise.

Despite these differences, both characters subvert traditional power hierarchies by privileging intelligence over physical dominance. Farah Mendlesohn argues that modern fantasy frequently reconfigures power by enabling marginalized figures to reshape dominant systems from within (114). Dahl and Rowling align with this tradition, presenting intellectual agency as a legitimate and transformative force capable of challenging institutional authority.

Knowledge as Transformative Power

Knowledge functions as the central mechanism of empowerment in both *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series. Reading, research, and critical thinking allow the protagonists to interpret injustice and respond effectively. This emphasis resonates with Paulo Freire's conception of education as a practice of freedom, wherein literacy and critical consciousness serve as tools of emancipation (72).

Importantly, knowledge-driven assertion in these narratives remains ethically grounded. Neither *Matilda* nor Hermione seeks domination or revenge; instead, their resistance aims to restore justice and dignity. This ethical framing distinguishes their assertion from earlier literary depictions of rebellious children, positioning resistance as morally responsible and socially constructive.

Reimagining Childhood Agency

By granting children the authority to question and confront unjust systems, *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series contribute to a redefinition of childhood agency. Childhood is no longer portrayed as a state of passive dependence but as a phase capable of ethical insight and social critique. As Peter Hunt observes, contemporary children's literature increasingly acknowledges the complexity of childhood experience, allowing vulnerability and strength to coexist (6).

Through *Matilda* and Hermione, Dahl and Rowling present models of empowerment that are both aspirational and accessible, encouraging young readers to value knowledge, empathy, and moral courage as tools of resistance.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates how Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series construct the movement from passivity to assertion through intellectual agency. Both *Matilda* Wormwood and Hermione Granger begin within oppressive environments that demand silence and conformity, yet they emerge as assertive figures by mobilizing knowledge, ethical reasoning, and critical awareness.

While *Matilda*'s rebellion is immediate and symbolic, Hermione's is gradual and ideological. Together, they challenge traditional associations of power with physical strength or adulthood and reaffirm children's capacity for resistance. Ultimately, these texts position

knowledge as a transformative force, offering young readers a vision of empowerment rooted in intelligence, justice, and moral responsibility.

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