



Video Game, Fairy Tale and the Fabulator as Healer: Postmodern Catharsis in Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life*

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Abstract:

Fairy tales and Video games are perceived as agencies of emotional and moral cleansing, especially, of young adults. The unprecedented popularity of Harry Potter series is a testimony to the fact the world of magic has an affective and cathartic function in the modern society. Salman Rushdie is probably aware of this pulse of the young adult readers and his novel, Luka and the Fire of Life, written with Milan, his teenage son as the ideal reader, is a delightful blend of fairytale, magic realism and video game. This paper will examine the way in which Rushdie uses the paradigm of game theory in the novel to create an alternate reality of the World of Magic to facilitate a console-like use of a print-in narrative. The paper will also see how 'gaming,' by extension, the fabulous use of lexical units provides Luka, the protagonist and Rushdie, the fabulator, an affective axis that affords a postmodern psycho-moral cleansing of violence.

Key words: video game, fairy tale, modern society, magic realism, game theory, Salman Rushdie.

Story-telling, in Rushdie's world of fiction, has always been life-sustaining – be it Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* or Moraes, the Moor, in *Moor's Last Sigh*. It gains more prominence in *Luka and the Fire of Life* as Luka has launched himself into a project of stealing story to revive his father,

Rashid Khalifa, the great story teller of the city of Kahani. The paper will make an attempt to prove how Rushdie leads the readers into a narrative full of multi-lives, exit buttons and temporary deaths to sharpen their hand-eye coordination and an affective catharsis of pent up violence.

Recent trends in young adult fiction show a combination of fantasy writing and video games. Such a fiction uses video game as a mode of narration, generating more interactive possibility for the narrator or the focal character. It also enhances the postmodern domain of play with ample use of fabulation, magic realism, science fiction, fairy tale and fantasy. This new genre of fiction has embedded in it violence and use of fire arms as one would find them in a fairy tale. It would be an interesting enterprise to see if such a work leads to some kind of catharsis – affective, narrative or receptive. This paper is an attempt to consider Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* as a narrative that touches upon techniques of fairy tale and gaming and to see how these domains act as outlets for emotions. Further, it is also within the purview of the paper to examine Rushdie as a fabulator who delights himself in creating a self-conscious verbal artifice and suggests a verbal/narrative mode of postmodern catharsis.

Fantasy is defined as “a kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to the realistic representation of the known world” (Baldick 2008, 125). As a narrative framework, fantasy is expected to include a variety of literary genres such as fairy tale, dream vision, fable, romance and science fiction. If one can stretch the definition a bit into the context of 21st century, one can include within the ambit of fantasy gaming and magic, though there has been attempts on the part of certain theorists to differentiate fantasy from magic realism and hypertexts. However, if one overlooks these theoretical differences from a broader perspective and if one considers their strategies, one can align under the paradigm of fantasy, the elements of gaming and magic realism. Could catharsis be a strategy or

outcome of fantasy? Are video games and fairy tales affective, if not mimetic, and thereby an outlet for suppressed urge for violence? These questions could be answered, at least in parts, if one makes a close reading of *Luka and the Fire of Life*.

One has to keep in mind that video game is not a genre in fiction but rather an interactive medium. It is closer to a visual experience while a conventional fiction is verbal. Purists in literature consider visual media and computer games as threats to the very act of reading as they can easily lure the young minds away from books. Rushdie, however, seems to imply in *Luka and the Fire of Life* that video game and verbal narrative can have a symbiotic relation and the readers can have the experiences of both the media simultaneously. It could also be argued that Rushdie has made an attempt to revolutionize the narrative technique by using the conventions of gaming, and thereby trying to revitalize fiction with computer games. Regardless of the purpose, the outcome in this experiment seems to be an interesting combination of simulated fairy tale with its harmless demons, animals, spells, curses and ghosts that leads the focal character, Luka, a child (someone like Harry Potter) and the readers to a new experience of fantasy. However, even a casual reader will not be able to overlook the abundant use of violence, abusive language and impersonation in this quasi-simulated novel and this paper tries to consider the psycho-moral impact of such instances of violence, use of language and role play.

