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METAMORPHOSIS OF FOLKTALES FROM INDIA IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *LUKA AND THE FIRE OF LIFE*

Venitia Amelia Joseph
Stella Maris College, Chennai

ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie derived few folkloric elements and combined it with magical realism techniques in order to make an effective reading. He used the folkloric elements only in his latter novels as an effect of Fatwa, the death punishment that he receives after his protest against God and Islam in his work *Satanic Verses*. Of course his latter works also contains few allegorical meaning but not to that extent. He used lots of symbolic meanings and folkloric elements to hide all the nuances he raised against someone or something. Rushdie on the whole understands the importance of ancient storytelling tradition; this enables him to introduce the so-called "storyteller" character in most of his works. The storyteller is present in Rushdie's masterpiece *Midnight's children*, *The Enchantress of Florence*, *Haroun and the sea of stories*, and finally in *Luka and the Fire of Life*. They play the major role in safeguarding the storytelling tradition either in real life or in the story. Rushdie as a storyteller exemplifies this by including storytelling technique almost in all his novels. He also includes other elements of folktales such as riddles, myths, legends etc. to keep the tradition alive.

KEYWORDS:

Folktales, Oral Traditions of India.

INTRODUCTION

Generally folktales were the oral traditions of Indian cultural practices. "Every kind of Indian cultural practice, every Indian cultural performance, whether it is the classical epic and theatre or modern film and political rhetoric, is indebted to oral traditions and folk forms" (Ramanujan xiv). They were passed down from generation after generation through oral narration. "In a folktale that goes on changing from teller to teller, the structure of the tale may remain constant while all the cultural details change" (Ramanujan xxi). A.K. Ramanujan in his *A flowering tree* explained,

"In my twenties, I collected tales from anyone who would tell me one: my mother, servants, aunts, men, and women in village families with whom I stayed when I was

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

invited to lecture in local schools, school teachers and school children, carpenters, tailors. I had no idea what to do with them. I had no thought of writing books. I was just entranced by oral tales. I had read Grimm, Aesop, Panchatantra, Boccaccio, the Ocean of story, and devoured any tales that appeared in any children's magazine. I had no idea I was doing what was called folklore" (ix).

Folktales are stories about "peoples' lives and imaginations as they struggle with their fears and anxieties about the world around them." They were made up to explain the magic or wonders present in the world.

A. K. Ramanujan's in his definition of folktales states that "It is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling". To understand the culture of India one has to study not only its written classics but also its oral traditions, of which folklore plays an important part. Folklore which includes proverbs, lullabies, folk medicine, folktales, pervades families and communities as the symbolic language of non-literate parts of the people and the culture. Folklores and folktales have been an eternal part of every culture. It contains wide range of stories and mythological legends which emerge from all walks of life from ancient 'panchatantra' to moralistic tales for children. Panchatantra like *Aesop's fables* is a collection of stories on human behaviors, portrayed through animal characters which are believed to have been written in the 3rd century BC, by Pandit Vishnu Sharma. They are actually documented versions of oral stories. Thus the folk literature had its origin from the ancient oral story telling tradition. Even now in some villages and in rural areas oral story telling tradition is still followed by people. Some of the famous folk tales from India include Hitopadesha tales, Jataka tales, panchatantra tales.

A. K. Ramanujan, a renowned anthropologist in his introduction to the book, *Folktales from India*, distinguishes Verbal folklores (proverb, riddle, lullabies, tale, ballad, prose narrative, songs) into two "specific genres, non-verbal modes (such as dance, games, floor or wall designs, artifacts from toys to outdoor clay houses in villages), and composite performing arts (such as street magic and street theatre, which combine, prose, verse, song, dance, various local objects, costume etc)." (xiv). He further states that "every kind of Indian cultural practice, every Indian cultural performance, whether it is the classical epic and theatre or modern film and political rhetoric is indebted to oral traditions and folk forms"(xv) Hence, in a country like India everyone- whether poor or rich, high caste or low, engineer or street hawkers- has inside him a large non-literate contents the strong touch, taste and the influence of folklore.

