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The Art of Storytelling and the Role of Memory in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life*

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Abstract

The focus of this study is mainly twofold – firstly to locate Salman Rushdie's two children's fiction namely *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) in the storytelling traditions of east and west and to understand Rushdie's art of storytelling; and secondly to address the role of memory in this very act of storytelling and to analyze the metaphor of journey in that process of memorizing in these novels. This article seeks to analyze how memory in the form of 'minimarrative' can challenge the official version of story/ history and the concept of homogeneous empty 'Time' and how the gap between memory's 'private inside' and 'public outside' might be bridged in the scope of these two novels.

Keywords: storytelling, memory, journey, time, nation.

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) celebrate the triumph of storytelling, literary imagination and memory over power and dogmatism. This study is an attempt to find answers to the following questions in the scope of the two children's fiction by Salman Rushdie. Does memory influence only those who remember? Does it influence those who are remembered? Is the concept of memory static? Can it not change the bygone days? It is true, history or the past events directly or indirectly create our memory. Can memory create its own version of history? How can the shared memories of different social groups foster a sense of collectivity? Can memory serve the ethical purpose of a novel? I will seek to analyze in the process of remembrance how an individual and a community influence and complement each other.

In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Michel Foucault defines genealogy as an analysis of descent opposed to the evolutionary model of history whose main force is in the search for origin: genealogy liberates what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history and what has been set aside as accidents or errors in the imposed order of historical necessity. The genealogical approach with its task of tracing "passing events in their dispersions" questions a "suprahistorical perspective" that assumes a "teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time" (Rabinow, 1984, pp. 76-100). In this study I will seek to understand how characters like Haroun and Luka can resist the "teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time", symbolized by the figures like Khatam-Shud and Aalim.

In *Haroun* and *Luka*, Rushdie achieves the effect of "written orality" (Brenan, 1989, p. 139), in introducing Indian storytelling as it functions in the *Kathasaritsagara*, the largest available collection of tales in Sanskrit verse, written by Somadeva in the eleventh century. The Chinese

box pattern of the *Kathasaritsagara* is metaphorically represented by the idea of ocean. Indeed the main plot of the *Kathasaritsagara*, the romantic adventures of Prince Narawahananda and his quest for the throne, is interspersed with many shorter tales which can be categorized as fables, anecdotes, religious sermons, gothic stories or romances; and several interlinked stories are narrated by the characters to clarify their arguments or to both instruct and amuse the listeners. The nonlinear mode of storytelling with the intertwining of multiple storylines is the oral one which is traditional in India and the Middle East. Like *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, *Panchatantra*, *Jataka* tales and *The Thousand and One Nights* they belong to the Indian tradition of cyclical, episodic, and digressive storytelling. The splitting of the name of the caliph of Baghdad, Haroun-al-Rashid, “into the names of father and son,” as Meenakhshi Mukherejee observes in her essay “*Haroun and the Sea of Stories: Fantasy of Fable?*” invokes “the cycle of tales that for Rushdie has long been a synecdoche for an inexhaustible storehouse of stories” (*The Perishable Empire*, 2013, p. 153). Among the many other countless sources one important source is the tales of *Panchatantra*. Haroun’s changing his turtle for his father’s peacock has a subtle reference to the tales of “bird and peacock” and “bird and turtle” in *Panchatantra*. The Water Genie Iff reminds us of the tale of *The Arabian Nights* which is abounded with Genies of all sorts, including the Water Genies. Salman Rushdie returns to the theme of *The Conference of the Birds* (written in the twelfth century by Farid-ud-Din Attar) in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 15 years after the publication of his debut novel *Grimus* (1975), where he first made reference to Attar’s poetic masterpiece. In Attar’s poem the bird hoopoe, as figure of the sheikh who guides the Sufi adept along the path of righteousness, appears at the beginning of the poem to tell the birds about their king Simurg. In Salman Rushdie’s novel (1990) when the Water Genie asks Haroun to choose a bird to carry them to Kahani, Haroun chooses the hoopoe, the bird with a brain box with “memory cell” (p. 149) and the bird that “in old stories . . . leads all birds through many dangerous places to their ultimate goal” (p. 64).

