

***THE ARABIAN NIGHTS' MIRAGE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS: HAROUN  
AND THE SEA OF STORIES AND MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN***

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**Abstract:** *The present paper deals with the concept of intertextuality. Starting from the premise that a text is bound to other texts, previously written, we'll analyse the manner in which Salman Rushdie takes over and fructifies ideas encountered in a couple of tales from **The Arabian Nights** anthology namely "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves". Then, echoes of the figure 1001 and allusions to well-known characters (e.g. Scheherazade) are present in **Haroun and the Sea of Stories** and **Midnight's Children**. Thus, intertextuality is a creative process generated and sustained by interculturality: the author takes over ideas encountered in ancient tales and adjusts them to a new cultural space. A proper name, a statement ("Open Sesame!"), fixed in the collective memory, may generate a new idea or a new variant of the same idea.*

**Key-words:** *adaptation, allusion, interculturality, intertextuality, tale*

### **Introduction**

Nowadays there is a tendency of the contemporary authors to submit the texts, previously written, to a process of rewriting by giving them personal interpretations. The fact that one piece of writing communicates with other works belonging to authors who lived in different centuries made Mikhail Bakhtin (1982: 277) assert that language appears dialogic: anything we say or write exists in response to things that have been said or written before. Thus, "the image becomes polysemous, as well as a symbol. Immortal novelistic images are consequently created, that live a different life in different epochs".<sup>1</sup> That is why a text appears as a multidimensional space where echoes from other writings (i.e. individual voices, social dialects, currents of opinion, etc.) intermingle in a pure stylistic unity.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory is emphasized by Roland Barthes (1998: 64) who states that any text is a *tissue*: "the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue –this texture- the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web". A text is not a finite product; it is submitted to a continuous process of transformation, restructuring, reorganization. The text cannot remain isolated, broken away

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Romanian: „imaginea devine polisemantică, precum un simbol. Aşa se creează imaginile româneşti nemuritoare, care trăiesc în epoci diferite o viaţă diferită”.

from any links with other texts<sup>2</sup>; on the contrary, it takes over and combines an ensemble of discursive practices, codes and voices from texts whose origins are either known up to this time or they have been lost in the long run. An enunciation or a fragment of an enunciation, uttered in another space and historic time, can be reinterpreted by a contemporary author and adjusted to a new cultural-linguistic medium. A new idea or a new variant of an idea is developed and/ or reformulated. Such adaptations are frequently encountered in literary texts, space that permits several associations among ideas.

### **Arabian Nights' Echoes**

*The Arabian Nights* (or *One Thousand and One Nights*) is a collection of old tales compiled along the centuries by several authors, scholars and translators from different countries. Some editions include just a few hundred tales, but some other ones include 1001 or even more. The roots of these narratives are found in ancient Arabia, India, Persia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and early medieval Arabic folklore. So far an original manuscript hasn't been discovered but it is supposed that these tales' origins go back to the Islamic Golden Age<sup>3</sup>. A few of them (e.g. "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp", "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves", "The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor") –almost certainly authentic Middle Eastern folk tales- were not part of *The Arabian Nights* in the Arabic versions. Firstly, they were included into the anthology by Antoine Gallard<sup>4</sup> and, after that, by other European translators.

The common denominator of all *The Arabian Nights* editions is the initial frame story: after Sultan Shahryar had discovered the infidelity of his first wife, he executed her and declared that all women are unfaithful. Then, a succession of marriages followed, the brides being executed in the next day after the wedding. Finally, Scheherazade –the Vizier's daughter- offers herself to be the next bride. In order to avoid execution, on the first night of

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<sup>2</sup> A similar idea is encountered at Jonathan Culler (1981: 103) who states that "the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion"; a text is endowed with meaning just because specific things have been previously written.

<sup>3</sup> Islamic Golden Age (mid. 8th to mid. 13th centuries) was a prosperous period for the Muslim world, when scholars, engineers, geographers, artists, philosophers brought notable contributions in varied domains: agriculture, science, maritime navigation, art, literature, philosophy. These innovations had considerable influences upon the civilizations from other continents.

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Gallard, a French orientalist and archeologist, was known for his first translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* anthology (the French version: *Les mille et une nuits*) that appeared in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717.

the marriage with Sultan Shahryar, Scheherazade tells a story but she doesn't finish it. During the second night, after finishing the story, she begins another one and the Sultan, curious to hear its end, postpones again her execution. And so she continues for 1001 nights, till Sultan Shahryar accepts Scheherazade as his permanent wife.

Salman Rushdie's novels, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Midnight's Children*, are a clear proof that a text is "an echochamber or echoic space, reverberating with tremors of past and prior utterances and which can thereby reward a sensitive approach to the text with the thrill of recognition" (Kundu 2008: 2). From the very beginning, specific references to *The Arabian Nights* are encountered: reverberation of proper names, circumstances in which narratives are told, the constant repetition of certain figures and phrases.