Storytelling is an ancient and intimate tradition, through which people develop communal relationships. The storytelling technique originates when people sang chants while grinding corns and while doing other communal works. They constructed supernatural elements to add effectiveness to their story; also they created myths to explain natural occurrences. This is how folktales were expected to be born. Most of Rushdie's novels contain storytelling element either by the protagonist or by other minor characters which proves that he has driven few strategies from ancient folktales. Storyteller plays a major role in folktales, because it is through them the history of a culture passed down from generation to generation. In this novel, the storyline arises out of storytelling process, where the story's hero travels to the land of magic to save his dying father, otherwise the storyteller Rashid Khalifa.

BASIC AND IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF FOLKTALE STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES:

The important feature of storytelling technique in folktales is that the storyline starts with, "Once upon a time..." the incident that has already happened. In here, the story opens with, "There was once..." talking of the past incident, "in the city of Kahani in the land of Alifbay, a boy named Luka who had two pets, a bear named Dog and a dog named Bear" (Rushdie 1). This type of opening statement gives introduction to the story's hero and other characters; also it creates suspicion to the readers to read rest of the story. The story teller of the novel Rashid Khalifa, Luka's father tells story of a mysterious land containing, "Torrent of Words", "Lake of Wisdom", "River of Time", "Mountain of Knowledge" and finally "the Fire of Life". This magical world "was kept hidden for thousands of years, guarded by mysterious, cloaked spoilsports who called themselves the Aalim, or Learned Ones" (Rushdie 11). The narrator of the story however tells that the secret was out now. "It had been made available to the general public by Rashid khalifa in many celebrated tales. So everyone in Kahani was fully aware that there was a World of Magic existing in parallel with our own non-Magic one" (Rushdie 11). This supposedly creates believability in the "magic world" not only to the characters present in the story but also to the readers who deeply understand it. This is how myths, legends etc came into existence through the storytelling process.

Another important aspect in folktale is the use of mythology and legends. Mythology refers to a "sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their human form." It has been passed through oral tradition. It is closely linked to religion and the explaining of why something is; establishes modes for behaviour. The characters usually include Gods and other supernatural heroes. The best example can be taken from Virgil's 'Aeneid', one of the famous Greek mythological poems, where Gods determine the destiny of mortals. There are many Gods that play a role in the poem. The main ones are Jupiter, king of all deities, Juno the divine antagonist of Aeneas' destiny and Venus, his mother and his main protector. The conversation happens between God and mortals in mythological stories. 'Luka and the fire of life' can also be categorized under mythological stories where Rushdie introduces Gods of various countries in his narration. "Three Chinese Wind Gods are here... Chi Po, Feng-po-po and Pan-Gu!" (Rushdie 207). Rushdie also introduces their personal role in guarding the "Fire of Life". He then talks of a Japanese God "Fujin". Furthermore, he brings in American Gods,

"the Iroquois deity Ga-Oh. And Tate of the Sioux, and, see, the ferocious Cherokee Wind Spirit, OonawiehUnggi, over there! I mean the Sioux and the Cherokee were never allies, and to join up with the Iroquois Confederacy- oh, my! And even Chup the Wind God of the Chumash tribe from California has stopped sunbathing and shown up." "And the Africans are here as well- that's Yansan the Yoruba Wind Goddess! And from Central and South America, Ecalchot of the Niquiran Indians, and the Mayan Pauhtuns, and Unahsinte of the Zuni Indians, and Guabancex from the Caribbean..." (Rushdie 207).

These Gods like other characters play an important role in safeguarding the "Fire of Life" in the world of magic. Like how Aeneid's hero "Achilles" fate is destined by God, in the same way Luka's fate is governed by God in the world of magic. They chased him when they come to know that he is about to steal the fire of life. "In Hindu mythology, the gods do not sweat or blink, nor do their feet touch their ground. In the tales, the gods have bodies" (Ramanujan xxx). Rushdie does not describe the gods in the same way as he describes the mortals or other characters. He effectively portrays them, when they chase him, "the ground began to tremble." "It's the sound of several hundred angry gods moving at

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

speed" (Rushdie 208).

