

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S HAMLETS ON THE PAPER HOLODECK: TOWARDS A RE-TERRITORIALIZATION OF LITERATURE

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RESUMO: A virada dos últimos anos e, principalmente, a do último em questão trouxe novamente à superfície a perigosa, porém inevitável fragmentação dos territórios como conhecíamos. A crise econômica na Europa e nos Estados Unidos da América, como um resultado tardio do sistema capitalista, acentuou-nos a percepção de que, em um mundo onde a aceleração da realidade cria novas formas a cada dia, fronteiras nada mais são que imaginárias. Como consequência, isso não é só aplicado ao chão físico, mas também ao chão das ideias. Nesse cenário instável, Salman Rushdie publica *Luka e o Fogo da Vida*. Nesse livro (que pode ser lido como uma continuação ou não de *Haroun e o Mar de Histórias*), o autor traz à tona mais uma vez a relevância do discurso ficcional em nosso mundo. O propósito deste trabalho é, dessa forma, discutir a reinvenção do artefato literário (e consequentemente, dos territórios literários) nesse romance de Rushdie. Através de uma mistura de mitos indianos antigos e fantasmas do cânone ocidental, o escritor migrante faz uma revisitação pós-moderna de velhos temas e velhas histórias num espaço que se assemelha aos dos videogames. É importante analisar, então, a constituição de uma subjetividade capaz de lidar com tão complexa rede: o Texto em si.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Salman Rushdie; territórios; hipertextualidade

ABSTRACT: *The turning of the last years and especially of the last one have put into relief the dangerous though inevitable fragmentation of territories as we used to know them. The economic crisis in Europe and in the United States, as a late result of the capitalist system, shows us that in a world where the acceleration of reality makes new forms each passing day, frontiers are but imaginary. As an extent, that is not applied only to the physical grounds, but also to the grounds of the mind. In such unstable scenery, Salman Rushdie publishes *Luka and the Fire of Life*. In this book, as a sequel (or not) to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the author brings about the importance of literature in our world once more. The purpose of this paper is then to discuss the reinvention of the literary artifact (and consequently, literary territories) in this Rushdie's novel. Through a mixture of Indian ancient myths and ghosts from the Western cannon, the migrant writer makes a postmodern revival of old stories and themes in a videogame framework. It is worth to assess then the constitution of an identity capable of dealing with such a complex network: the Text itself.*

KEYWORDS: *Salman Rushdie; territories; hypertextuality*

After telling and retelling all his life story, the message Salim Sinai delivers to his listener, Padma, in *Midnight's Children* (1981) is that you need to swallow the whole world in order to understand a single life. This lesson is inevitably recurrent in other Salman Rushdie's novels and ends up on the not-so-beautiful-sleeper storyteller Rashid-al-Khalifa in *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010). The weight his body assumes in the gradual ageing and sluggishness of his walking, eating, and speaking, is a metaphor for Rushdie's concerns on the potential loss of freshness and pep of literature. By the light of one of Ítalo Calvino's american lessons, we query how possible it would be to carry so much weigh (the cultural legacy of an entire world) in such a liquid, fleet, light modernity. Would

literature be – as an institution still more or less placeable – doomed to keep on reproducing itself through the same models, mediums and themes? Cultural interchanges, always punctured through an encounter of the old and the new (hence, the assumption of power), are a *leitmotif* in the chosen novel to be analyzed here. Thus, to start with, we position the *oeuvre* of this author in a multiple place: most of all, because it is strategic, and it allows a renegotiation of places of literature itself. That is what we will discuss on the afterwards.

Some time ago, it was common to talk about Rushdie’s output having India, his homeland, as a referent. As a writer in English language, it is indeed possible to notice that the author cannot detach his practice from the colonial heritage England has left on the Indian lands and mindsets. However, what we notice in *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), goes beyond the simple bargaining of literary capital towards its primary metropolis – matter clearly highlighted by the postcolonial criticism. More than that, the narrator describes the city of Kahani as a different town from that we knew through Haroun’s adventures in the Magic World:

[...] Things had changed in Kahani, and sadness was no longer the city’s principal export, as it had been when Luka’s brother, Haroun, was young. The demand for glumfish had fallen away, and people preferred to eat better-tasting produce from farther away, the grinning eels of the south, the meat of the northern hopedeer, and, more and more, the vegetarian and nonvegetarian foods available from the Cheery Orchard stores that were opening everywhere you looked [...] (RUSHDIE, 2010b, p. 37).