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* reminds us, firstly, of the Islamic world historic figure, Haroun al-Rashid, the Caliph of Baghdad (786 - 809), and secondly, of a recurring hero present in a few tales in *The Arabian Nights*. In Salman Rushdie's novel, the name Haroun al-Rashid is split up between father and son. Rashid Khalifa becomes "the Ocean of Notions", known for his abilities to invent stories spontaneously and Haroun is his child.

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist and the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel asserting that he was 'mysteriously handcuffed to history'; he was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1947 at midnight, right at the moment when India gained its independence from the British domination. But when he turns thirty-one, Saleem fears that he dies soon because his body becomes weaker: "Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old perhaps, if my crumbling overused body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning –yes, meaning- something, I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (Rushdie 1995: 34).

*Midnight's Children* begins with explicit reference to *The Arabian Nights*. As Nancy E. Batty (1987: 50) asserts, "both Scheherezade's and Saleem's narratives share, and to a common purpose, the creation of suspense". If Scheherazade's tales are essential to her intention of remaining alive the next day by keeping Sultan Shahryar's interest, Saleem tells his family life story<sup>5</sup> to Padma, his loyal and loving companion, being conscious of the life unfairness. Here are Saleem's thoughts that synthesize very well his narrative: "Who, what am

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<sup>5</sup> Saleem's story starts in Kashmir, thirty-two years before his birth, in 1915. Then, Aadam Aziz, his grandfather, began treating Naseem, the woman who, three years later, was to become his wife.

I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone, everything of whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I have gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', everyone of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I report for the last time, to understand me, you will have to swallow a world" (Rushdie 1995: 383).

Saleem considers that the events from India's recent history are somehow related to his family: e.g. the First World War; the Indo-China War; the Partition of India and Pakistan and the division of East and West Pakistan, after the Indo-Pakistan War; the Emergency Period etc. Saleem surveys the political fate of the modern Indian nation-state and tries to understand his family history. Moreover, the protagonist identifies the past and recent events from his family and finds out intertwinements with the country's restless history: e.g. Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, saw his future wife's face for the first time on the same day the First World War ended. It seems that Saleem's survival "is linked to the survival of the Indian state, based on an imperilled secularism. This makes interesting the unmasking of his family history as a façade, thereby undermining that same illusion of continuity" (Baker 2002: 151).

### **Reconfigurations of the Figure 1001**

As we have already seen, ideas or words designating proper names found in old tales are transposed and adjusted to other geographic spaces and historic times. The figure 1001, initially related to nocturnal and magical realities, is not an exception. Even if we speak about words, phrases or other symbols "the connotations could be multiple due to the secondary, individual, variable or even accidental character, depending on linguistic and extralinguistic contexts"<sup>6</sup> (Bidu-Vrânceanu et al. 2005: 133). In fact, the individual is the one who may attribute new meanings to the symbols, either linguistic or nonlinguistic, s/he is familiar with. And the figure 1001 frequently encountered in Salman Rushdie's novels is a relevant example.

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* opens with the description of a sad city, "so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name", where Haroun and his parents lived. Haroun imagined his

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from Romanian: „conotațiile pot fi multiple datorită caracterului secundar, individual, variabil sau chiar accidental, în funcție de contexte lingvistice și extralingvistice”.

father as a juggler since his stories “were really lots of different tales juggled together”. Rashid had the gift to combine the words easily “in a sort of dizzy whirl” without making any mistake. Having a story-telling job, Rashid was away from home most of the time. Even the politicians asked him to tell stories in their interest during the election campaigns. For this reason Haroun’s mother, Soraya, felt neglected and, one day, she ran away from home with their neighbour, Mr. Sengupta, who often criticized Rashid as he didn’t understand the relevance of his stories.

Soraya’s leaving disturbed Haroun’s soul. He became doubtful regarding the truthfulness of his father’s stories, fact that affected Rashid who couldn’t narrate any more. Then, the boy wasn’t able to concentrate more than eleven minutes. Since Haroun’s mother left the house at eleven o’clock, it seems that the boy remained “stuck fast on his eleven number and cannot get to twelve”. Therefore, Rashid decided to take his son with him on one of his story-telling jobs. Their final destination was the “Valley of K” where Rashid had to speak for politician “Snooty Buttoo”. Moreover, father and son were put up to sleep aboard the politician’s yacht that floated on the Dull Lake: ‘The houseboat was called *Arabian Nights plus one* because (as Mr. Buttoo boasted) “even in all the Arabian Nights you will never have a night like this.” Each of its windows had been cut out in the shape of a fabulous bird, fish or beast: the Roc of Sinbad the Sailor, the Whale That Swallowed Men, Fire-Breathing Dragon, and so on. Light blazed out through the windows, so that the fantastic monsters were visible from some distance, and seemed to be glowing in the dark“ (Rushdie 1999: 50-51). The boat’s name was very suggestive since all its windows were designed to represent mythical creatures encountered in fairytales from all over the world. Then, the figure 1001 is constantly repeated throughout the novel.

