

Vanishing Voices: Venturing into Myth and Mortality in Salman Rushdie's

Luka and the Fire of Life

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how old myths have quietly faded from our everyday lives. In the magical world of this novel, these legends are still alive, but in the real world, people no longer remember them. The main aim here is to explore why these stories disappear from our memories, even though they continue to thrive in fiction. At the same time, the story reminds one that while one can't avoid it, one can still live on in the hearts and minds of those who remember them. Through his storytelling, Rushdie brings back forgotten gods and shows how people deal with the idea of dying. But more importantly, he shows that hope can fight back against loss. The Fire of Life is a symbol in this book that stands for both the delicate nature of life and the strength we find when we believe. By shedding light on the lost voices of ancient deities and legends, Rushdie's novel highlights how storytelling preserves cultural memory and keeps the essence of myth alive in a world that has largely forgotten them.

Keywords: Forgotten Gods, Myth and Mortality, Hope and Immortality, Cultural Memory, Imagination, Lost Belief, Fire of life.

Myth and Mortality concepts are closely interconnected, revealing the relationship between storytelling and human experiences, particularly life and death. Myth refers to traditional stories, often rooted in ancient cultures, that explain the origins of the world, the nature of existence, and fundamental human experiences. “In *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s epic and masterpiece, the poet leans on Biblical incidents and mythologies to shape his story. He tells the story of the Fall of Man, the Garden of Eden, and the scheming of the fallen angels, now devils and demons. He plays on the image of Eve as a seducer of men and the cause of humanity’s ills”. Myths typically explore themes such as gods, fate, creation, and the afterlife.

Mortality refers to the inevitable reality of death that, every living being must undergo. In many myths, mortality plays a central role, offering explanations about what happens after death and the possibility of rebirth. Frequently, myths feature protagonists who embark on journeys in search of ultimate power—either to achieve immortality for themselves or to save their loved ones from death. The themes of myth and mortality help us make sense of life. Through old stories and legends, people have long tried to understand why life is short and what might lie beyond it. These myths don’t just entertain—they give comfort, offer meaning during uncertain times, and reflect our deep desire to rise above the limits of time and death.

In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Salman Rushdie imagines a world where mythical beings are still around, but their strength fading. Right from the start of Luka’s adventure, we meet once-powerful gods and magical figures who are now struggling to survive. Characters like the Insultana of Ott and the Aalim live in a world that feels like it’s falling apart. Their fading presence reminds us that even the greatest legends can be forgotten with time. Through them, Rushdie shows how myths, like memories, can slip away, revealing just how fragile even the strongest stories can be.

The theme of mortality extends beyond individuals to myths and storytelling itself. Rushdie presents a reality where stories, once vibrant and powerful, begin to lose their influence over time. Luka's journey becomes not just a quest to save his father but also an exploration of the fading power of storytelling. Rashid Khalifa, as a storyteller, represents both an individual struggling against death and the broader struggle of stories themselves to survive in a world that increasingly forgets them. Through this, Rushdie suggests that storytelling, much like life, must fight against the forces of time and oblivion to endure, which can be witnessed when Luka explains about the importance of stories and his father's art of storytelling to that of the mythological Gods in the magical world when they all surround him in order to restrict him from taking off the fire of life from the magical world to that of the real world to save his father.

It's a bit on the feeble side, to be honest with you. Listen to me: it's only through Stories that you can get out into the Real world and have some sort of power again. When your story is well told, people believe in you; not in the way they used to believe, not in a worshipping way, but in the way people believe in stories – happily, excitedly, wishing they wouldn't end (Rushdie 182).

Heroes like Orpheus and Gilgamesh also undertook journeys to defy death, following the same tradition that Luka follows. Nobodaddy, the transparent figure who grows stronger as Rashid's condition deteriorates, symbolizes the inevitability of death. Like the Philosopher's Stone and the Fountain of Youth, the Fire of Life represents an attempt to conquer death. However, the Fire of Life is not merely a source of physical existence; it also embodies the spark of imagination and storytelling, reinforcing the novel's exploration of creativity and endurance.

