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"Ordinary Life? In this family we know there's no such thing." – The Child as the Saviour of the Father in Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life*

Ever since he published *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in 1990 as a gesture of literary defiance against the fatwa and in order to please his son Zafar who wanted his father to write a book that he would want to read, Salman Rushdie has found a place in the list of great novelists who also wrote for children such as James Joyce or Aldous Huxley. Indeed the title of his Booker of Bookers award winning novel of magical realism, *Midnight's Children* bears witness to his attachment to the land of lost childhood. Rushdie wrote *Luka and the Fire of Life* in 2010 as a gift for his second son Milan's twelfth birthday.[1] Rushdie was almost fifty years old when he became father a second time. The years that separated the older father from the younger son had made the father think right at the moment of his son's birth about his own mortality and contemplate leaving a literary heritage for him in order to help him come of age. Milan, who had read *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, knew that it was written for his brother and had been pressing his father to write one for him. Besides, Rushdie's own father was a bedtime story teller and it was his magical retelling of *Arabian Nights* stories that shaped Rushdie's own creative genius.[2] Rushdie wanted to convey the sense of filial bonding that is created by telling stories to Milan. Storytelling has always functioned as a bridge between generations.[3] Telling and receiving the story is very close to the heart of who we are and what we become, according to Rushdie.[4] The purpose of the book is, therefore, to impart the love for language games and hand down the story telling tradition as symbolic family properties by way of a postmodern fable belonging to the genre of fantasy quest. The ultimate message, of course, is one of love and it is clear in the last line of the acrostic offered to Milan as incipit to the book: *Naught but love makes magic real*.

Rushdie explained in an interview at the Harvard Bookshop that he resorted to writing comic books because he believed that a story should be told in a form that goes against its grain.[5]

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[1] Rushdie, Salman (2010), Luka and the Fire of Life, London, Jonathan Cape.
[2] Rushdie, Salman (2012), *Joseph Anton – A Memoir*, New York, Random House, p. 19.
[3] Skuba, Anne, "Storytelling," in *Expression, Bulletin of the National Advisory Council on Ageing*, Manitoba, Volume 14, Fall 2001, p.1.
[4] Rushdie, Salman in an interview granted to Anne Strainchamps of the radio programme, "To the Best of Our Knowledge," Wisconsin Public Radio, February 4, 2014. http://www.ttbook.org/listen/72626, consulted on 9 July 2015.
[5] Roy, Madhumita and Anjalai Gera Roy, "Haroun and Luka: A study of Salman Rushdie's talismanic stories," in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, volume 49, issue no 2, pp. 173-187. The authors insist on the Indo-Islamic visual, narrative and performative elements that are borrowed from the *Dastan* tradition and interwoven

The graver the theme, the lighter the form. However writing a second children's book after a successful first own carried its own challenges. He drew inspiration from Lewis Carroll who managed to write *Through the Looking Glass* after *Alice in Wonderland*, even though Alice had grown up in the meantime. In both *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka the fire of Life*, the sons receive the mission of saving the father. There is no religious undertone in the plot but rather a glance in the direction of the space opera *Star Wars* whose hero Anakin Skywalker is redeemed by his son Luke. Both the books have been variously described as "talismanic tales" and "postnationalist fairy tales" by critics.[6] In current critical parlance, *Luka and the Fire of Life* can be described as a portal-quest fantasy.[7]

Both the stories are set in the city of Kahani situated in the fictional land of Alifbay,[8] another name for the Bombay of Rushdie's childhood. However in the former, the emphasis is on tyranny and censorship, while in the latter it is about saving magic, the alternative world of imagination and its relationship with reality, in other words about literary creation au such. *Haroun* is a tale about the metamorphic nature of stories, their fluidity, and their propensity to change and combine to create new stories. Therefore Rushdie uses the water metaphor. In *Luka*, the metaphor is fire because the flame of life on Earth is kept alive by the Sun and because while researching for the book, Rushdie realized that man's quest for fire was perhaps the one of the oldest stories in human history irrespective of cultures.[9] The title plays, nevertheless, with the title of the tale *The Water of Life* by the Grimm brothers. The link between these two texts is made in *Luka and the Fire of Life* basically through an extended metaphor which inscribes the landscape of Kashmir as filigree in the art of narration:

> 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. The Lake of Wisdom, as is well known, stands in the shadow of the Mountain of Knowledge at whose summit burns the Fire of Life (8-9).