Besides Rushdie’s emphasis on the dissolution of binarisms in his writings, we believe that when he wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991), the stress on the borders of “here and there”, the inhabitants of Gup and Chup, the East and the West, even though subrepticiously, had to be a little more explicit in order to develop a gaze on the deconstruction of the opposites. In *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), however, that seems to be not that obvious. The frontiers are, in fact, floppier and harder to be measured. The own perception of a magic world affected by globalization is a gesture which reinforces Rushdie’s option for a deterritorialized, or rather, a multi-territorialized writing. That also gets in tune to the perception that the writing does not need to fit into the limits that the alphabetic conventions of languages could provide. On the last “level” of Luka’s game, for example, he gets to the temple where the gods of Norse, Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythology live. In this episode, Luka goes to trial because he had stolen the Fire of Life. Ingeniously, Rushdie uses special typefaces to distinguish the language of the “bosses” from that of the hero – who would supposedly defeat them and keep the Fire with him: “☉☉◆ ♁☉◆ ♀♂♂■ ♁✕◆□◆□◆♂♂ ♁ ☉■♂○◆◆◆ ♀♂ □♂◆ ◆ □□♂♂, shouted Ra.” (RUSHDIE, 2010b, p. 179). Such a gesture destabilizes the own conventions of how writing and thinking should be expressed. According to Walter Ong (1998), who published a study on the historical pathway of the development of writing, the former should not be seen as inherent to human beings, but, rather, as an artificial process which involves a performance of conscious and technological empowerment. This way, the takeover of writing, as a technology accessible only for the initiates, is loaded with hierarchizing assumptions since its beginning. Regarding that, Rushdie criticizes the linearity of writing through a simple gesture of imagining other ways which flee from Western and also Eastern representations – and its possible implications on the restatement of English language itself.

As the writer himself comments on *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), he is not comfortable being placed inside categories such as the Commonwealth literature, because they are historically constructed as belonging to a tradition which he does not want to be part of. According to him, this huge umbrella is something that does not exist, because it gives credit only to *British* writers who do not live in the United Kingdom. In this category, there would not be included, for instance, United States inhabitants who write in Black English, or even Indians who write in Hindi:

By now, 'Commonwealth literature' was sounding very unlikeable indeed. Not only was it a ghetto, but it was actually an exclusive ghetto. And the effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the broader term 'English literature' – which I'd always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language – into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist" (RUSHDIE, 2010a, p. 63)

Rushdie reverses the Eurocentric logic and gawks at English literature as the *literature of the English language*. According to him, "this literature is also Indian literature. There is no incompatibility here. If history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them" (RUSHDIE, 2010a, p. 65). As Luka travels by the "levels" of the game of the Magic World, he gets in contact with spaces, buildings, objects, characters, and stories which do not have a specific origin, making us really "un-console-able". He surfs on the river Silsila, described as having a "[...] thousand thousand thousand and one different strands of liquid, [...]" (RUSHDIE, 2010b, p. 47-48), he collects coins that grant him extra lives in his journey, he rides on magic carpets, he faces the ancient gods from old mythologies, fights with guerrilla rats, and listens stories about a flock of thirty birds, clearly linking to Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus* (1975), inspired on the long poem *The Conference of the Birds*, by Farid-ud-din Attar.

Because of that willing to the difference, we might consider that Rushdie would destabilize all assumptions of reproducing canonic models, even though he himself serves as a model for a cannon, regarding certain specificities. For the author, literature would only be in danger when forces prohibit it to flow to new forms (forces, including language, fascist itself, as Barthes reminds us). Nowadays, the author himself makes some campaigns as a Showtime TV series screenwriter, *The Next People*, besides getting involved in projects aiming to take his narratives to the digital environment, such as the musicalized adaptation of the short story "In the South" for Booktrack, an application developed for tablets. Because of that, Rushdie will privilege a hypertextual structure in his narrative as part of a postcolonial agenda. Hence, this would be a way for literature to keep itself renewed, being able to play centuries of stories to the air and leave them adrift for whoever wishes to pick them up. As Jaishree K. Odin (2005) points out, the

Hypertext aesthetic is rooted in active and interactive reading like oral storytelling. Multilinear narratives of hypertext can be regarded as a return to oral storytelling...Benjamin's lamentation about the death of storytelling in the age of information finds its apotheosis in the birth of hypertext, since hypertext marks the beginning of storytelling once again (ODIN, 2005).

