# Deconstructing Identity: A Postmodern Analysis of Self-Discovery and Liberation in the Centaurs of *Harry Potter*

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## Abstract

The establishment of identity and exploration of identity crisis in literature has been diverse, delving into different perspectives and approaches. By questioning established norms and traditional narratives, it enriches our comprehension of identity nuances. Postmodern authors, in particular, delve into the concept that identity isn't static or inherent but instead shaped and flexible. They dismantle the conventional idea of a consistent self, portraying characters who confront various, fragmented, or contradictory identities. This postmodern view of identity crisis aligns with wider cultural and philosophical changes that question overarching narratives, absolute truths, and rigid classifications. The theme of self-discovery and identity crisis is prevalent among various magical beings in the series, including house-elves, werewolves, Centaurs, and giants. Each of these creatures navigates challenges related to societal prejudices, acceptance, and self-acceptance due to their inherent natures or cultural differences. This paper explores the quest for meaning and self-definition exhibited by Centaurs which is a minor and marginalised group in *Harry Potter* series.

**Keywords: Centaurs, marginalised, identity, postmodernism, identity crisis**

## Introduction

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human existence. It is the main component of individual consciousness in psychology, it is a social product and social power in sociology, and it is a source of psychological stress and conflict in psychoanalysis. (Watson's 1913) In literary contexts, identity encompasses the diverse elements that shape an individual's self-perception and understanding of their role in society. This exploration delves into a range of influences including personal history, cultural heritage, societal roles, gender, racial background, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and unique traits that collectively define and mould an individual's sense of identity. Individuals frequently wrestle with the complex journey of forming their identity, contending with internal struggles, external societal expectations, and the challenge of defining themselves in a multifaceted environment. Woodward argues, 'identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources— from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender [...It] gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live [...] Often [it] is most clearly defined by differences, i.e., by what it is not' (Woodward,.1-2). Erik Erikson, known for his use of identity crisis described identity as a 'mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others'. (Erikson, 109) In postmodern literature, authors often engage with the idea that identity is not fixed or essential but rather constructed and fluid. The traditional notion of a stable and coherent self is deconstructed, and characters grapple with multiple, fragmented, or conflicting identities. The postmodern perspective on identity crisis is closely linked to broader cultural and philosophical shifts that challenge grand narratives, absolute truths, and fixed categories. Saadawi emphasises that identity is a

complex concept influenced by power dynamics and labels, challenging static definitions amid constant change. She argues 'Identity is a discourse, and it is essential to know who is using it, who decides, who labels me, what all this interest in "cultural identity" means, where does it lead. (Saadawi 118) She further argues that everyone is 'so engrossed in defining our identities when they are changing all the time' (Saadawi 126).

Postmodern literature's emphasis on questioning traditional narratives and norms has contributed significantly to understanding identity crises in various ways.Individuals belonging to marginalised racial groups encounter systemic obstacles, discrimination, and stereotypes, impacting their quest for acceptance and meaningful relationships. Navigating spaces dominated by other racial groups intersects with their racial identity, highlighting the challenge of reconciling self-perception with societal norms for a genuine sense of belonging.In *Harry Potter* series the marginalised groupsnavigate challenges related to societal prejudices, acceptance, and self-acceptance due to their inherent natures and cultural differences.

Through the portrayal of characters that defy social conventions and expectations, readers are provoked to critically analyse preconceived concepts of identity and are reminded that it is a living and evolving concept which is impacted by many variables and individual experiences and thus are inspired to accept the fluidities of their own identities.

### Discussion

In the *Harry Potter* series Centaurs are portrayed as intelligent, proud, and reclusive beings living in the Forbidden Forest. While the books do not explicitly delve into Centaur psychology or identity crises, there are instances where their cultural differences and clashes with wizards hint at potential identity conflicts. The series does explore the tension arising from their clash with wizarding culture and their attempts to maintain their distinct identity and way of life amidst the encroachment of the human world.