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into the texts of *Haroun* and *Luka*. The original cover illustration for *Luka* by Niroot Puttapipat shows this influence. https://himmapaan.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/lukanoflaps-1400.jpg, consulted 9 July 2015.

[6] Teverson, Andrew, "Salman Rushdie's Postnationalist Fairy Tales," in Robert Eaglestone, Martin McQuillan (eds.), *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 2013, London, Bloomsbury, p.72-85.

[7] Mendlesohn, Farah (2008), *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Wesleyan University Press, p.1. "In both portal and quest fantasies a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal to into an unknown place. […] The position of the reader in the quest and portal fantasy is one of companion audience, tied to the protagonist, and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding."

[8] *Kahani* means story in Hindi and *Alif* is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet.

[9] The Aztec Coyote, the Scandinavian Loki, the Greek Prometheus, the Polynesian Maui and the West African Anansi are the well known examples of stealers of fire in mythology.

The narrative does unfold as a sequel to *Haroun* in the sense that the names of the main characters are the same. When Rachid Khalifa, the Shah of Blah and Soraya, his wife have a second child after a long interval, they feel rejuvenated. Rachid Khalifa is a fictional remake of both Salman Rushdie and his father Anis Ahmed Rushdie. Similarly Soraya shares features of Rushdie's first wife Clarissa Luard and his third wife Elisabeth West.[10] Luka's elder brother Haroun, who is eighteen years his elder, teaches him many useful things. Rachid lives in a world of dreams and trains Luka with riddles to stimulate his intellect and stories to familiarize him with the parallel world of magic. Rachid's wife Soraya is "inconsolable" when she sees the father and son indulge in video games as she feels that video games are far removed from real life and therefore not useful for educating children, an opinion which the father does not share.[11] When Rachid falls into a deep sleep, again figure of speech to refer to the underground life Rushdie had to live after the fatwa pronounced by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Luka, accompanied by his pet animals a dog called bear and a bear called dog,[12] decides to steal the fire of life from the mountain of knowledge to bring his father back to life from his condition of "un-being" in a reversal of the oedipal myth. The fact that nobody has successfully stolen the fire so far and that somebody has to die in order to fulfill the quest is the catch and the trap that he has to bear in mind.

Luka outwits the gun toting Terminator like Old Man of the River[13] in a game of riddles by asking the very familiar question posed by the Sphinx to Oedipus. With the magic carpet of the Insultana of Ott, in other words his foul tongued mother Soraya in another dimension, he is able to cross the borderland between life and death by throwing itching powder on Ratshit, the OverRat of the Respectorate[14] of I, a territory where everyone says "ayes" to avoid any argument. The test of the three rings of fire turns out to be a joke because Captain Aag, the Respectorate's security chief, was the master of the circus from which Lula's pet dog and bear

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[10] Cf. Rushdie, Salman, *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*.

[11] Salman Rushdie, 2010 audio interview on Video Games and the Future of Story Telling in Big Think. http://www.salmanrushdie.com/big-think-video-games-and-the-future-of-storytelling/ consulted 9 July 2015. The loose structure of the narrative of the video game *Read Dead Redemption* gives the player agency. Videogames stimulate thinking and hand eye coordination.

[12] This confusion of categories may an allusion to the problems of dyslexia. According to the German ophthalmologist Rudolph Berlin who invented the term, dyslexia presumes right handedness and is caused by a left sided cerebral lesion. In Rushdie's novel, Luka is described as left handed. In Rushdie's *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*, the driver Dennis of the special branch's protection team is called the horse. Rushdie's protection team consisted of *Stanley Doll and Ben Winters*, shortened to Stan and Benny (p.139). They might have been fictionalized in the form of pet animals in *Luka*.

[13] The Old Man of the River first appears in *Midnight's Children* as Tai the boat man. His reappearance here allows Rushdie to connect his fictional creations and make them part of a family epic.