Most video games have fairy tale characters, introducing the players into a world of game which has familiar characters and situations. This use of the fairy tale elements in video game is what Marshal McLuhan would term the 'rearview effect' which is an influence and the presence of traits of an earlier medium on another medium that develops later. However, Rushdie in *Luka and the Fire of Life* not only integrates fairy tale into a video game-like narrative but also employs what could be termed the reverse of rearview effect – that is, the use

of the elements of a medium that developed later on an existing medium. Rushdie achieves what could be called a 'telescope effect' by importing the conventions, tools and experiences of gaming into a novel or a narrative. Thus, one can easily feel that Rushdie's narrative in *Luka and the Fire of Life* has a backward integration to a fairy tale and a forward integration to the futuristic visual narratives of gaming. What is common in fairy tale and video game is the ample expression of violence, verbal or otherwise, leading to an experience of simulated violence and a catharsis of the impulse for the real violence.

Game theorists argue that video games are not merely Quixotic or deforming but attempts to create independent-minded adults out of children and young adults by making them understand the values of self defense, protection of others and the need to fight against overwhelming odds. Adam Thierer argues that children will not grow into responsible citizens if they are brought up in "an intellectual bubble". (Thierer 2010, 26). Even as this thinking is undoubtedly controversial, one will have to admit that history of art and entertainment has always been engaged in controversies in terms of its impact on culture and society – the latest being what Thierer terms as "the moral panics" about video games. Every new medium has created such panics among the parents, and video game is no exception. Rushdie himself seems to be with the younger generation in his novel and instead of ringing an alarm on the adverse effects of video games, he seems to have laid faith on young adults in their ability to come to terms with gaming and its effects on the moral values.

Marc LeBlanc discusses the following points while explaining what makes gaming enjoyable:

- Sensation – game as sense pleasure
- Fantasy – game as make-believe
- Narrative – game as unfolding story
- Challenge – game as obstacle course
- Fellowship – game as social framework

Discovery – game as uncharted territory
Expression – game as a soapbox
Submission – game as mindless pastime
(Marc LeBlanc 2010)

LeBlanc's theory explicates the point that gaming has in its ambit elements of storytelling such as fantasy, narrative and discovery. This possibility of using game for more than one purpose might have urged Rushdie to explore it as a structural device in his novel. Lewis Pulsipher explains how video games can be highly useful as they can offer different levels of challenges for the user. He says:

Video games can be particularly good at managing the level of challenge, either through adaptive programming, via the difficulty setting, or through increasingly difficult levels in games that use levels. (Pulsipher 2010)

Pulsipher also appreciates the impact of role playing games wherein the player can assume the roles of dragon hunters or trouble shooters. He also argues that though these situations are simulated and thus artificial, they make the game more enjoyable. He classifies games into two – Story Dominant Games and Rule Dominant Games. He explains that in a Story Dominant game, there is a dream to be fulfilled and it invokes a story, and the game turns out to be the expression of the story. The Rule Dominant games on the other hand, emerge out of the rules and not from following a story. Such games have a set of rules which could be altered by the players. Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* is more aligned to a Story Dominant game as the protagonist's journey into the world of game, also called the World of Magic, unfolds a story for himself and for the readers.

Pulsipher also classifies games into two more categories on the basis of adaptations that the players make. He talks about long term planning games and the games that demand adapting to changing circumstances. He considers games like

chess and checkers under the first category while many card games as the second variety. He also considers adaptation as more important a skill in gaming than long term planning. He remarks: “for a variety of reasons, adaptation is probably the more common preference among the video games”. (Pulsipher 2010). Rushdie, in fact, prefers his focal character, Luka to make a series of adaptations in the novel with each chapter designed as a new level of game, which poses more challenges. For instance, in Chapter Three, Luka encounters an old man who challenges him to a game of riddle. Here, Luka’s adaptability helps him to negotiate this old man as he imports his experience of riddling he had under his father’s supervision. Another adaptation that he displays is that he recognizes this old man to be one of the characters created by his father, Rashid Khalifa, a great story teller of the City of Kahani. This adaptation gives Luka the upper hand in their battle of wisdom. Yet another instance of Luka’s adaptation to changing circumstances is in the fourth Chapter, titled, “The Insultana of Ott”. In this chapter, Luka, who has to select his weapon to attack the thin skinned rats to help the queen of Otters, Soraya, opts for bombs made of itching powder. This weapon makes the rats scratch themselves to death.