One of the most powerful ideas in *Luka and the Fire of Life* is that not only humans but also Gods and myths can fade and disappear over time. In the magical world, Luka meets divine beings who were once worshipped, but now, they are almost forgotten. This shows that even Gods, who are usually seen as eternal, depend on human memory to exist. Unlike the old belief that gods live forever, the novel offers a

different take—it shows that gods and myths survive only as long as people continue to believe in them. This idea makes us think about how delicate existence really is, not just for people but also for the stories we tell. Myths might be passed down for generations, but they don't last forever. When people stop sharing them, they slowly fade away. In many cultures, gods were once deeply honored, but as time passed and beliefs changed, they were left behind. Rushdie shows us that it's faith and memory that keep these stories alive. Once they're forgotten, their power fades too.

Through these fading gods, Rushdie also holds up a mirror to human history. Many ancient gods, once at the heart of great civilizations, now exist only in history books or in ruins. Luka's journey echoes this truth. It reminds us that those myths, just like people, don't last forever. They live on only if someone remembers them. This reflects one of the novel's core messages: that nothing lasts forever. Whether it's a person, a god, or a legend, everything eventually gives way to time.

Luka and the Fire of Life gives us a fresh way of looking at mythology. Instead of showing gods as all-powerful and eternal, Rushdie presents them as fragile beings who rely on human belief to exist. In the story, gods can weaken and even disappear if people forget about them. This means they're not independent or invincible, but that they only continue to live through the memories and faith of those who once worshipped them. Without that belief, they slowly fade into the past. This idea mirrors what has happened throughout history. Many ancient cultures had gods at the center of their lives, but as time went on and new religions or ideas took over, those gods became nothing more than names in old stories. Rushdie brings this truth to life in his novel, showing how easily a once-revered figure can vanish when no one remembers their story.

The fading gods in the book also symbolize something deeply, human memory. Just as people can be forgotten if no one tells their stories, gods too disappear when they are no longer remembered. This ties into one of the novel's larger themes: the reality that nothing lasts forever. But the story also offers hope. It

shows that myths and gods don't have to vanish completely—they can live on through storytelling. If someone continues to share their tales, they exist in some way, even if they no longer hold the same power. This reminds us of how important memory and tradition are in keeping stories alive.

Soumava Maiti, in an article about Rushdie's work, points out how both *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life* celebrate storytelling and imagination. These stories highlight how memory and creativity help preserve culture and meaning over time. Rushdie's fading gods, though still powerful in theory, are at risk because people have stopped believing in them. This becomes a strong metaphor for how memory works in our own lives. Whether it is a god, a person, or an idea, once we stop telling their stories, they begin to disappear. In this way, the novel gently reminds us that memory is what keeps identity alive—both for divine beings and for us. Rashid's body weakens as time passes, showing the natural decline that comes with mortality. While there are brief moments where his condition seems to improve, his life is slowly fading. However, despite his physical decline, Rashid's stories remain alive, continuing to be remembered and shared. This highlights one of the novel's key themes—the power of storytelling to outlive the storyteller. Even when a person passes away, their words, ideas, and memories can continue to exist, passed down from one generation to another. "You want Immortality? It's only my father, and people like him, who can give it to you now" (Rushdie 182).

Luka's journey, while driven by his desire to save his father, gradually becomes something more than just a quest for survival. It transforms into an effort to preserve Rashid's legacy, ensuring that his stories are not lost. In this way, Luka is not only fighting against death but also against the erasure of memory. The novel suggests that while mortality is inevitable, stories can transcend time. They give life to those who came before, keeping their presence alive in the minds of those who remember them.

Rushdie's portrayal of storytelling as a form of immortality reinforces the idea that human existence is not only defined by physical life but also by the impact one leaves behind. Rashid, the storyteller, may be

reaching the final chapter of his life, but through Luka, his stories continue to live on. This captures a simple but powerful truth—while every life eventually comes to an end, the stories we tell, the memories we leave behind, and the lessons we share can continue to shape the world long after we're gone. These stories carry more than just words—they hold a community's history, offer guidance, explain where we come from, and help people make sense of the world around them. I have seen this in my own life too—some of the stories my grandparents told me as a child still stay with me today. Even though they're gone, those stories carry their voice, their values, and the warmth of those moments. It reminds me how deeply storytelling keeps people alive in our memory.

