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Story Telling in Salman Rushdie's Fiction for Children: A Postcolonial Take

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to focus on two works by Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), the latter being a sequel to the former. Most of Rushdie's canon has received great interest from the academic and critical industry which surrounds it. However, the works selected for study in this paper have not received a great share of this attention. This paper would afford a tri-pronged study of the aforementioned texts, written originally for Rushdie's children as books which are must reads for children today. The child protagonists of these works, siblings Haroun and Luka, and their father, Rashid Khalifa, are indeed representations of Rushdie and his sons, Zafar and Milan. The paper would highlight how the two children struggle with the limits imposed on the freedom of expression of their father Rashid Khalifa, who is a story teller by profession, making these works allegories for the author's own tumultuous context. Finally, the paper would examine how the characters and place names are intriguing linguistic bridges to Indian culture.

Keywords: Postcolonial, children's writing, story telling, censorship.

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The word 'Postcolonial' has been used quite liberally and profusely in the last four decades or so to refer to cultures and societies of recently decolonized spaces. The link between language, economics and power was substantially displayed by the heaping of English onto the native languages and societies, as the English language became a major weapon of colonial masters. Consequently, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism came to share mutual ground as one fed on the other. The resultant silencing of the native language became a violent and destructive act of colonialism with the pushing of indigenous languages into the background. Serious deliberations are needed to explore the question that by forbidding children in schools from communicating in their native tongues, are we encouraging the rise of neo-colonialism, which promises to leave Postcolonialism behind.

Major issues of Postcolonial literature, today, continue to be language, representation, resistance, nationalism, gender, migrancy and diaspora. However, all these tend to revolve around and are tethered to a colonial centre, even as Postcolonial literature subverts dominant discourses of race, ethnicity and gender. The realm of Postcolonial studies has already entered a new domain as erstwhile colonies gain increasing distance chronologically and ideologically from the so-called 'imperial masters.' The overarching influence of colonial, imperial and 'grand' writings of the colonizers has gradually slithered away from the creative oeuvre of the recently emancipated states as well. Consequently, new literatures have emerged which signify the coming of age of Postcolonial studies. The keyword in Postcolonial studies is 'difference' rather than universality to include the indigenous experience of colonialism, as the effectiveness of Postcolonial studies lies in derailing accustomed trains of thought, giving way to marginalised narrative trains. Therefore, today, Postcolonialism is under immense strain to be meaningful, relevant and inventive as opposed to the meta-narrative of colonialism.

The present wave of Postcolonial studies has also seen the emergence of the phenomenon of the displaced writer who has had to face the tyranny of censorship and gagging. One such writer, who has become the face of the debate on freedom of expression, is Salman Rushdie, probably the most cited author when debating issues of censorship, banning and gagging. Currently in exile in England, Rushdie has had to face stiff censures on his own freedom because of his 1988 book *The Satanic Verses,* which was burnt all over the world. As he himself acknowledges in *Luka and the Fire of Life,* "Man is the Story telling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning and his lifeblood…Man alone burns with books" (34). Rushdie's canon has successfully created a whole new trend in Postcolonial literature as he blends autobiography, popular culture (children's literature in the context of this paper), documentary history, fiction, magic realism and folklore. Rushdie has created an imaginative register that draws upon experience for its raw material, but that transforms this raw material into something altogether more fantastical and bizarre (Teverson 68).

The present paper seeks to focus on two works by Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), the latter being a sequel to the former. Most of Rushdie's work has received great interest from the academic and critical industry which surrounds it. However, the works selected for study in this paper have not received a great share of this attention. This paper would afford a tri-pronged study of the aforementioned texts, written originally for Rushdie's children as books which are must reads for children today. Both deal with the parent-child relationship and its various nuances. The child protagonists of these works, siblings Haroun and Luka, and their father, Rashid Khalifa, are indeed representations of Rushdie and his sons, Zafar and Milan. The paper would highlight how the two children struggle with the limits imposed on the freedom of expression of their father Rashid Khalifa, who is a story teller by profession, making these works allegories for the author's own tumultuous context. Finally, the paper would examine how the characters and place names are intriguing linguistic bridges to Indian culture.

Salman Rushdie occupies a unique place in post-war fiction of the world with 'exotic fantasia' and 'magic realism' being the labels applied to him in profusion. His penchant for sophisticated modernist and post-modernist narrative forms gives a multiplicity of perspectives to his works. Rushdie's fiction is a celebration of the multiple, the plural, and the fluid (Nayar 201). Almost all his works displace conventional story telling techniques and juxtapose them with new ones which are entirely of Rushdie's own imagination, just like Haroun's father in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, "Straight answers were beyond the powers of Rashid Khalifa, who would never take a short cut if there was a longer twistier road available." (19) Rushdie's re-working of wit, humour and satire to produce modern day classics has heralded the ushering in of a new genre altogether which in its own way defies classification.