Pulsipher also talks about entertainment and challenge as two significant impulses behind gaming. He indicates that traditional notion of a game is that it is a competition or a series of challenges. Dungeons, rivers, dragons and monsters pose these challenges and the player is supposed to be a good guy who is pitted against a bad guy who creates an unending series of challenges. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, there are bad guys – Ratshit, Luka’s classmate of the real world and Captain Aag, the wicked circus master in the World of Magic. Pulsipher also points out the possibility of the second type of game that entertains, not challenges. He considers that playing against people online tends to be challenging while playing with a terminal tends to be entertaining. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*,

Luka's mastery over gaming and his successive negotiation of nine levels offer him great entertainment.

Danilo Curci and Terenzio Formenti use the term 'cathartic narration' to explain how narration itself can be a cathartic act by putting together various skills and components of one personality. They indicate that a good narrative will bring together dream and reality; rationality and fantasy, good and bad and positive and negative. They amplify this theory further:

To put in contact and into positive interference, the opposites, so that they will become a couple of forces promoting the growth and maturation of one's personality: joy and pain; cheerfulness and sadness; happiness and unhappiness, to favour the best harmony that is possible, and the possible serenity. (Curci and Formenti 2010)

The World of Magic in *Luka and the Fire of Life* is an example of a narration that contains opposites – the opposites which lead to a catharsis. Rushdie presents Luka in his World of Magic wherein everything operates under the principle of contrary, ensuring a cathartic narration in its place. This dense piling of contraries and the unreal could be tested in the very first chapter of the novel itself. Located in the world of reality, the narrator prepares his focal character, Luka and his readers for this contrary World of Magic:

So everyone in Kahani was fully aware that there was a World of Magic existing in parallel with our own non-magic one, and from that Reality came White Magic, Black Magic, dreams, nightmares, stories, lies, dragons, fairies, blue-bearded genies, mechanical mind-reading birds, buried treasure, music, fiction, hope, fear, the gift of eternal life, the angel of death, the angel of love, interruptions, jokes, good ideas, rotten ideas, happy endings, in fact almost everything of any interest at all. (Rushdie 2010, 9)

Luka and the Fire of Life, which is a sequel to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, begins with a lot of inter-textual

references to this former fantasy written by Rushdie. Luka is the younger brother of Haroun and like Haroun, he lives in the City of Kahani in the Land of Alifbay. After being cursed by a magician, Aag, Luka's father enters a long sleep and Luka is expected to revive him by bringing the Fire of Life from the World of Magic. He has to steal the Fire of Life, which in fact is a story. This means that Luka has to steal a story from a story which makes his task even more difficult. Stealing, thus, gets contextualised in the story and it is also naturalized by Luka who enters the World of Magic as a player entering a video game. The framework made of fairy tale, story, magic and video game scales down the impact of stealing and gives it a cathartic function. Ultimately, Luka doesn't steal anything real, yet he understands the psychology of stealing in his journey into the combined world of fairy tale and video game.

Rushdie takes the readers in *Luka and the Fire of Life* right into the world of stories and raises, subsequently, the question – can story-telling be cathartic? The answer seems to be in the affirmative as the following eight chapters of the novel pile up a number of stories narrated with a breathless tempo as Luka, like Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children*, is caught in a 'race against time'. Luka has to undergo all the adventures of the World of Magic by playing all nine levels of the game and yet be the focal character of the narrative. He understands towards the end of the narrative that the stories have really kept him alive and that he has not really saved his father but his father's stories and characters have helped him in his hazardous journey. Further, in the stories, Luka also encounters evil forces and in the process of negotiating them, he achieves maturation and a balanced emotional state.