The story of the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) begins in an imaginary “country of Alifbay,” with “a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name” (p. 15) and ends happily with a policeman’s declaration of “We remembered the city’s name” (p. 208). Hence, here in this story there is a journey from forgetfulness to the restoration of memory. The narrative of the story starts with the identity crisis of a community as it forgets the city’s name and ends with the preservation of the lost identity by recalling the name. The name of the city is “Kahani” and “It means story” (p. 209). The novel tells the story of Haroun Khalifa and his father Rashid Khalifa and their adventure in Gup and Chup in search of Rashid’s lost talent of storytelling after Rashid’s wife Soraya’s disappearance with a clerk who despises stories as useless untruth. While Soraya finds Rashid’s impractical storytelling impossible to stand, Haroun on the other hand finds his father’s skill fascinating. In the practice of storytelling, the talent of the storyteller is celebrated: “Haroun often thought of his father as a juggler, because his stories were really lots of different tales juggled together, and Rashid kept them going in a sort of dizzy whirl, and never made a mistake” (p. 16). In his essay entitled “Between memory and history: Les lieux de memoire” Pierre Nora (1989) felt that memory should be captured through individual means, because “the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to become themselves memory individuals” (p. 16). Nora says that “memory . . . is affective and magical” (p. 8). Thus the memory-maker is a kind of magician who controls the affections of his/ her audience. I find Pierre Nora’s linking the concept of the memory-maker and magician quite interesting. Haroun and Luka often consider their father as a magician or juggler who controls the affection of his audience.

On the narrative plane Haroun and Rashid embark on their trip to the valley of K in order to recover their respective losses (of a mother and stories) before they end up in their story-world of Kahani. On their way Rashid “remembers” an “old old dream” one of the old stories, the story about Khattam-Shud who “is the Arch-Enemy of all stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech” (p. 39). This Khattam-Shud of Rashid story also turns out to be the Arch-Enemy within the story in the novel (along with Mr Sengupta and Mr Butto). In one passage between sleeping and waking, Haroun meets the Water Genie Iff and there meet the two worlds – real and the magical. Haroun asks Water Genie, “Are you trying to claim you’re really one of those Genies my father told me about?” (p. 56). Thus the novel’s various interrelated layers are achieved by remembering some characters and then meeting them or vice-versa.

The novel *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) offers another foray into the lives of the now older Khalifa family twenty years after the publication of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The younger son Khalifa family, Luka is now ready for an adventure of his own, filled with fantastical creatures, distant lands, and P2C2Es. Luka is a miracle child, born to aging parents with the power to “turn back Time itself, make it flow the wrong way and make us young again” (p. 8). The spectacular use of the digital media is revolutionary as it opens up a space for independence within the social group that has always been systematically controlled in relation to its access to information, self-expression, and means of social communication. To some extent, this empowerment of young people comes from their creative interactions with popular culture, communal medium. Rushdie’s use of MMOs – or in his playful pun, “Muu” (p. 12) – may be seen as his acknowledgment of their inherent freedom for excursion and digression and to give alternative possibilities. In the story of *Luka* Rushdie manages to achieve the alternative possibilities through “an almost infinite number of parallel realities” (p. 11) because the “magical boxes” or “alternate-reality boxes” (p. 12) of Luka offer “the richest, most complex journeys into other spaces and different-time, into the zone of multi-life and temporary death” (p. 12). Like Haroun’s adventure, Luka’s journey is driven by the memories of his father Rashid’s stories and the recollections of these old memories help him to achieve “parallel realities” in the battle with Time. In his almost impossible task of stealing the “fire of life”, Luka depends heavily upon the knowledge of mythical creatures like Bear the dog, and Dog the bear, Elephant Birds, and the wisdom of Queen Soraya with her “thousands of years old” magic carpet (p. 82), Coyote and the legendary Titan Prometheus, the first thief of fire. Luka is able to defeat every deadly peril not because of his gaming skills `but by recalling the knowledge and wisdom contained in his father’s stories. When Luka faces the “Old Man of the River” with his “Terminator in his hand” he “did his best to summon back the memory of what else the Shah of Blah had told him about this malevolent river-demon” (pp. 51-52) in order to get rid of him. In the River Of Time he meets the “fat, blind, whitish Worms” who are “capable of making Holes in the very fabric of Time” (p. 61) and he is at a loss in his “travel up into the Fog of the Past” (p. 62). Here is his conversation with Nobodaddy which stresses the significance of memory to invoke our past:

‘You have to work it out how it is,’ Nobodaddy said, ‘that people manage to reach back into the Past.’

‘I guess . . . by remembering it?’ Luka offered. ‘By not forgetting it?’ . . .

‘Very good,’ said Nobodaddy . . .