[14] A pun on the word inspectorate.

escaped. They know the trick and come out unscathed. Meanwhile, Firebug, the spy has raised the alarm. But to get to the Heart of Magic, the Aalim[15] Country, Luka's mother's carpet is of no use. One of his mother's friends, The Changer Gyara-Jinn, becomes a horse and takes them straight towards the danger across the Rainbow Bridge, an unmistakable allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*. Another of his mother's friends, the Coyote creates a distraction by running in the opposite direction. Luka's pet animals do their bit to entertain the audience. Ratatat, the red squirrel advises Luka to practice cunning to face the last step. The Manga inspired figure of the fire thief is caught by the gods who want to punish him. Neither Soraya nor Nobodaddy is there to guide him. But plucky Luka amazes the angry gods into silence by telling them the naked truth rather than a tall story. The Heart of Magic belongs to his father in so far as he is its creator. But for his stories, they would have been long dead. It is in their interests to keep him alive. Luka retrieves the fireball and rushes home to put it in his dying father's mouth and revive his father in the nick of time. Nobodaddy has by now left the scene.

This article focuses on the representation of a contemporary family that is tested by an insurmountable crisis from outside and which tries to prevent implosion from within by preserving the eternal values of love, loyalty, courage, cleverness, endurance, and optimism. The presuppositions of an ordinary everyday life are highlighted by the family's confrontation with what is "odd"[16] - a life shattered by a death sentence, an unsteady sense of time, reversals of all sorts, curses coming true, words becoming magical and myths overturned in postcolonial landscapes. The fairy tale like family reunion at the end contrasts, however, with Rushdie's quotation from Edmund Leach in his autobiographical memoir *Joseph Anton* published in 2012: "the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents."[17] The quest narrative gets multicultural and metanarrative to emphasize the unavoidable of intrusion of the unreal in reality that makes life stranger than fiction.

"Ordinary Life? In this family we know there's no such thing" is a statement made by Soraya, Luka's mother at the end of his adventures (214). This is obviously an allusion made to the pronouncement of the fatwa, a fateful event that sent Author Rushdie into hiding, threatened

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[15] *Aalim* means man of learning in Arabic.

[16] Stanley Cavell draws our attention to the oscillation of philosophy between oddness and non-oddness in his essay entitled "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary." Indeed according to him, the extraordinary is ordinary for Beckett and the ordinary is extraordinary for Chekov. Cf. The Tanner lectures on Human Values delivered at Stanford University, April 3 and 8, 1986. tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a.../**cavell**88.pdf, consulted on 9 July 2015.

[17] Rushie, Salman, *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*, p. 104.

the safety of his wife, children and family, indeed even translators of his novel *The Satanic Verses*.[18] As Rushdie had to fight for his life instead of simply living it, he spent more time in fighting than in writing. This resulted in the writer's anxiety and a creative block. Going underground created tensions of its own. It preserved life in the biological sense but not in the socio-cultural sense. When the secret police asked him to change his name, Rushdie considered it as a fall into anonymity, a life in death. Rushdie's memoir *Joseph Anton* evokes the dreadful consequences of this plight: the divorce with Marianne Wiggins, remarriage with Elisabeth West and the destructive passion for Padmalakshmi. But here in *Luka*, he allegorizes the singular loss of control over his life as a see-through body for the child's sake.

The ordinary is conceived as a structure of repetition, while the experience of the fantastic is linked to sudden change. Duty, familiarity, simplicity, stability, certainty, regularity and predictability form part of ordinariness. The expectations of an ordinary life of, let us say, a middle class family in Britain presuppose a loving couple, charming kids, a comfortable income, a cosy home, children playing and the parents keeping an eye on them and the perspective of "a stretching shady avenue of years" before them to quote Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*.[19]

The French philosopher Pierre Macherey has stated the potential of the ordinary to become the extraordinary in the following terms:

> Everyday life is the plane on which the encounter between the universal and the particular takes place, which, instead of placing them in continuity and in harmony with each other, takes the form of a collision with the uncanny that is exposed to the most sudden of reversals.[20]