Another important element in the folktale theory is the use of riddles. It is considered as the "shorter form of folk literature." The purpose of riddle is to kindle the listener about its meaning. A description is given to demand the answer from the listeners. The best examples of riddles in literature are Sphinx riddles in Sophocles and Anglo-Saxon riddles derived from Latin customs. In western culture, riddles are cultivated by children. Even if the answers are known, they hear and answer it over and over again. Riddles play an important motif in a story from the ancient time of Sophocles. His play *Oedipus Rex*, although it is a play about Oedipus complex, it is "riddles" that brings the turning point to the story. It changes the fate of both the hero 'Oedipus' and his father. In here, Luka starts his adventure as if he is playing a video game of riddles. He loses each life when he says an incorrect answer. Both Luka and his father "Rashid loved riddles; he had tormented Luka with riddles, day after day, night after night, year after year, until Luka had become good enough to torment him back" (Rushdie 52).

In the magic world, the first threat of Luka came in the form of an old man who actually loved riddles. He can precede his adventure to obtain the fire of life only when he answers all his questions. Therefore Luka as a child, considered it as a "way of challenging a riddler to a battle" (Rushdie 53). Luka knew that "Riddlers are tricksters...and you had to nail down the deal before you began the battle, or they would try to wriggle out of it later on" (Rushdie 54). Therefore they had a deal before playing the riddles. Luka told the old man: "And if u lose, Old man, then you will have to Terminate yourself, not just temporarily, but once and for all" (Rushdie 53). Luka as a courageous little boy knew already that the magical world that he is travelling in "is his Magical World and nobody else's." It is the magical world created by his father Rashid; therefore he accepts the challenge to save his dying father. Involving riddles in folktales kindles interest among people especially in children. Tales were told by the elders "to keep the children's attention and to make them eat more" (Ramanujan xxii). In here it is Luka's father, "Rashid Khalifa, who encouraged Luka, and who tried, with comically little skill, to join him on his adventures" (Rushdie 5) to the world of magic. Folktales were told mainly for the children, to make them eat, sleep, and to make them believe in the world around them.

The novel contains a lot of folkloric elements than the actual magical realistic features. Out of which storytelling technique, fables, mythology, legends, riddles, proverbs, and fairytales play a significant role. In a folktale, "a proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy, or a recipe travels every time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time a bilingual person tells it or hears it" (Ramanujan xx). Of course, these elements take another form in magical realism too, but with the touch up of few realistic characteristics, in folktales these remain fictitious.

The novel does not only contain folkloric elements or the elements of magical realism, it also "reveals its own politics: not because it presents a powerful allegorical justification for the importance of freedom of speech, but because of how it engages the twenty-first-century cultural and generational concerns about the role of technology in daily life". Rushdie writes this novel for the contemporary citizens; he considers game as a new mode of storytelling and concludes that experience with video games can produce better thinkers, well-developed storytellers etc. He argues that storytelling technique can be kept alive only through the use of modern technology like video games and digitally monitored world. Rushdie uses this video game element not in the real world, but in the magical world. "Luka" at his entrance to the magical world, catches lives to continue his journey to reach the Fire of life. Children play video game using the lives given to them; this symbolically represents the life given to us

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

in the real world, therefore Luka says, "Lives were everywhere, in everything, disguised as stones, vegetables, bushes, insects, flowers, or abandoned candy bars or bottles of pop" (Rushdie 49).

Rushdie on the whole understands the importance of ancient storytelling tradition; this enables him to introduce the so-called "storyteller" character in most of his works. The storyteller is present in Rushdie's masterpiece *Midnight's children*, *The Enchantress of Florence*, *Haroun and the sea of stories*, and finally in *Luka and the Fire of Life*. They play the major role in safeguarding the storytelling tradition either in real life or in the story. Rushdie as a storyteller exemplifies this by including storytelling technique almost in all his novels. He also includes other elements of folktales such as riddles, myths, legends etc. to keep the tradition alive.

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