

## **Childhood in the World of Fantasy: Interrogation of Juvenile Ageism in**

### **Salman Rushdie's Luka and the Fire of Life**

Surte, Amol Uddhav<sup>1</sup> and Pillai, Sunila<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Mumbai

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, RKT College, Ulhasnagar.

#### **Abstract**

Representation of childhood in fantasy fiction is an area of great critical interest. Children who occupy the social spaces in a fantasy fiction are often expected to be of great intelligence and maturity, forcing them to assume the role of an adult. However, children are also considered as tropes in advertising and fantasy novels as they are believed to be more imaginative and hence adept to this world that is built upon counter logic. Childhood depicted in such novels calls for adventure, courage, decision making and even taking big responsibilities. This paper is an attempt to examine Salman Rushdie's fantasy narrative *Luka and the Fire of Life* to show how Rushdie depicts Luka's childhood in the backdrop of magic and witchcraft. Luka has to take responsibility of his father against the effects of a spell and has to negotiate an adventurous journey to revive his father. This paper analyses the language and Luka's actions and experiences of Luka to show how he has to occupy the worlds of childhood and adulthood in order to thrive. Rushdie's attempts to make Luka a character beyond the ageist perspective is also commented upon with this paper. The convention of looking at a child as a dependent subject is ruptured by the author with a role reversal for Luka thereby endowing him responsibilities beyond his age.

*Keywords:* Juvenile Ageism, Childhood, Magic, Fantasy and Fantasy Fiction,

#### **Impact Note**

This research paper has a real significance as it is an initiative that explains the representation of childhood in the world of fantasy fiction to show how juvenile ageism is overlooked or critiqued in popular fiction. As the consumers of children's fiction are mostly the kids and teens, it is very important on the part of the authors to document the harmful effects of juvenile ageism and

parentification. This paper is significant also because it examines the psychological impact of the above-mentioned prejudices on child characters. In a society where children consume fantasy fiction, it is imperative to analyses and understand the fictional and cultural renditions of juvenile ageism and its impact on childhood. It is not very usual to push a child hero into the tasks normally accomplished by adults in a fantasy. Hence, this paper, helps one to understand the issue of stereotyping a child in the genre of fantasy.

### **Main Paper**

Ageism is a prejudice on the basis a person's age. It also refers to the stereotypes in the way one thinks about others and oneself based on age. This discrimination may result into deprivation, victimization and bullying of people of all age groups. The term was coined in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler to describe discrimination against the elderly, patterned on the terminology of sexism and racism. Children who are born in a community become aware of their culture, age and stereotypes. Experts also maintain that individuals internalize and use such stereotypes in their attitude and behavior towards the members of different age groups. Self-directed ageism is a tendency to stereotype oneself, enforcing certain behavioral codes, dress-code, and other socio-cultural norms based on one's age. It is not merely the senior citizens who become the targets of ageism but also children and adolescents. It is often found that ageism overlaps with other prejudices such as racism, sexism and ableism. It is latent in healthcare industry, institutional practices, work place, culture and literature.

Saumya Aggarwal in her chapter in the WHO sponsored Global Report on Ageism (2021) describes the causes of ageism and its impact: "Age is one of the first characteristics – along with sex and race – that we notice about other people when we interact with them. Ageism arises when age is used to categories and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage and injustice and erode solidarity across generations" (Aggarwal 2).

Aggarwal also points out how multi-layered ageism and stereotyping are. She enlists the levels of manifestations and dimensions of ageism:

- Three dimensions – stereotype (thoughts), prejudice (feelings) and discrimination (actions and behavior)
- Three levels of manifestation – institutional, interpersonal and self-directed
- Two forms of expression – explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) (Aggarwal 2-3)

Robert Butler in his research paper titled “Dispelling Ageism: The Cross-Cutting Intervention” (1989) considers ageism as a cross-cutting issue. He explains that ageism gets manifested in a wide range of situations both at the individual and institutional levels. According to him stereotyping, dislike, avoidance of contact and discriminatory practices are its different manifestations “The remaining issues are more of social class and race. This does not mean, however, that there must not be continuing vigilance against the possibilities of rationing and denial of care and income. Ageism is a primitive disease, and, unfortunately, our fears about ageing are so deep that ageism will probably never totally disappear” (Butler 146).