*Haroun and the Sea of Stor*ies (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) are works which stand out in the Rushdie canon. Both were written for his children, but the former's text intersected more heavily with contemporary concerns in design and theme. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written as a reaction to the menace of censorship of the highest order. The text can be described as an allegorical defiance of the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's spiritual head, for Rushdie's apparent disrespect towards Islam in *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie was consequently forced to lead a life of seclusion and hiding for many years as he hopped across various cities. The sad city that has forgotten its name as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* opens is probably symbolic of the many cities which offered shelter to Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the consequent gagging order issued by the radicals. Such was the impact of this fatwa on Rushdie and his oeuvre that his autobiography, *Joseph Anton*, starts with a reference to the day he heard about it, "He wondered how many days he had left to live and thought the answer was probably a single-digit number" (3). It marked a before-and-after phase in his life and changed the course of his destiny. The next work Rushdie wrote was *Haroun and the Sea of Stories.* The text has also been adapted into a stage play which premiered at the Royal National Theatre in 1998. An Opera of the same title was launched at the New York City Opera in 2004.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories is essentially an adventure story beneath all its trappings, The adventure in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is celebrated for its visual and aural appeal by children. It has all the stock ingredients of a perfect folk tale, besotted by adventure- the hero's journey into a strange land to find a solution to a problem at home, assistance from supernatural companions, wicked magicians and of course a happy ending. The seemingly fantastical and phantasmagorical characters are actually vehicles and also weapons for conveying the author's own tumultuous context. For his material, Rushdie goes back to pre-colonial history and folktales to write in an amalgam of reality, fantasy, illusion, dreams in the same plane of narration, floating between degrees of inclusion, marginalisation and exclusion (Nayar 207).

Haroun undertakes a journey to the Land of Chup to clear the Sea of Stories of the pollution done at the behest of Cultmaster Khattam-Shud, the ruler of the Land of Chup. This pollution is indirectly responsible for the cutting off of story waters to Rashid, Haroun's father, a story teller by vocation. This journey is sprinkled with elements which delight child readers, Eggheads at P2C2E House, the Shadow Warrior Mudra, Floating Gardeners, plentimaw fish, Iff the Water Genie and Butt, the Hoopoe. Various characters are named in language terminology-Prince Bolo, Princess Batcheat, General Kitab, King Chattergy, Blabbermouth and Bezaban. Even coughing sounds are described as 'Gogogol' and 'Kafkafka.' Rushdie is indeed stressing on the need for dialogue and communication as the means of resolving all conflict. It would be interesting to relate *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to *Alice in Wonderland* and to Rushdie's own *Luka and the Fire of Life* for their use of the journey motif.

Haroun's younger brother, Luka, also goes on a journey to bring back the fire of life to his sleeping father who has fallen into a comatose state. This journey takes Luka to the world of Gods and Goddesses as well as the realm of video games and 'lives.' On his way, Luka encounters video-game like characters and situations and of course his father's shadow like 'other self' called 'Nobodaddy.' Strangely enough, this phantom-like creature saps Luka's father's energy, which decreases as Nobodaddy's energy levels go up in a Nintendo-like scenario. Luka has two pets, Bear, the singing dog, and Dog, the dancing bear. Luka's mother becomes Soraya the Insultana of Ott in the magical world, who assists Luka through the world of magic. The Ultimate Guardians of the Fire of Life in the World of Magic are called the 'Aalim' by Rushdie in a strange twist of words. The word 'Aalim' or 'Ulema' literally means Muslim scholars trained in Islam and Islamic law. The Aalim stand between Luka's father's life and death, in a self-referential autobiographic streak which can hardly be ignored, "The Aalim, whose idea of Knowledge was that it belonged to them and was too precious to be shared with anyone else, probably hated Rashid Khalifa for letting the cat out of the bag" (9). Another character in the novel, Captain Aag, the circus owner, is partially responsible for the sad fate of Rashid, Luka's father. Captain Aag's brother, Prometheus, helps Luka on his mission. A Coyote distracts the Gods as Luka finally steals the Fire of Life. Egyptian, Norse, Aztec and Chinese Gods engage in 'play' in this vast and colourful tapestry of illusions and references. The theme of 'quest' which has figured time and again in literary representations is imaginatively conflated with the escapist domain of video games in an exuberant display of linguistic finesse, "The Torrent of Words, by the way, thunders down from the Sea of Stories into the Lake of Wisdom, whose waters are illumined by the Dawn of Days, and out of which flows the River of Time" (8).