Here is the episode when Haroun took a gulp from the Wishwater as he wanted to help his father regain the lost gift of storytelling. From that moment, alternate visions followed. Firstly, he saw his mother’s image, fact that made him think at his mother’s returning home. Secondly, his father’s image came to Haroun’s mind, imploring his son to help him recover the gift of storytelling, the only activity he had known. These alternate images lasted exactly eleven minutes and, after that, “a jangling noise like the breaking of a thousand and one violin strings” made everything disappear from his mind.

Or, the occurrence when Haroun looked into the Ocean of the Streams of Story “seems to take us right into the heart of the aesthetics of intertextuality as a creative process,

generated and sustained by cross-cultural interflow” (Kundu 2006: 144). Haroun noticed that the Ocean’s water “was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents”, each one coloured differently. These were the Streams of Story, each strand representing and containing one single tale. The Ocean of the Streams of Story was “the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive“ (Rushdie 1999: 72).

This paragraph resembles another one, where Iff the Water Genie explains how the Plentimaw fishes, also called the “hunger artists” (re)create new stories by assimilating the already existing ones. When the Plentimaw fishes are hungry “they swallow stories through every mouth, and in their innards miracles occur; a little bit of one more story joins on to an idea from another, and hey presto, when they spew the stories out they are not old tales but new ones. Nothing comes from nothing. Thieftlet; no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old; it is the new combinations that make them new. So you see, our artistic Plentimaw fishes really create new stories in their digestive systems” (Rushdie 1999: 86).

The process that explains how Plentimaw fishes (re)create new stories proves that language is not immobile, fixed in certain structures. On the contrary, when we use it in communication it functions as a vehicle that generates sense. Even if the number of linguistic signs is limited in a language, they enter in numerous combinations, fact that permits the production of an unlimited number of sentences. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* reveals how individuals use the words to create an indefinite number of sentences and implicitly an indefinite number of stories. These stories are generated “in the same dialectic of the finite and the infinite as do human-language grammars. Through the Plentimaw fishes as catalysts, new stories come into being in a process that joins a limited number of already existing stories [...] to an unlimited number of novel combinations” (Bongartz and Gilman Richey 2010: 456). The act of generating stories recalls the linguistic creativity principle since something new is created from what it already exists.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the figure 1001 makes reference to the children born at the stroke of midnight, on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, when India gained its independence. All of them were endowed with remarkable talents: e.g. Saleem, due to his telepathic abilities, could penetrate the people’s thoughts and could communicate with the other children born in the

same hour; Shiva, with his abnormally large knees, was a very good fighter; Parvati-the-witch had the power to make things disappear by putting them in a basket, etc. “Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before, and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight’s children can be made to represent many things [...] They can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind” (Rushdie 1995: 278).

On the one hand, this testifies that figure 1001 represents alternative realities, fact for which it could be hated by politicians for whom alternative worlds represent threats. On the other hand, these children “born in that numinous hour of Independence are representative for the post-Independence generation” (Parameswaran 1983: 39) as they are found at a crossroad. It is the moment when India gets rid of its colonial past and makes a new departure. And midnight’s children, that are to grow up in a changing society, have the power to influence, either in a better or a worse manner, the country’s destiny.

Then, the figure 1001 is repeated as an echo in some other contexts: e.g. in the magicians’ ghetto from Delhi, Saleem noticed how jugglers “managed to keep one thousand and one balls in the air at a time”; or, Shiva whose braveries as a fighter in the Indo-Pakistan War were recognized everywhere in India “was invited to a thousand and one different gatherings” –banquets, musical soirées, bridge parties, diplomatic receptions, political conferences, fashionable balls- being congratulated by noblemen and high officials.

### **Arabian Nights’ Fantasies**

Through his referential style, Salman Rushdie demonstrates that within a text more or less obvious reverberations from other pieces of writing are perceived. In fact, this is the essence of intertextuality since it reveals “the ways in which one text echoes or is linked to other texts by direct allusions and quotations or simply by being a text” (Kundu 2008: 2).

Such echoes are found in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* where the transfer of ideas from “Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp” is obvious. In the old tale, a boy receives a ring with

a genie inside it able to fulfill wishes to those who ask for them: i.e. this genie helps Aladdin escape from the magical cave where he has remained blocked. Similarly, Haroun asks Iff the Water Genie to fulfill a fervent wish; he wants to be accompanied by the genie on a journey to Gup City and see the Grand Comptroller, the one who may help his father regain the lost gift of storytelling.