According to this theorist, hypertext can be seen as a metaphor for culture because it can shelter random and paradoxical information, simultaneously, referring to the own

construction of subjectivity: a “decentered and plural experience”. Societies work that same way, hence the criticism to the rational Eurocentric thinking. She argues yet that the hypertextual structure is the most adequate to represent the postcolonial experience, because:

[...] it embodies our changed conception of language, space, and time. Language and place are here no longer seen as existing in abstract space and time, but involve a dynamic interaction of history, politics, and culture (ODIN, 2005).

Because of this interaction, there cannot be a linear trajectory on the reading activity if we want to effectively construct meaning. The discontinuity existent in this structure forces us to always make a relational reading, highlighting the non-transparency of language. In such a multi-territorialized world, where Bollywood films, videogames, literary classics, and Beatles songs coexist naturally among words, there is no sense, for Rushdie, to make India as his only starting point for his creations. In these thousands and one thousands of streams, where a story goes through another, we should try to approach a conception of literature which is not bound to a single nationality of a single medium (as a book). We think that this is a necessary attitude in times where the end of territories is a current concern.

Then, we could state that because of the difficulty of categorizing Rushdie’s modest proposal, this would be characterized as being in a “non-place”. However, just like “Commonwealth literature”, the term seems to be inappropriate as well. The concept, coined by Marc Augé (1992), is related to non-relational, non-identitary, and non-historical transitory “places”. We do not think the concept is able to suffice what Rushdie thinks (and practices) as literature. Augé locates the concept in what he understands as an “over-modernity” – an understanding of modernity that emphasizes the pragmatic rather than the free usage of the space. Moving ahead, we think that Rushdie also gets tuned to the tendencies of the random circulation of cultural goods – perception better defended by Zygmunt Bauman (1998), who names current times as a “liquid modernity”, fluid, where even cast-off stuff turn into available ones that could be used afterwards, *ad infinitum*.

Moving a step forward on Augé’s idea, Bauman gives an apathic characteristic to the “non-place”concept. According to him, the easy access to relationships and contacts on the liquid modernity causes a loss in the interest on reality. Moreover, the immediacy of the relation between man and reality makes things disposable. Bauman’s gaze is grey, but it is outstanding in a context where the crisis of literature itself, within a postmodern framework, takes into account not only an overloading of experience, but also – and mainly – a recycling or discarding of memory. Such an attitude, according to him, is important in times where being “light and liquid” is the new means of dealing with the power.

Regarding that, we still think about the conception of *place* adopted by Stephen Graham (1998), which, according to him, is heavily influenced by machines and information technology. Based on an Actor-Network performatic theory, the geographer points out the role of technology on the perception of time and space and, consequently, on the identity of the contemporary subject. According to the theorist, these virtual systems also shape subjectivities, and, because of that,

social and spatial life become subtly and continuously recombined in complex combinations of new sets of spaces and times, which are always contingent and impossible to generalize (GRAHAM, 1998, p. 167).

Man and machine become, thus, bolder and bolder, and because of that it is not possible anymore to consider new places without taking into account the effects of technology on the day-by-day of people. As an extent, territories are entanglements: they are simultaneous, ran through multiple temporalities and set themselves from social processes which involve the constant usage and casting of these networks.

In order to privilege the multiple place in Salman Rushdie's *oeuvre*, then, is more than a fashion or a politically correct effort. On the contrary, in behalf of it being a network, complex in itself, the multiple place serves us as a possible methodology to get close to the author's hybrid writing. A re-territorialization of literature in this sense has to take into account a junction of these places (we have listed only some here, but there are many others), because the literary artifact does not serve as a fixed material.

By way of conclusion, we could say that the act of swalling discourses, in this proposal of a minor literature is a strategy Rushdie uses to reinvent his own written tradition. Yet, it is not a matter of technological innovations electronic hypertext or the narrative in the digital medium could offer, but rather a greater possibility of Relation the hypertextual structure might grant the written text. Obviously, words in paper do not allow (yet) that freedom when reading in what it concerns to texts and images popping literally on the same way digital lexis and links do, but what changes is the own perception of what literature is, which must consider now, more than ever, an intense critique and dialogue with other discourses and materials, whether they are literary or not. This way, reading is like a game, infinite, on the extent the charges added to the "battery" must be done and undone continuously. In the magic world of Luka, he picks coins that grant him extra lives and he restarts his levels when he cannot defeat them. Rushdie's infinite game, then, occurs when he understands subjectivity, language, words, and literature as a continuous to-be. Finally, we could say that a re-territorialization of literature would still remind us that Man will keep on being the "Animal Storyteller" for a long time onwards.

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