Storytelling, then, is more than just a way to pass time. It's a way of keeping the past alive while still speaking to future generations. It holds onto what matters—our memories, our values, and our shared heritage—ensuring they're not lost but carried forward in the hearts and minds of those who listen. Even when individuals pass away, the stories they leave behind ensure that their essence continues to exist. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, storytelling emerges as a force that defies mortality, proving that while life is fleeting, narratives endure, shaping generations to come.

Rushdie does not present mythology as a fixed or unchanging concept; instead, he invites us to explore how myths evolve within modern society. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Luka enters a magical world where the challenges he faces resemble a video game. Each task he undertakes is structured around a point system, reinforcing the idea that myths, like games, adapt to new forms while retaining their core purpose.

He grabbed lives in great handfuls and stuffed them into his pockets, whereupon, with a little *ting*, they dissolved, became a part of himself; and this was when he noticed the change in his eyesight. A little three-digit counter had somehow become lodged in the top left-hand corner of his field of vision; it was there, in the same place, no matter where he looked or how hard he rubbed his eyes;

and the numbers kept going up as he swallowed, or absorbed, his many lives, making, he was sure, a low whirring noise as they did so. (Rushdie 50-51).

In earlier centuries, myths were primarily passed down through oral tradition, later transitioning into written forms. Similarly, in the modern era, myths are increasingly shaped by digital narratives. Luka's journey shows how storytelling continues to change with time. The magical world he moves through feels like a video game—he can save his progress, restart, and keep going after setbacks. This idea reflects the old mythological pattern of death and rebirth, where stories don't just end; they shift, grow, and come back in new forms.

Even though some myths fade as time goes on, they're often replaced by new ones. That way, the tradition of storytelling doesn't die—it just takes on different shapes. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Rushdie captures this ongoing transformation. He shows us that while the style or medium may change, the purpose of myths—helping people make sense of life and sparking the imagination—remains the same.

One of the most powerful symbols in the novel is the Fire of Life. It stands for both the energy that drives us and the fragile nature of life itself. Like life, the fire is strong, bright, and full of possibility—but it's also delicate and can go out at any moment. I remember once hearing a storyteller compare life to a candle in the wind—bright, warm, but easily lost. That image stayed with me, and Rushdie's fire carries a similar feeling. He reminds us that life is precious, not because it lasts forever, but because it doesn't. Luka's journey to get the fire is similar to the quests of great heroes in different myths, where they must face many challenges to reach their goal. The Fire of Life is not something that grants eternal life, but it is something that helps in survival.

Luka's adventure is like the Greek myth of Prometheus, where Prometheus steals fire from the Gods to give knowledge and power to humans. "Prometheus happily left the Gods' playground and took the fire with him either in a hollowed pumpkin or hollowed reed (depending on the interpretation) and brought it

to Earth and gave it to humans.” Fire in that story stands for wisdom and life. In the same way, the Fire of Life in this novel is important for survival, but it does not make someone live forever. It is a force that keeps things alive, but it can also be put out, showing that nothing lasts forever. The Fire of Life also shows the importance of imagination and existence. It is something that keeps things going, but it must be taken care of. In the novel, this fire is not just a simple object, but something that gives life meaning.

Throughout the novel *Luka and the Fire of Life*, it becomes clear that myths help people understand the eternal cycle of life and death. Luka's journey into the unknown magical world is driven by his deep love for his ailing father. His only goal at the beginning is to save Rashid, but as his adventure unfolds, he realizes that his mission extends beyond his father's survival, that is preserving the storytelling too, to protect the mythical characters from becoming extinct from human memory. He stresses it out, when mythical characters stop him from getting the fire of life which is essential for saving his ailing father Rashid. There he emphasizes how Rashid's presence is mandatory for passing out the stories of those characters in the magical world to the people living in real world which changes the situation in favour of Luka in getting the fire of life which helps him to save his father from his illness and get him to normalcy.

The novel highlights that myths endure only through storytelling. Luka encounters various mythological characters, whom he had previously known only through his father's stories. This reinforces the idea that myth and mortality are always interconnected—while individuals may pass away, myths can last forever if they are remembered and retold. Rushdie's message is that true immortality does not come from an individual living forever but from the survival of ideas, imagination, and stories. Luka triumphs in his adventure, yet the novel suggests that the real victory lies not in escaping death but in keeping creativity, knowledge, and storytelling alive.

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