At the beginning of the narrative, Rushdie reminds the readers that the fire in the World of Magic is protected by the Aalim, the learned ones. This prepares the readers for the puzzles, riddles and twists in the narrative and language. They follow predictably, creating a series of brain teasers for the

readers. For instance, readers have to keep in mind many terminologies, rules and inversions of the World of Magic to get a hold on the chapters which follow. In Luka's world, for example, bear is a dog and dog is a bear, and if bitch is the feminine gender for a dog, bearina is the feminine of a bear. Similarly, Luka and his companions use abbreviations like P2C2E for a 'Process too Complicated to Explain' and M2C2E for a 'Machine too Complicated to Explain.' Besides, elephants which Luka comes across are the Memory Birds called Duck and Drake. These inversions and defamiliarised use of objects, animals and language come back in the narrative to test the memory of the readers. Later, Luka enters a zone in his game called, 'The Limits of Memory.' Metaphorically, the readers are also taken to the limits of their memory and reason and those who reach there undergo another catharsis – they reach the limits of the unreal, contraries and fantasy that Curci and Formenti talk about and come back to the real world, enriched with the cathartic humour that a fairy tale provides.

Rushdie also prepares his young adult readers for a world of violence, as it is predictable in the frame narrative of a video game. The omniscient narrator gets into the consciousness of Luka to point out how he, and possibly the readers of his age, are aware of the rules, fights, tools and stages of a game:

Fortunately for Luka, he lived in an age in which an almost infinite number of parallel realities had begun to be sold as toys. Like everyone he knew, he had grown up destroying fleets of invading rocket ships, and been a little plumber on a journey through many bouncing, burning, twisting, bubbling levels to rescue a prissy princess from a monster's castle, and metamorphosed into a zooming hedgehog and a street fighter and a rock star, and stood his ground undaunted in a hooded cloak while a demonic figure with stubby horns and a red-and-black face leapt around him slashing a double-ended light sabre at his head. Like everyone he knew, he had joined imaginary communities in cyberspace, electro-clubs in which he adopted the identity of, for example, an Intergalactic

Penguin named after a member of the Beatles, or, later, a completely invented flying being whose height, hair colour and even sex were his to choose and alter as he pleased. Like everyone he knew. (Rushdie 2010, 11-12)

The narrator also prepares the readers to enter a world that is mediated by magic. As Luka realizes, readers also realize that death is not a permanent status in game and hence killing or the use of arms are not serious crimes. Luka has to wade through different levels of the game that offers multi life and temporary deaths. Thus the game, by extension the narrative, purges Luka and young readers of the casual guilt, crime and offences associated with growing up.

Characters in this novel do not restrain themselves in hurling curses and abuses. Captain Aag, the black-tongued magician calls Luka, "Pigmy Hexter, warlock infant and pint-sized maledictor." Luka, who himself is black-tongued, hurls similar abuses at Aag and later, at all his opponents whom he comes across in the World of Magic. These abuses are mantled in figurative language and hence they provide an expressive, affective cathartic outlet for the pent up aggression. However, these abuses do not come out in Luka's world of reality. So, he remains a good guy in his family.

Luka decides to enter the World of Magic with a sense of guilt and a burden of responsibility after he realizes that he alone was the one who had brought a terrible curse on his family, forcing his father into a long sleep. His subsequent journey and the game that he plays make him understand that one has to get over the burden of guilt and the fear of death to live with some degree of confidence. Luka purges himself of guilt and the fear of the unknown as he proceeds punching, kicking and hurling missiles at a number of creatures. His return to the City of Kahani is after emotional and psychological negotiations with the Fear of Death and with the awareness that people die and death will have to be confronted and naturalized.

Throughout the narrative, Luka and other characters, refer to an exit button that facilitates a skip over a level that one dislikes in the game. The whole narrative with its magic, fantasy, fairy tale characters and the humorous absurdities, appears to be an exit button for the readers – a temporary exile from reality. Just as Luka may need this exit button in the world of video game, readers may also need such an escape route, to go back to their world of reality, refreshed. What Rushdie does here is to place reality and fantasy not as opposites but as the representation of the real and the counter real – two experiences that run parallel.