The relationship between Centaurs and Wizards is paradoxical, marked by mutual disdain, racial prejudice, and a firm belief in their own superiority. While the Centaurs consider themselves superior to Wizards, the Wizards, in turn, look down upon the Centaurs. This cultural clash leads to a deep-rooted animosity that manifests in various incidents within the magical realm, in the series. Centaurs, with their half-man, half-horse physical constitution, hold a strong sense of pride and self-respect. Dwelling in the Forbidden Forest according to their own rules, they are portrayed as intelligent, knowledgeable, and kind, but also fiercely independent. They carry bows and arrows, detesting any intrusion into their domain. The Centaurs in the series often maintain a sense of detachment from human affairs, preferring to live according to their own laws and traditions. They possess a deep connection to the natural world and have a strong disdain for human interference. Their society functions separately from that of the Wizards, and they prioritise following what has been foretold rather than intervening in human affairs. Despite their intellect and wisdom, the Centaurs display a distinct disdain for Wizards, viewing them as inferior and unworthy. They refuse to be subservient or assist in Wizard affairs, emphasising their independence and pride as a separate race. Centaurs' refusal to be treated as mere objects of study or divination by wizards suggests a struggle for autonomy and respect for their identity. They consistently challenge the wizards' attempts to exploit their abilities for prophecy, indicating a conflict in how they're perceived versus how they want to be regarded. In the series Firenze and Bane are two

prominent Centaurs and they undergo significant journeys of self-discovery and grapple with their identities, albeit in different ways.

### Bane

Bane represents the more traditional and conservative viewpoint among the Centaurs. He staunchly upholds the Centaur beliefs, customs, and their way of life. Bane embodies the ingrained superiority complex of the Centaurs, which leads to his strong disapproval of any actions that deviate from their established norms. He vehemently opposes Firenze's decision to collaborate with humans, seeing it as a betrayal and a disgrace to their race. Bane's character highlights the rigidity and resistance to change within the Centaur community, representing those who adhere strictly to tradition and do not appreciate change. This resistance can be seen as a postmodern rejection of assimilation into dominant narratives. Centaurs, as a group, resist being fully integrated into the magical society and prefer to maintain their independence.

Postmodernism often involves skepticism toward grand narratives and authority figures. Bane and other Centaurs express a deep mistrust of wizards and their actions. They reject the authority of human institutions and demonstrate a skepticism towards the magical world's narratives, particularly those associated with divination. When Umbridge was tricked into the Forbidden Forest by Hermione and Harry, her comment, 'by the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds, such as yourselves on a human' – and law fifteen "B"- 'any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions' (*Order*694) enrages the Centaurs. After telling her, 'We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own.'(*Order*694) they drag and carry Umbridge, the Ministry official, without fear away into the forest inevitably for taking her to the task.

Postmodernism often critiques human-centric perspectives. Bane's disdain for wizards and their perceived arrogance can be seen as a rejection of human-centric (wizard centric) views. The Centaurs, with their connection to the natural world, challenge the anthropocentric worldview prevalent in the wizarding society. They reject the idea of humans being superior or central to everything. When Hermione says, 'We only came in here because we hoped you'd drive her off for us', (*Order*695) Bane criticises her assumption that they should serve human interests and confronts Hermione's perception of them as mere 'pretty talking horses,' emphasising their complex history and their refusal to be marginalized or controlled by wizards. By refusing to be subservient and rejecting the role of obedient hounds, Bane asserts Centaurs' autonomy and pride in their separate identity as a non-human race.

> So we were to do your dirty work, were we, human girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies like obedient hounds? ... We do not help humans …. We are a race apart and proud to be so. We will not permit you to walk from here, boasting that we did your bidding.'… 'Perhaps you thought us pretty talking horses? We are an ancient people who will not stand wizard invasions and insults! We do not recognise your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority. (*Order* 695)

The Centaur's words highlight their deep-seated belief in their own culture and heritage. They see themselves as an ancient people with their own values and laws, not bound

by human standards or authority. This anti-anthropocentric stance challenges the notion that humans are inherently superior and should dictate the actions of other beings.

**Firenze**

Firenze's character arc revolves around his willingness to challenge traditional Centaur beliefs and forge a new path by cooperating with humans, particularly through his role as a teacher at Hogwarts. His decision to defy the norms of Centaur society and work alongside wizards demonstrates a profound exploration of identity. Firenze grapples with questions of loyalty, purpose, and the true essence of being a Centaur. His actions provoke internal conflict and lead to a re-evaluation of his beliefs and values.

By engaging with humans and teaching at Hogwarts, Firenze faces backlash and rejection from his fellow Centaurs, who view his actions as a betrayal and dishonour to their race. This conflict forces Firenze to confront the tension between loyalty to his own kind and the desire to explore a different path, leading to a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the world. His journey emphasises growth, introspection, and a willingness to challenge societal norms thus leading to the discovery of a new self.

In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*series, Firenze undergoes self-discovery and a transformative journey regarding identity, more so as his identity as a Centaur versus his identity as a being who does what he believes is right.