Parentification is one of the manifestations of adultification with regard to children. It is seen when adults expect adult-like behavior and mature sensibility among children. It would be worthwhile an exercise to understand parentification, its causes and consequences generally seen in child behavior. Lisa Hooper from the University of Alabama in her research article titled “Defining and Understanding Parentification: Implications for All Counselors” (2008) makes an attempt to define parentification. She states that parentification can be best defined in the context of the responsibilities expected of children. Further she explains:

Parentification is the distortion or lack of boundaries between and among family subsystems, such that children take on roles and responsibilities usually reserved for adults. That is either explicitly or implicitly, parents create an environment that fosters caretaking behaviors in their children that help maintain homeostasis (i.e. balance) for the family in general and the parent in particular. (Hooper 2008, 34)

Parentification is one of the manifestations of ageism with regard to children. It is seen when adults expect adult-like behavior and sensibility among children. Lisa Hooper in her research paper titled “Expanding the Discussion Regarding Parentification and Its Varied Outcomes: Implications for Mental Health and Practice” (2007) makes an attempt to define parentification. She states that parentification can be best defined in the context of the responsibilities expected of children. Further, she defines parentification: “Parentification is the distortion or lack of boundaries between and among family subsystems, such that children take on roles and responsibilities usually reserved for adults” (Hooper 34).

Juvenile ageism is a form of ageism which is an attempt to parochially show what a child can/cannot do. It is also an effort to stereotype children and their world. This term is also linked with

juvenile childism which also stands for classifying children under a set of acceptable behavioural patterns. Both juvenile ageism and juvenile childism denormalise a child who does not confirm to the so-called desirable child behaviour.

John Wall in his research article titled “From Childhood Studies to Childism: Reconstructing the Scholarly and Social Imaginations” (2019) explains how childism tries to transform the social and cultural constructions of childhood. According to him childism is a social bias that indicates as to how the world of the children is supposed to be irrespective of individualistic situations and behaviours of children. Wall observes: “It suggests, in a similar way to recent forms of feminism, that the more fundamental problem for children and youth is not just how children and youth themselves are understood and related to, but also the social and political foundations on which children’s lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed” (Wall 4).

Juvenile ageism is not often identified in social practices. It may get manifested in two forms – institutional juvenile ageism and individual juvenile ageism. The first one becomes a reality when social systems neglect the interest of children. Here, schools, religion, family and community can represent the social system. Individual juvenile ageism gets manifested when the developmental needs of a child are not given adequate attention.

In the U.K., a councillor Richard Thomas pointed out that age discrimination works against younger as well as older people at a meeting of the Bracknell Forest Council in June 1983. Ageism may be seen against children and teens through the acts such as denying them certain rights and privileges usually reserved for adults, ignoring the ideas and contributions of adolescents and children because they are considered “too young”, putting strict behavioural constraints on them in educational, political and social spheres.

One of the types of child-related ageism is institutional juvenile ageism wherein social systems such as family, education and law and order ignore the interest of children. One can examine literary texts to see if social systems configured in them ignore the interest of children. Areas of children’s interests ignored under juvenile ageism could be identified as play, recreation, peer group, education, imagination and so on. When some of these interests of children are ignored, parentification becomes a manifestation of juvenile ageism. Parentification along with juvenile ageism become the reason for the abuse of children and this form of abuse is as harmful in the society as the ageism against older adults. Juvenile ageism forces one to disregard children as

citizens with developmental needs and social rights. Novels can be analysed to see if the juvenile characters' developmental needs are addressed or not. Another instance of juvenile ageism is when children are segregated from public places. These places might include work places, space of serious discussions, business world and so on. This segregation is based on the prejudice that children are not matured enough to be in such places.

Vânia de la Fuente-Núñez et al in their research article titled "Scoping Review on Ageism against Younger Populations" (2021) analyse ageism against children to point out that ageism can be detrimental in the first half of human life as much it can be in the second half. They maintain that the available framework for the analysis of ageism should also include the concerns of children and younger people. In this context, they use a term adultism and explain it in detail:

The term adultism is used to refer to the stereotypes, feelings and behaviours of adults towards children and youth, which are based on the assumption that youth and children are naïve, inexperienced, or incompetent and that adults know better and are thus entitled to act upon them without their argument. Adultism represents the structural power that adults have over children in our society. Adultism can manifest in many ways including over-victimizing youth, infantilizing youth, romanticizing youth, and tokenizing youth and is often reinforced by social institutions, law and customs. (Fuente-Nunez 5)

The discussion carried out on parentification and ageism indicate that these realities have social, psychological and cultural implications. It also points out that these oppressive practices against children are often overlooked in society and in Culture Studies.