Luka and the Fire of Life is also a narrative about story telling. It has in its objective a post modern metanarrative function – how to use a story against another story or how to use the narrative against the narrator. Further, it also blurs the boundaries between the domains such as game, story, fiction and fairy tale by allowing the characters like Luka, the semi-transparent copy of his father- Nobodady, bear the dog, dog the bear and Soraya, the Queen of Otters to assume these locations at their will. For instance, though Luka is not the narrator of the novel, and that there is an omniscient narrator, the readers continue to get the field of view seen over the shoulders of Luka. This becomes very evident when Luka enters the World of Magic. In this world, the view that the readers get is that of the monitor and the counters which appear on it. This indicates that it is Luka who manipulates the point of view of the narrator and that it is not the narrator who creates Luka. With this device, Rushdie undermines both the reliability of the narrator and the authorial control of the novelist in a postmodern touch.

Story-telling is also an act of affective release. Rashid Khalifa's stories, as Luka realizes in his journey, have not only revived ancient Gods, Goddesses and Monsters but also have created a World of Magic that is eternally recuperative for readers as it provides them an escape from regimental reasons.

Nobodaddy, at one point, reminds Luka how stories lead to an interpersonal cathartic narration:

“You of all boys should know that Man is a Storytelling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning and his lifeblood. Do rats tell tales? Do porpoises have narrative purpose? Do elephants ele-phantasise? You know as well as I do that they do not. Man alone burns with books.” (Rushdie 2010, 34)

These questions, humourously though, highlight the cathartic function of narrative and fantasy.

Time and space are two factors that remind human beings how they are transfixed in routines. Games provide an outlet from these fixities that wear their minds out. The game that Luka selects for himself, has time jumps and space jumps. These jumps, though throw people out of gear in a game, can also help them to reach places imaginatively, making them Time Travellers. Nobodaddy explains:

Also, on account of the odd relationship between time and space, the people who do manage some time-jump sometimes space-jump at the same time and end up... in places where they simply don't belong. (Rushdie 2010, 61)

Past, often, is a burden of guilt and unpleasant memories. A futuristic game, as the one Luka plays, sends future to change the past. A game, as Luka suggests, helps the player to rearrange the memories and chaotic experiences of the past in a cathartic future. Luka's doubt about time echoes this possibility:

If time was a River eternally flowing – and here it was, here was the River of Time! – did that mean that the Past would always be there and the Future, too, already existed? (Rushdie 2010, 63)

Chapter Four, “Insultana of Ott,” depicts a hilarious battle between Otters and Rats. Flying Otters, called the Otter Air Force (OAF), attack the hyper sensitive Rats with huge

quantities of gloop, egg yolk and rotten vegetables. Luka also comes under the attack of Otters and his life-counter in his field of vision comes down. Although in a game, he responds: "That's as may be... but when you are on the receiving end of the attack, it's hard to be sympathetic, to be honest with you." (Rushdie 2010, 82) This verbal articulation of reciprocal aggression too is cathartic as it is more simulated than in reality. Later, Luka helps Otters with his idea of Great Itch Bombing. Though the attack on Rats has scenes of horrors, Rushdie scales down the violence with defamiliarizing humour, the possibilities of the World of Magic and the absurdities of the animal world:

The thin-skinned masters of the Respectorate were literally scratching themselves to bits, actually ripping themselves apart, until there was nothing left of them but lumps of mangy fur and grey, ugly meat. The shrieking of the rats reached a terrible crescendo, and then slowly the air grew quieter, and silence fell. At the very end Luka saw the Over-Rat himself come running down the street towards the River of Time, slashing himself as he ran, and at the end of the street he leapt into the River with a terrible cry and, as he was the one Rat in the World of Magic who was unable to swim, because he had always been too lazy and spoiled to take the trouble to learn, he drowned in the Temporal Flow. (Rushdie 2010, 90)

As Luka advances to different levels of the game, he learns that the childhood rules imposed by the parents will have to be transgressed, though it is only in a game. He breaks the rule – "don't talk to strangers" (Rushdie 2010, 102) – when he is fired with white Mist Balls as he reaches the level of the game called "The Limits of Memory." He talks his way out of trouble and this transgression too is cathartic.