Postmodernism emphasises individual agency and the rejection of overarching structures. Firenze's decision to save Harry Potter and later work within the Hogwarts community shows agency in choosing his own path, even if it means breaking away from his Centaur heritage. Firenze believes that he should act for the betterment of society even if he has to go against what the stars have predicted or even against other Centaurs. When Harry is to be attacked by a hooded figure in the forest Firenze allows Harry to ride on his back; other Centaurs do not see it in a good light. Bane shouts at Firenze, 'What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?' (*Stone*276) They even remind him, 'Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest.' (*Stone* 277) Firenze defies Centaur conventions by aiding Harry Potter, earning the scorn of his own kind. Bane's outburst highlights the deep-seated disdain towards humans, accusing Firenze of disgracing their race. Yet he sets himself against what is lurking in the forest and is ready to do that with humans alongside, if he must.

Postmodernism often involves a skepticism towards grand narratives and authority figures. Firenze challenges the traditional Centaur views by aligning himself with humans, particularly through his role as a Divination teacher at Hogwarts. In a way it is a form of resistance to the Centaur community's established norms. The Centaurs' aversion towards meddling in human affairs, as dictated by their beliefs, becomes a point of contention when Firenze decides to align himself with humans, specifically Professor Dumbledore. This choice is viewed as betrayal and dishonour by the Centaur community, severing Firenze's ties with his own kind and straining relationships with former allies like Hagrid. Further Firenze decides to work for Professor Dumbledore and teach at Hogwarts, a move viewed as a betrayal by the Centaur community, intensifies the resentment they have for him. In *Order of Phoenix*Magorian tells Hagrid, 'Our ways are not yours, nor are our laws. Firenze has betrayed and dishonoured us … Firenze has entered into servitude to humans … He is

peddling our knowledge and secrets among humans… There can be no return from such disgrace.' (*Order*644)

Postmodernism often challenges fixed identities and embraces hybridity. Firenze, being a Centaur, embodies a hybrid identity, straddling the boundaries between human and magical creature. This can be seen as a departure from traditional, fixed notions of identity. He understands that once he accepts to work for Dumbledore, there would be no return. In response to why he cannot return to the forest, Firenze replies, '[C]entaurs are not the servants or playthings of humans… I have agreed to work for Professor Dumbledore' and 'they see this as a betrayal of our kind.' (*Order* 555) Firenze is ostracised and almost kicked to death because other Centaurs think that he is a disgrace to their kind, who has dishonoured them by accepting to work for humans. He faces and accepts criticism from fellow Centaurs who view his decision as a betrayal of their way of life, marking a conflict between his identity as a Centaur and his willingness to engage with the wizarding world. He does not back down from his chosen path,carving a niche different from established norms. His bold step separates him from the conventions of Centaur identity. At the same time, Firenze does not let go of his Centaur identity. after he accepts teaching assignment at Hogwarts, he does not quite bother to be painstaking enough in imparting difficult lessons of magic and the mysteries to his class consisting of wizards. He assumes that the wizards are not sharp-witted enough to grasp easily what Centaurs themselves took years to learn.

In the context of postmodernism, knowledge is often seen as fluid and context-dependent. Firenze's choice to teach Divination, a subject often dismissed by other Centaurs, reflects a fluid approach to knowledge. His acceptance of different ways of understanding the future challenges rigid structures within the magical world. Firenze's stands out as an example of a Centaur undergoing self-discovery and identity exploration due to his willingness to challenge tradition, face internal conflict, and ultimately redefine what it means to be a Centaur in the wizarding world. His transformative journey reflects growth, evolution, and the courage to question deeply ingrained societal norms, making him a more compelling representation of Centaur self-discovery compared to Bane.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the portrayal of Centaurs in the *Harry Potter* series offers a rich exploration of identity and self-discovery within a postmodern framework. The portrayal of characters like Bane and Firenze illuminates the complexities of navigating identity amidst cultural clashes and societal expectations. The tension between Centaurs and wizards reflects broader themes of autonomy, agency, and the rejection of established norms.

Bane embodies traditional Centaur values, resisting assimilation into human-centric narratives and maintaining a staunch pride in Centaur heritage. His character represents the struggle to preserve identity in the face of external pressures and cultural conflicts. On the other hand, Firenze's journey challenges traditional Centaur beliefs by embracing collaboration with humans and navigating the complexities of hybrid identity. His actions reflect a postmodern willingness to question fixed identities and engage in self-discovery beyond cultural boundaries.

In summary, Centaurs in *Harry Potter* represent broader postmodern themes, emphasising identity's fluidity and complexity in a culturally diverse and power-driven world.Their narratives contribute to a nuanced understanding of identity crises and liberation within literature and society at large.

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