In *Luka and the Fire of Life* the father of the family exercises the most extraordinary profession of dreaming and storytelling. He behaves more like a child than like an adult when he indulges in videogames. But when he falls into a deep sleep like some fairy tale characters, he resembles a ghost, Nobodaddy, a figure borrowed from William Blake's comical reduction of God-the-Father. This ugly *Doppelgänger* is the embodiment of the figure of the author as

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[18] Hitoshi Igarashi, Rushdie's Japanese translator, was stabbed to death on 11 July 1991. Ettore Capriolo, the Italian translator, was seriously injured in a stabbing in Milan on 3 July 1991. Aziz Nesin, the Turkish translator, was the intended target in the events that led to the Sivas massacre on 2 July 1993 in Turkey. Indeed William Nygaard, the publisher in Norway, was shot three times in an attempted assassination in Oslo in October 1993, but survived. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Satanic_Verses, consulted on 9 July 2015.

[19] Rushdie, Salman (1988), *The Satanic Verses*, Viking, London, p.51.

[20] Macherey, Pierre, « Le quotidien, objet philosophique ? », Articulo - Journal of Urban Research [Online], 1, 2005 devoted to Plural Perspectives on Daily Activities, http://articulo.revues.org/871, consulted on 9 July 2015.

perceived by misled and hostile readers. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, the father who is physically there but symbolically absent perturbs the son's sense of time. While he is getting slow, the urgency to find a solution falls upon the shoulders of young Luka and accelerates his race. The disturbed relationship with the ordinary sense of time is a peculiar feature of this troubled family.

Reversal is a tactic that Rushdie uses to signify the extraordinary in the family. Luka is left handed. His brother reminds him that that the left path is associated with darkness. Luka's pet dog is called bear and his pet bear dog and both speak the human language. The substitution of the literal for the metaphoric to create a sense of the absurd is a constant in the novel. Rachid Khalifa designates his right hand nobody and his left hand non-sense. When he tickles his son, he could thus easily get away with it by saying it was nobody and non-sense.

The fantastic occurs not only in the form of unusual events and supernatural beings but also in the form of extraordinary powers. For instance, Luka can throw a curse and his curses come true. This seems to be an inherited trait as the practice of cursing by older women is also mentioned by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Cursing belongs to the register of magic like spells. Indeed J.K. Rowling helped develop an augmented reality video game called *Book of Spells* as a companion volume to the Harry Potter series. However, neuro-psycho-sociologists and linguists have come up with some theoretical insights into the act of cursing. According to Timothy Jay,

> cursing is rarely meaningless or purposeless [...] The functions or purposes of cursing [...] serve three independent forces a) neurological control, b) psychological motives and restraints and c) socio-cultural restrictions [...]. We learn to live in language and exist through the language we learn. Cursing is an emotional element of language that alters the way we view ourselves and others.[21]

Rachid Khalifa teaches new words to his son, plays with words, coins new words and creates funny portmanteau words such as “permination” to signify permanent termination. He sprinkles his text with mystifying abbreviations like OTT (over the top), hieroglyphs and multilingual variations (*Rätselmeister*, *Roi de l'énigme*, the *Pahelian ka Padisha*). Such linguistic transpositions show the child that magic is first of all in the words and initiate it to the familial idiolect.

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[21] Jay, Timothy (2000). *Why we curse, a neuro-psycho-social theory of speech*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Philadelphia/Amsterdam, p.81

The chapter entitled "Into the Heart of Magic" has several dimensions. At the literary level, it is a luminous and postcolonial response to Marlowe's Heart of Darkness in so far as it refers to the Great Pure Realm, the legendary library of Ling pao T'ien-tsun,[22] the Taoist deity, the heavenly elder who controls the interaction between Ying and Yang. At the psychological level, it symbolizes the child's imagination untainted by reality. It also constitutes a *carte de tendre* of the writer's native Kashmir. It stands in contrast to the seats of power that the author is obliged to visit by being a victim of international terrorism.