Challenges are the significant aspects of a video game and they prepare the player to take decision and for the adult world. Luka, while finishing the nine levels of the game to become a successful fire thief, meets a series of challenges

posed by the Rats, The Eddies, Mist Balls, The Three Jo-s, and El Tiempo – the whirlwind. These challenges make him wise in the world of game.

Captain Aag comes back in the novel as the fierce demon of anger riding a dragon, Jaldibadal. As the Titan of Rage of the underworld, he urges his dragon to attack Luka and his friends. The expressions he uses create images of violence and aggression but the real violence is diluted by the hyperbolic rhetoric that Rushdie adds to Captain Aag's words: "Cook them!... Grill them, roast them, blast them, toast them! Bear sausages for dinner! Dog chops! Boy cheeks! Cook them and let's eat!" (Rushdie 2010, 123-24)

In the seventh chapter, "The Fire of Life," Luka reaches close to Fire which he wants to steal. He thinks of using his friends, Bear the Dog and Dog the Bear to accomplish his task. Here, for the first time, Rushdie uses italics in a large section of the text to indicate the interiority of Luka. When the issues of stealing and exploiting his friends become more of a moral situation than a psychological one, Rushdie drops the omniscient point of view and captures Luka's thoughts directly in his protagonist's interior monologue:

It seems there is no such thing as a purely good deed, a completely right action. Even this task, which took on for the very best of reasons, involves making choices that are not that "good", choices that might even be "wrong" (Rushdie 2010, 154)

Perhaps, Luka's real purgation is reflected in understanding the secret of time. He learns that in a tale, as in a game, time is fluid, making an alternate world. His thoughts reveal this cathartic understanding of time:

Our dreams are the real truths – our fancies, the knowledge of our hearts. We know that Time is a river, not a clock, and that it can flow the wrong way, so that the world becomes more backward instead of less, and that it can jump sideways, so that everything changes in an instant. We know that the River

of Time can loop and twist and carry us back to yesterday or forward to the day after tomorrow. (Rushdie 2010, 157)

At the end of the novel, Luka emerges as a superhero, as the only one to have stolen the Fire of Life and with this fire, he revives Rashid Khalifa, and by extension, his stories. This role play that Luka does is also cathartic as it is not easy to be a superhero in real life. Game makes it possible for Luka and by getting into the field of view of Luka, readers also become virtual superheroes.

Even when Luka completes all levels of the game, Rushdie does not allow the conventions of the fairy tale to recede into the background of his narrative. With bear, dog, otters, four dragons, a cayote, rats and a flying carpet, the fairy tale world enriches the video game that Luka plays. This world of the unreal or the world of wise animals leads Luka and readers to negotiate the violence in videogame by aligning it to the harmless, hyperbolic violence of fairy tales.

Thus, what Rushdie manages in this unique work is a postmodern simulacra, a creation of game-like narrative which offers a psycho-moral outlet for both Luka and his readers. Luka who plays the game and readers who follow Luka are called upon to use their emotions and moral judgement. They are also expected to decode the intertextuality that the narrative and the game carry to myths, folk tales, riddles and fairy tales. Such a participative, co-creative, interactive reading of *Luka and the Fire of Life*, help the readers probably to understand life through the lenses of the game and stories, as what Luka conceives in the novel, while thinking of the Aalim – Jo-Hua, Jo-Hai and Jo-Aiga:

There are those of us who learn to live completely in the moment. For such people the Past vanishes and the Future loses meaning. There is only the Present, which means that two of the three Aalim are surplus to requirements. And then there are those of us who are trapped in yesterdays, in the memory of a lost love, or a childhood home, or a dreadful crime. And some

people live only for a better tomorrow; for them the Past ceases to exist. (Rushdie 2010, 158)

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