‘And if you want to travel up the River, Memory is the fuel you need.’ (p. 66)

On his “Path to the Three Fiery Doughnuts” (p. 93) he again has to “rely on the Memory of the Elephant Birds for fuel” (p. 97). Also in the “Rings of Fire”, the Memory Birds help Luka “as guide”

to get past “the golden orb” (p. 115). Whenever he faces difficulties, he recalls his father’s stories for the necessary knowledge because “all the places he knew so well from his father’s tale” (p. 96).

An important approach to the study of memory charts its relation to the regimes of temporality. In Luka’s journey to reach ‘the Heart of Time’ and when he is ‘about to break the Rules of History’, there is a subtle tug-of-war between time and memory. Time is a historical construct and memory is that which complicates or refuses to sit within that temporality though “the Mists of Time” and “the Weapons of Time” (p. 98) can push us to “the Limits of Memory” (p. 97). Here by ‘Time’ Rushdie indicates the grand concept of time or homogenous empty time that always seeks to undermine gaps or fadings of history. Memory has the power to revive our forgotten pasts. Dictators like Aalim always try to control this ‘Time’ that attempts to erase the low voices of history or myth (here represented by the ex-gods). Hence ‘Time’ is an enemy to memory as we can see that in Luka’s journey up the River of Time the *mists* and *weapons* of time challenge Luka’s memory. To my mind, mists and weapons of time signify the official voices of history/nation. But Luka’s memory of his father’s story-world wins at the end defying the grand concept of ‘Time’.

The story of Luka is a warning against forgetting. We are living in such an age with high technology and “High Definitions” (p. 115) that we do not even bother to hear the age-old stories, to think about magic or dream-world. Queen Soraya laments that, “Magic is fading from the universe . . . We aren’t needed anymore . . . One of these days you’ll find out what it’s like to live without even the idea of Magic” (p. 130). In his adventure to the sea of stories Haroun also observes that, “. . . the real world was full of magic, so magical worlds could easily be real” (*HSS*, p. 50). Luka is at a loss when he faces almighty Aalim and then he recalls what his father Rashid told him one night, “Dreams are Aalim’s enemies, because in dreams the Laws of Time disappear . . . The time of our feeling is not as the time of the clock” (p. 157). Hence if Aalim is the “Trinity of Time”, a combination of what was, what is and what will come (p. 132), dreams and magic can “slow down” or “speed up” Time by “great excitement or anticipation”, by “our feelings” or by our recollections (p. 157). Dreams are mostly made of certain recollections (sub/ un/ consciously) of our past (sometimes future) fantasies or desires. Rashid challenges the prevalent notion of reality by arguing that, “Our dreams are the real truths – our fancies, the knowledge of our hearts . . . I’ve spent my life telling people that this is the truth about Time and that the Aalim’s clocks tell lies” (p. 158). Hence Luka decides to pursue the dream or the magic world to defeat almighty Aalim.

In *Luka*, The Heart of Rashid’s dream world is populated by the ‘forgotten others’ – “badly behaved” discarded gods – including “the ancient gods of North, the gods of Greece and Rome, the South American gods, and gods of Sumeria and Egypt” (p. 127) – in whom “nobody believed any longer, except as stories that people once liked to tell” (p. 127). These gods, powerless in the real world, still retain their ‘superpower’ in the Heart of Magic. Luka truly grows beyond his father’s own authority as the story-teller when in the final battle for the ‘Fire of Life’ Luka impresses all the ex-gods saying that, “this world of magic . . . is my father’s world” (p.180) and then, “listen to me; it’s only through Stories that you can get out into the Real World and have some sort of power again. When your story is well told, people believe in you” (p. 182). This implies that if the storyteller dies, the gods, who have already lost their divinity but still survive majestically as fallible heroes in the colourful stories of Rashid Khalifa, would also be lost forever. As in *Haroun*, in the court of King Chatterjee, young Haroun impresses everyone by his speech and as a result he is chosen for the adventure to the land of Chup, here in *Luka* also, Luka in “the greatest speech of his life as a performer” (p. 183) shows his skill as a storyteller. Ratatat tells him “you’ve certainly got their attention now” (p. 182).

Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Storyteller" says that the art of story-telling is "an artisan form of communication . . . It does not aim to convey that pure essence of the thing. . . It sinks in to life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again" (*Illuminations*, 2007, pp. 91-92). He further says that in the act of storytelling the relation between a storyteller and his/her listeners is the most important, in reproducing the stories:

the listener's naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by this interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of *reproducing the story*. Memory is the epic faculty par excellence (p. 97, emphasis mine).