Childhood is a significant theme in children's fiction and Young Adult fiction. It is often rendered from a perspective of a child who either enjoys a harmonious and happy childhood or goes through a troublesome or deprived childhood. Many novels of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain depict turbulent childhood of the protagonists spent in orphanages. The theme of childhood echoes strongly in children's fantasy genre as well wherein the child protagonist negotiates the world of magic to outwit the blocking characters who are mostly wizards and mages. In such a genre, the depiction of childhood is marked with certain amount of responsibility such as the task of saving the family or safeguarding friends or relatives. In such a case, an element of parentification or adultification seeps into the narrative, giving it an ambiguous relationship with the theme of childhood. However, magic is often considered as an agency for a child protagonist to elevate

his/her status in the family and society and to question the ageist cognitive bias, that children of certain age are capable only of certain tasks.

Fiction can be considered as a tool to bring about social and cognitive changes as it can bring into focus the impact of harmful stereotypes. Furthermore, children's fiction most often than not tries to construct a more inclusive and age-integrated society in which children's place and roles are questioned. Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) can be considered as a literary text that challenges unfavourable stereotypes about children and brings about an inclusive society in which children also play a constructive and a responsible role, though it may be the world of magic. Furthermore, this novel can be considered as a narrative that inhibits childhood-directed ageism and the generational gap based on juvenile ageism. One can find the elements of anti-juvenile ageism in this novel as Rushdie portrays Luka as a young, matured and capable child who has both child-like simplicity and maturity of adults. Luka assigns himself the role of saviour of his dying father, Rashid Khalifa and decides to go into the World of Magic to steal the Fire of Life to save his father.

Rushdie makes his child protagonist, Luka to grow beyond his biological age to take the responsibility of his father who is dying a slow death through seemingly an unending slumber and thereby of the World of Magic. In contrast to a narrative in realistic tradition, fantasy, as Rushdie would configure it, demands a rapid maturation of a child to a point of taking the responsibility of his father. Fantasy also creates a role-reversal for a child, like Luka as children are normally expected to be more proficient and hence more significant stakeholders of their families and society at large in this world.

Maggie Galehouse in her research paper titled "A Father's Gift Becomes a Magical Story" (2010) considers Luka as a home-maker. This point implies that Luka is a parentified child: "All of us have an idea of home that changes – a home we're born into and, later, a home that we make. In this book [*Luka and the Fire of Life*], it's an attempt by Luka to preserve the home" (Qtd. in Ved Shukla 3).

Luka's brother Haroun, who is elder to him by 18 years, sounds not only like an ageist but also a parentified person, when he tells Luka that Luka has now reached the age to enter the World of Magic but at the same time he warns Luka of its consequences: "I knew it would happen soon," he said. 'You've reached the age at which people in this family cross the border into the magical

world. It's your turn for the adventure – yes, it's finally here! – and it certainly looks like you've started something now. But be careful. Cursing is a dangerous power. I was never able to do anything so—well—dark''' (LFL 6). But here, Haroun perhaps doesn't know that Luka is also an adultified child who has got the potential to survive in the World of Magic. Luka seems to be infantilised by Haroun.

Using abusive language, belittling the children or considering them weak are some of the outcomes of juvenile ageism. Aag's (the rival mage's) words reveal juvenile ageist bias as he paradoxically calls Luka the tiny insignificant one:

'Dreadful black-tongued child,' the message read, distinguishing witch-boy, did you imagine I would do nothing in return for what you did to me? Did you think, vile warlock infant, that I could not damage you more grievously than you damaged me? Were you so vain, so foolish feeble pint-sized maledictor, that you thought you were the only witch in town? Throw out a curse when you can't control it, O incompetent pygmy hexer, and it will come back to smack you in face. Or, on this occasion, in perhaps an even more satisfying act of revenge, it poleaxes someone you love.' (LFL 20)

After this episode, Luka finds himself in great distress. He understands the fact that Captain Aag is going to take his revenge indirectly on him (Luka) by causing serious problem to someone he loves and this someone is none other than his father, Rashid. Therefore, Luka holds himself responsible for Captain Aag's curse falling on his father and making his father go into a long sleep. This self-persecution, holding himself responsible for his father's ailment, is another instance of self-parentification of Luka: "Luka began to shiver, even though the night was warm. Was this the truth? Had his burning curse against the circus boss been answered by a sleeping curse on his father? In which case, Luka thought with horror, the big sleep was his fault" (LFL 20-21). This behaviour of Luka shows that he is a sensitive and emotional child in spite of being adultified.