Reverberations from *The Arabian Nights* are also found in *Midnight's Children*. The resonant name of a character reminds us again of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp". This is Alauddin Latif, a former soldier in the Pakistan border patrol. He appeared to have a treasure in his mouth: when he smiled he revealed all his "solid gold teeth". He offered himself to make famous Saleem's sister, Jamila, who had discovered in Pakistan her gift for singing. For Alauddin Latif, the act of promoting Jamila signified prosperity for Saleem's family. Moreover, he associated this possible occurrence with the old tale's episode when the genie of the lamp was able to bring welfare to the possessor if he had wanted to: "Know the story? I just rub my jolly old lamp and out pops the genie bringing fame and fortune. Your girl will be in dam good hands. Dam good" (Rushdie 1995: 432).

Then, Saleem took refuge in his own imagination, becoming himself a character of *The Arabian Nights*. Since he wanted to get rid of the quotidian life, Saleem created another story from a mixture between "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves". "When I went shopping with Mary Pereira –overawed by her ability to tell a chicken's age by looking at its neck, by the sheer determination with which she stared dead pomfrets in the eyes. I became Aladdin, voyaging in a fabulous cave watching servants dusting vases with a dedication as majestic as it was obscure, I imagined Ali Baba's forty thieves hiding in the dusty urns; in the garden, staring at Purushottam the sadhu being eroded by water, I turned into the genie of the lamp, and thus avoided, for the most part, the terrible notion that I, alone in the universe, had no idea what I should be, or how I should behave" (Rushdie 1995: 210-211). The proper names -"Aladdin", "Ali Baba"- and certain phrases - "fabulous cave", "the genie of the lamp"- make us remember of *The Arabian Nights'* fictitious worlds. Just here someone may travel through fabulous caves where stolen treasures are hidden or someone else may turn into a genie and hide inside a magical lamp.

The echoes of *The Arabian Nights* become weaker towards the end of *Midnight's Children*. A gustatory sensation made Saleem remind an episode from his childhood, when his parents found out that he wasn't their biological child and, consequently, he was sent to

his uncle, Hanif Aziz. Here, Saleem was treated with “the best chutney<sup>7</sup> in the world”. Taking a bit of chutney as adult, the protagonist instantly recognized the flavour experienced in childhood and determined him to seek for the place where this chutney was produced: “I made her bring me the jar and there, on the label, was the address of a building with a winking, saffron-and-green neon goddess over the gate, a factory watched over by neon Mumbadevi, while local trains went yellow-and-browning past: Braganza Pickles (Private) Ltd., in the sprawling north of the town. Once again an abracadabra, an open-sesame: words printed on a chutney-jar, opening the last door of my life ... I was seized by an irresistible determination to track down the maker of that impossible chutney of memory [...]” (Rushdie 1995: 637-638).

The atmosphere of this place has lost its magic encountered in *The Arabian Nights*; it resided in a modern building, everything being designed for profit, for mass appeal. Mumbadevi –the patron goddess of Mumbai City- was reduced to a silhouette made of neon lights, becoming a decorative object of bad taste. The phrase “open-sesame”, firstly uttered in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” opened the mouth of a cave where forty thieves hid a treasure. Even if it has lost its magical power, this phrase makes Saleem think to the unique taste of chutney, able to wake up long-lasting memories.

### Conclusion

As we have already noticed, Salman Rushdie “crosses and re-crosses spatial, textual, cultural and generic frontiers with perfect ease and playfulness to produce a self-conscious self-reflexive intertextual artifact” (Kundu 2006: 145). Both novels, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Midnight's Children*, reflect the author’s vivid imagination who, being helped by a rich cultural background, recycles old tales in the process of literary creation. Consequently, two main features of intertextuality are inferred:

1. The text is perceived as a plurality of other texts. When writing a text the author makes an appeal, more or less consciously, to anterior experiences. In the author’s mind, just a symbol, either linguistic or nonlinguistic, may evoke other symbols and other situations where its content could be amplified; an enunciation or a fragment of an enunciation may stir up other manners or styles for expressing an idea. Then, the text’s perception also depends on the

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<sup>7</sup> Chutney, associated with South-Asian cuisine, is made from various combinations of vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices.

reader's cultural and intellectual background; s/he is the one able to discover the plurality existent within a single text.

2. Intertextuality is creative. The author doesn't just take an enunciation or a fragment of an enunciation found in a previous text, but s/he adjusts it to other situations by giving it secondary meanings. A proper name or a well-known statement has the power to recall an idea, idea that can be developed in another context.

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