He further argues that storytelling is the antithesis of information, because it thrives on containment and limitation ("prompt verifiability", 89). "Half the art of storytelling," he goes on to say, is "to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (89). Thus for Rushdie and Benjamin storytelling resists the totalitarian thinking by limiting or controlling society's potential definitions and interpretation. When Haroun asks Khattam-Shud why he hates stories he replies: "The world, however, is not for fun . . . The world is for controlling . . . inside every single story in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all . . ." (p. 161). The narrators' effort to rewrite and rewrite age-long stories in modern time while questioning the totalising conception of time and space from a heterological perspective leads to questioning the symbolic representation of the empire or the nation. The layered narratives of memory through which the novels reconstruct old stories is allegorical in two senses in that it exposes the act of signification by de-centring the symbol of the transcendental signifier (represented by Khattam-Shud and Aalim) while telling an allegorical story of personal and familial crisis intertwined with mythical stories. Both Khattam-Shud and Aalim represent the totalized account of experience that must suppress difference to maintain the illusion of its own totality; the story sea in *Haroun* and the story world in *Luka* on the other hand, represent a riot of diverse narratives that resist the drive toward assimilation and incorporation. Here Rushdie's aim is to imagine a form for the nation as a fluid, provisional entity defined by its capacity to incorporate difference and variation. In this respect, Rushdie's *Ocean of Story (Haroun)* and the *Magic Land of Story (Luka)* can be described with more accuracy as an attempt to give shape to the Lyotardian ideal. In Rushdie's vision of a plethora of 'small' stories, set in opposition to the 'grand mythology' promoted by Khattam-Shud and Aalim, there is an echo of Lyotard's famous distinction between *petites recits* and metanarratives in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984, p. 82). Whereas Lyotard's vision of competing narratives remains at the level of metaphysical generality, Rushdie's allegorical revision of Lyotard's attack on the Platonic tradition has a more specific focus. Rushdie's aim is to 'reimagine' a form of social and communal interaction. To my mind, Rushdie deftly explores 'memory' to reimagine a free communal interaction and to blur the boundary line between 'mininarratives' and 'metanarratives'.

The urge for retrospective readings of the past at the dusk of the twentieth century manifests itself as increasingly obsessions with memory what Andreas Huyssen (1995) calls *twilight memories*. The 'twilight' status of memory as the act of remembering, according to Andreas Huyssen, is concerned with a fissure between the past and the present—"the fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering its representations" (1995, pp. 1-9). The 'experiencing' of events and 'remembering' their representations are always central to Salman Rushdie's works. But, whereas in novels like *Midnight's Children* (1981) or *Shame* (1983), the protagonists mostly are the onlookers of the past and recount the past events as they experienced, the protagonists in the two children's fiction are both onlookers and participants of the present

and narrate the present events (as well as the past) as they experience. Though they do not experience the past events physically, they experience them through their mind and memory while listening to the stories of their father and now experience them physically while encountering them for the second time in their journeys into the story-worlds. Hence, for Haroun and Luka, the experiences and remembrances happen at the same time and become the same thing. In this study we have seen that memory can influence not only those who remember but also those who are remembered. Hence the concept of memory is not static as we can see in cases of *Haroun* and *Luka* where the protagonists' memories alter and change the fates of those who are remembered. Memory here in these two novels pushes the 'excess' or 'remains' of past to the 'foreground' of novels. Hence not only story/ history create memory but memory also creates its own version of story/ history.

Time can nourish and sustain age-old stories by reminiscence and remembrance of the past events. Stories can resist the homogeneous concept of time by making us think *backwards*; the characters of the story-world continue to live in our mind. The child-heroes undertake their imaginary journeys not only to save the life of his father but also many lives of the community. The story water is saved as well as the story-world. The multiple lives of fairy creatures and characters (like Water Genie, Iff, fallen gods) are saved. In reality, it is the grand restoration of memory. The forgotten happiness of all people of Kahani is restored as the consequences of their journeys. The 'private inside' of the child-heroes' memory is linked with that of the 'public outside' of the other worlds as well as with the city Kahani. To my mind, 'cultural memory' plays a vital role in Haroun and Luka's retelling their father's stories. According to Jan Assmann (1995), humans unlike animals have to find an implement to maintain their nature over generations and culture memory serves as such an implement. It is a concept for saving the knowledge that directs behavior and experience in social context that lasts over generations. For the Rashid family and the people of Kahani the memories of age-old stories and the telling and retelling them serve as this implement (by way of passing knowledge and wisdom) that maintained their nature over generations.