At the end of the novel, Luka Khalifa is back home in the real world from the World of Magic after crossing myriad life-threatening hurdles, with the Fire of Life burning with six Ott Potatoes. He puts one of them quickly in the mouth of his father and brings him out of the spell of long sleep and gives him a new life. Now he has got five more Potatoes – one each for his brother, mother and the two pets and himself. They all can consume the Ott Potatoes and become immortal. It is noteworthy to know little Luka's opinion about immortality. The idea of becoming immortal does



not sound exciting to him, rather it sounds horrible. This kind of maturity and wisdom, generally possessed by true saints, is shown by Luka, and it takes him much ahead of his biological young age. Here, Luka is depicted not as a victim of juvenile ageism but as a wise and matured adultified child:

Maybe his dog Bear had been right, and it was better to do without Immortality, or even the possibility of it. Yes – maybe it would be better if Soraya hid the Ott Potatoes somewhere, so that all the Khalifas could slowly forget about their existence; and then maybe they, the Potatoes in their Pot, would finally get bored of waiting to be eaten, and would slip back across the Frontier into the World of Magic, and the Real World would be Real again, and life would be just that, life, and would be more than enough. (*LFL* 215)

In this way, Luka brings the Fire of Life and saves his father. This is an instance of Luka breaking the shackles of juvenile ageism and childism. He poses himself as a capable child who can take calculated risks in the World of Magic and defy being tagged as a timid and dependent child.

Fantasy as a fictional genre is generally considered to be preferred by children and young-adult readers. This perhaps is largely because of the fact that the genre subverts the rigid age-based hierarchies. Children enjoy some degree of revolt while reading a fantasy and get a cathartic outburst of feelings from being dominated by the adults in the real world. Furthermore, a fantasy is not merely written for children but rather populated with children as main characters. In such narratives the child protagonist often liberates himself or herself from the social expectations of a child; thus they challenge the stereotype of institutional juvenile ageism. He or she may wander off into a world of magic, setting aside the compulsions of school and parental control and so on. This, however, has a paradoxical impact on the childhood as well. A child caught in the world of magic has to give up on simple pleasures and may have to, like an adult, take responsibilities, make serious decisions and encounter adversities—situations that snatch the simple carefree moments of childhood. As one knows the awareness of virtual reality is as important as that of actual reality in the age of computer and internet. If a child is able to overcome the difficult and dangerous tasks in the videogames, he is likely to use that expertise in the real world as well in any gruesome situation. Luka is portrayed as a techno-savvy child. Thus, it could be inferred that such a techno-savvy child as Luka who manoeuvres independently and confidently like an adult in the virtual world is likely to show the same sensibility in leading his life in his real world as well. This could



be considered as an example of virtual adultification of a fictitious character. Dinesh Kumar in his research article titled “Video Game, Fairy Tale and the Fabulator as Healer: Postmodern Catharsis in Salman Rushdie’s *Luka and the Fire of Life*” (2013) is of the opinion that not only Luka but also the young readers are adultified at the hands of the omniscient narrator: “Rushdie also prepares his young adult readers for a world of violence, as it is predictable in the frame of 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” (Kumar 2079).

According to Kumar, Luka shows extraordinary maturity, sense of responsibility and high level of conscience in the *World of Magic*. Luka’s struggle could be seen on the psychological front as well. He removes fear of death and guilt from his mind and shows exceptional courage. He realises that death is both inevitable and natural. Thus, according to Kumar, Luka could be an adultified child:

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 fear of death to live with some degree of confidence. Luka purges himself of 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. (Kumar 2028). Further, Kumar, argues that Rushdie makes Luka more reliable and pervasive than the omniscient narrator. His narrative technique creates an effect where Luka takes over his creator himself. This brings Luka to the focal point of the narration and technically makes him the spokesperson of the author. This could be noted as the authorial adultification of a child character done by the author: “...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 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. (Kumar 2081)

Thus, one can argue that Rushdie makes Luka confront juvenile ageism with the help of magic and authorial control. With a postmodern flip, Rushdie's narrative undermines the stability of many social practices including juvenile ageism and parentification. Once Luka enters the World of Magic, the conventional perceptions on children change as the child protagonist is empowered with magic, authorial voice and digital skills. Rushdie seems to assert that both these skills are closer to younger generation and these skills can be used to inhibit juvenile ageism and to redefine the limits of children's abilities.

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