Both, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life* are books for children, to be read, enjoyed and finished with a sense of relief at the end. They "duplicate(s) the narrative complexity of the story sea it depicts by drawing freely upon a range on narrative pre-texts, including European, Middle Eastern and Indian fairy tale, pop music lyrics, English children's classics, Indian cinema, Persian poetry, political allegory and science fiction" (Teverson 168). Such a broad frame of reference is not daunting to the child reader, but instead opens multiple doors of cross references and learning outcomes for its readers. Both texts hinge on an oft-repeated theme – enter a magical realm and defeat malevolent forces,

> It was the same enchanted water his brother Haroun, had seen in the Ocean of the Streams of Story eighteen years earlier, and it had tumbled down in a Torrent of Words from the Sea of Stories into The Lake of Wisdom and flowed out to meet him. So this was – it had to be – what Rashid Khalifa had called it: the River of Time itself, and the whole history of everything was flowing along before his very eyes, transformed into shining, mingling, multicoloured story streams (48).

The straightforward water imagery of the text conceals a profound stirring beneath the surface, which gives deeper meaning to the text, "(T)he magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand, thousand, thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity…" (71-72).

The text of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* operates on two levels of allegory, the personal and the public. On the personal level, it is the story of a father and his child, Rashid and Haroun, Rushdie and Zafar, to whom the book is dedicated. Haroun takes it on himself to help his father recover from his affliction of speech. The fact that this affliction has befallen a master story teller, whose sole profession and consolation was 'story telling' makes it all the more heart wrenching for Haroun. When Haroun's mother, Soraya, abandons Haroun and his father, Rashid depicts the personal cost that Rushdie might have paid with the fatwa on his head. The spiritual leader who publicly asked his followers for Rushdie's head merges into the villain 'Khattam-Shud,' the tyrant responsible for Rashid's affliction. Rushdie himself went through a phase of writers' block after the fatwa became public and he apparently overcame it with *Haroun and the Sea of Stories.* The followers of Khattam-Shud are none other than the fanatical crowd which cheered the announcement of this fatwa. Alison Lurie says, "(W)ho could have believed that a world famous spiritual leader would publicly exhort his millions of followers to murder a novelist in another country, and promise them eternal salvation should they succeed?" The life of reclusion and hiding that Rushdie led would probably not interest a child reader, but, its juxtaposition with the freedom of speech and movement we take for granted will surely arouse his attention and make the child appreciate and respect what he takes for granted. Rushdie's personal freedom is, indeed, chronically and inescapably embedded in writing (Gandhi 158), as the impetus for writing *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* came from a curtailing of his movement. It is this unravelling of the reader experience in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* that makes it appeal not only to the child reader but to other reader segments as well. The primary father-son tale gives way to the allegorical representation of the censorship that was haunting Zafar's father in real life. So, Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is an amalgam of not only Rashid and Haroun, but also Princess Batcheat and Prince Bolo, the two vehicles of the author himself. The two feuding parties in the novel, the Guppees and the Chupwalas, are 'groups' of beings, if not people and Rushdie seems to suggest that certain differences between groups are inevitable as well as natural. It is this realisation of difference that children should be encouraged to recognise and celebrate, "If Guppees and Chupwalas didn't hate each other so, they might actually find each other pretty interesting." (125) Rushdie wants them to learn from each other highlighting the absurdity of the conflict between the two, the conflict between a pluralist and tolerant society and a monolithic and intolerant political order (Teverson 166).

Rushdie does not seem to agree with the realistic pretensions of literature as reflecting and recording life. Towards the end of *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Luka explains why the fire is so important to him. He says that the World of Magic does not belong to the Aalim, but to his father, along with its gods and goddesses, ogres and bats, monsters and slimy things. Rushdie's works are not 'records' of the goings-on in the world, and it is precisely this 'recording' which disturbs Rushdie, who says in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" that a writer's work extends far beyond keeping a mere record of things, "The quietist option, the exhortation to submit to events, is an intrinsically conservative one. When intellectuals and artists withdraw from the fray, politicians feel safer…Passivity always serves the interests of the status quo, of the people already at the top of the heap" (97). Rushdie raises his voice against the banning of his books by not being submissive, but instead creating a whole new world of magic, which challenges the existing order of things.

Towards the end of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie suggests that the only practical solution to issues arising out of these concerns is democratic inclusion as opposed to political segregation and exclusion. This gentle fairy tale delves into problematic areas of free speech, artistic expression and liberty and offers a concrete resolution at the end, just as *Luka and the Fire of Life* offers an insightful journey into the altered consciousness of a child. Both texts are symptomatic of the inflections of Postcolonial enterprise. Rushdie's novels, especially the early ones, remain crucial contributions to the political and pedagogical projects of Postcolonial studies as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century (Jani 12). Rushdie's latest work *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Days* (2015), too, draws upon a bank of folklore, *The Arabian Nights*, magic realism, for its form; and censorship issues, validity of the imagined world and religious thinking for its theme. Replete with jinns, fantasy worlds, disappearing towers, the text promises a world of fairy magic and unending narratives. This master story teller, indeed, has a lot more up his sleeves as does the Postcolonial canon which has quietly but firmly established itself in the centre with the pillars of literary theory holding it in place.

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