Characters like Haroun and Luka are always in the process of remaking their past lives. For them, memory is a "perpetually actual phenomena" and always in the process of "permanent evolution" (Nora, 1989, p. 8); and a part of 'an Undifferentiated eternal present'¹. While discussing the relation between history and memory in his book *History at the Limit of World-History*, Ranajit Guha (2002) proposes that:

. . . the role assigned to it [memory] is protective rather than nurturing. In other words, it is not for memory to hold the past in its womb and let time work on it slowly and creatively until it is ready to be *born again in repetition* . . . Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, has the doors of her temple open to all that survives time's ravages (p. 70, my emphasis).

Two important words in the above quotation, in my view, are 'protecting' and 'nurturing'. In this study we have seen that Rushdie's narrators are truly interested in nurturing their memory than protecting them.

In his essay "The Journey to the Past as a Journey into the Self", Ashis Nandy (2010), citing the instances of mythical characters like Arjuna, Bhima, Karna from the *Mahabharata* and

¹ Gyanendra Pandey (1999) in *Memory, History and the Question of Violence* quotes David Lowenthal's (1985) work *The Past is a Foreign Country*. P. 24. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. See reference section.

Nachiketa from *Kathopanishad*, finds the concept of “journey as a pregnant metaphor conspicuous in South Asia in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two epics which are centered on “the idea of exile” (*A Very Popular Exile*, 2010, 10). Nandy sees the metaphor of journey in South Asia as “a trope for growth, learning, the unfolding of personal or collective experience” and as ways of “self-exploration” and “self-realisation” (p. 8). Hence the journeys to “the strange or the unknown” generally “end up as private voyage to the other” (p. 8). Quite noteworthy is the phrase ‘private voyage to the other’ which, to my mind, can be applicable to the case of the journeys, undertaken by Haroun and Luka. Their journeys do not only explore their private self, but also self of the other. Both the other worlds, worlds of water and land, need them (Haroun and Luka) to save themselves (the worlds), though they are only outsiders. The “remembrance of life as a journey” or the “recaptured” life as “an intervention in the present” (Nandy, 2010, p. 9), to my view, act as central metaphors in both the novels. Hence, whether “all journeys in the imagination,” in the case of Nandy, can be called a “collapse into moments of imagination” (p. 10), the imaginary journeys, in the case of Rushdie, to my mind, are inventive (or discovering?) moments of recollections. “The poisoned city” (poisoned by Khattam-Shud and Aalim) in the novels becomes a kind of “remembered village” in the minds of the child-heroes (Nandy, 2010, 1, 15).

In their journeys both Haroun and Luka use their memories, full of the *stream-water*, and the *magic-land* of the story worlds, invented by their father; and their journeys too are remembered by their father. At the end of *Haroun*, Rashid Khalifa tells the story named “Haroun and the sea of stories” by “recalling” his “dream” (p. 204); and in *Luka*, Rashid does the same thing by “remembering” “the strangest dream” about Luka’s “adventure in the world of Magic” (p. 210). Rashid’s story inspires people to rise against the oppressive ruler; Luka’s story inspires the ex-gods to rise against the ruler of time Aalim; hence the stories can serve the ethical purpose as “a cohesive force in constructing a community” and thus “the flourishing of art” can be seen as “coterminous with the well being of life” (Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire*, 2013, pp. 162-163). Both Haroun and Luka begin their journeys with an eye to save the source of story-water from pollution (*Haroun*) and to save the characters of the story-world from destruction (*Luka*); interestingly and significantly they become the sources as well as the characters of their father’s stories at the end. It is significant because, it is not from their father’s story that we came to know the stories of Haroun and Luka. Rather the journeys that they undertake tell us the stories of his father, the story of Kahani and stories of other people. It is the story of Haroun and Luka, not Rashid’s.

In the scope of the two novels, as we have seen, the concept of ‘journey’ plays a pivotal role in the narratives. The characters are always on the road and memory is their constant guide. Do they succeed in their purpose? Do they succeed in revealing what they want to reveal with the use of their memories? Here I want to draw attention to a Bengali word *abishkar* which can be translated as both ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ in English. What do the characters succeed in – ‘discovery’ or ‘invention’—by revisiting the pasts through their memories? I will say that they discover their fates as invented (reinvented) by their memory and invent their fates as discovered (rediscovered) by their memories. Memories for these characters are like epiphanies, for in the sudden moments of discovery (invention) the discoverers (inventors) are also discovered (invented). Memory discovers when it revives the events of the past; memory invents when it changes the events of the past. The coexistence of ‘discovery of history’ and ‘invention of memory’ and ‘discovery of memory’ and ‘invention of history’ is the secret charm and essence of Salman Rushdie’s art of story-telling.

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