The rather familiar pattern of the quest narrative is renewed and reinvented by intertextual infusions. To start with Bear the Dog and Dog, the bear, they sing and dance like Disney cartoons. The amphibian vehicle named Argo in which Luka and his mates travel to Respectorate of I combines *Odyssey* and *Star Trek*. Kipling's Barrack room ballads are echoed in the song that the dog sings with a foreign accent: *Yes, I am Barak of the It-Barak/ The immortal Dog Men of Yore* (30). There are also echoes of Arundhati Roy's Meenachal in the description of the green and slimy river Silsila. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is parodied in the chapter entitled fiery doughnuts. The Indo-Anglian irreverence in the book harks back to G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatter*. “If you are going to be a thief, steal the good stuff,” Soraya advises Luka.[23] Rushdie imitates Tolkien in the sense that he elaborates a distinct geography of the magic land, its history and mythology. He also copies Charles Dickens's cadence and description, taking the cue from his *Bleak House*. As for Rachid Khalifa manifests a Peter Pan like delight when he plays with Luka. He tries to get Luka interested in H.G. Wells like time travel. No wonder Kingston University's team BAFF in association with Random House has brought out an animation of *Luka and the Fire of Life*.[24] What is remarkable is the way in which Rushdie interweaves the story of fire thieves from different cultures in this modern tale.

Rachid Khalifa succeeds in making Luka vicariously envisage the death of the father by picturing him under intensive care nourished with intravenous drips and cardiac monitor, if not accept it. This playful rehearsal via story telling psychologically prepares the teenager to

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[22] Another common spelling for the same name is Lingbao Tianzun.
[23] Rushdie, Salman, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, p. 197.
[24] See Team Yaokuza's entry [Jonathan Ballalo, Jun Hyoung Chun, Katherine Robson & Yao Xiang] on Vimeo. https://vimeo.com/22122026. Another entry by Sam Falconer at https://vimeo.com/23823581. See also https://vimeo.com/17992661 for an entry by Sophie Powell, Timothy O'Leary, Moira Lam and Zach Ellams; https://vimeo.com/30242538 for an entry by Sandra Oehirli. All consulted on 9 July 2010.

accept mortality. Indeed Rushdie borrows the technique of multi-lives and temporary deaths, levels and saving points, from video games[25] to give rhythm to his narrative and has justified it saying that children's books should be written in an ordinary language like that of video games. The quest teaches Luka that he needs the transgressive energy of a trickster to survive. When the child learns to break the rules, he grows up. He solves the Oedipus conflict by realizing that at one point sure footed choices haves to be made; that he has to manage his life without his father or mother. "Something more powerful than his own nature takes control of him" (p.155) and he talks back to the Gods to save his father.

As for adults, they learn to confront entropy by interacting with children. The loyal dog and the affectionate bear that revert to their human forms teach Luka that what must die is the cumbersome past. Their soul transformation seems to be inspired by Native American myths of healing. Writing an adventure story constitutes for the mature author an attempt at fighting decay and reinventing one's self. If in the *Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie accustomed us to a mix of enchantment, supernaturality, sorcellery and witchcraft, in *Luka*, he proposes a postmodern rewriting of the trickster Puck. But the fundamental message is a rewriting from a line from the well known phrase from *The Tempest* ("We are such stuff, As dreams are made on," Act IV, Scene 1, lines 146-147): "Our dreams are the real truths (157)."

Rushdie has said time and again that man is a story telling animal. He believes that in our willingness to suspend disbelief and play, we manufacture our future reality. That is why nothing is just a story, a mere game. The fairy tale end of the narrative which describes a homemade dinner in which a perfectly cooked up, pleasantly consumable and hybrid menu of "happiness soup, curried excitement and great-relief ice cream" (214) is served sounds deceptive when the reader has in mind the more realistic version of the author's escape from the clutches of death and the strain in his family life that his autobiographical novel *Joseph Anton* gives. As Chloe Buckley[26] remarks the portal narratives always offer a return to the real.

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[25] Kumar, Dinesh, "Video Game, Fairy Tale and the Fabulator as Healer: Postmodern Catharsis in Salman Rushdie's Luka and the Fire of Life," in *European Academic Research*, Vol. 1, Issue 8, November 2013, pp.2071-2086.

[26] Buckley, Chloe, "An impulsive leap into the real: How 'portal' narratives offer a return to the Lacanian real," in *The Luminary*; Issue 1 devoted to intersections, Summer 2009.
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