

The Interplay of Language and Storytelling in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*: A Critical Reading

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Abstract

Language as a powerful tool of communication is used to convey both significant and irrelevant matters, truth and falsity, personal and public news, current and historical meanings. Moreover, it is instrumental in carrying out stories throughout generations. Stories are a part of the human world; it is most certainly a binding force of the universe for keeping alive the narratives associated with culture, nature, history, science, and the very evolution of everything present on the earth. In addition, stories are an intriguing composition of varied ideas presented through diverse techniques of writing, put simply, through the play of language. Language play is heightened in children's literature, wherein the characters developed for the amusement of children use language to facilitate play, using it as an object or resource for play. Interestingly, writers around the world have also adopted this medium of playful language to deliver serious matters in order to subvert the conventional norms and autocratic establishments. The writers play with language, forming stories that superficially seem simple and unalarming, but have underlying interpretations. Salman Rushdie is an Indian born British-American novelist; his literary works are predominant in giving voice to matters concerning humanity. In his children's novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), Rushdie employs language play to present his story, that is not one but multiple in number and style. Additionally, he also brings in other mediums of communication such as sign language or the language of gestures, also called *abhinaya* in Hindi, and interestingly silence too becomes a part of it. The present paper is an attempt at investigating Rushdie's use of language and storytelling in his celebrated children novel, *Haroun and the Sea of stories*.

Keywords: Abhinaya; Authority; Language-play; Silence; Storytelling.

Introduction

Haroun and the Sea of Stories, as the title suggests, is replete with stories of Haroun, his father and their surroundings on the earth and in the second moon of earth, Kahani, a distinct universe with distinct characters and creatures. Haroun's father Rashid Khalifa is the famous storyteller of the sad city "K" who is endowed with the power to appease, entertain and sustain people's attention with his stories. Haroun, Rashid and his wife, Soraya are a happy family of three, until their neighbour Mr. Sengupta who prioritizes critical over creative has eclipsed their contentment by persuading Soraya to believe that stories are not worthy of being listened to on the grounds that they are not true but made up and false. Equivalent to the gloomy situation of Rashid and Haroun's situation after Soraya left them was seen in Kahani as well. In the second moon of earth, Kahani, the universe is separated into two, one is marked by light and speech, the Gup City and the other is representative of darkness and silence, the Chup city. Khattam Shud, an autocratic master of the Chup city has an army of Chupwalas, consisting of majority of those unwillingly obliging to the master and the rest mechanically following the destructive scheme of putting an end to the flow of new ideas, stories and speech altogether from Gup City.

Additionally, apart from the parallel link found between these two stories in the novel, it also includes resemblances to author's real-life incident after he published his *The Satanic Verses* in the year 1988. *The Satanic Verses* is condemned as blasphemy of Islam, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa in 1989 calling for the killing of Rushdie as well as his editors and publishers. This also resulted in the exile of Rushdie in the United Kingdom and United States of America. However, as an artist he writes back, calling attention to the exercise of one's freedom of speech, just as Haroun and Rashid react against the forceful authorities in the novel. Under the guise of children literature that is filled with imaginary lands, magical creatures, extraordinary places which function beyond time. Rushdie created his characters and named as such. He uses the trope of language play to tell stories that are simple yet deep, serious, and important.

Argument

The paper seeks to argue that Salman Rushdie's children's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, has taken help of language play and storytelling in order to criticize the fundamentalists like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,

thereby reclaiming his rights of freedom of speech and expression.

Research Methodology

The methodology used in this research paper includes both primary and secondary sources. It includes the source text along with relevant secondary sources. The theoretical frame of reference employed here is the theory of deconstruction. Through deconstruction, the subtext of any literary work can be unravelled, because, reality is constructed by language and anything that exists as linguistic entity can be deconstructed, re-established or interpreted diversely. Further, Derrida (1988) asserts that, "deconstructive criticism aims to show that any text inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning and licences the reader to produce his own meanings out of it by an activity of semantic 'freeplay'" (108).

In Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, deconstruction as an analytical approach is helpful in exploring the underlying essence of a children's novel that functions as an important literary work of foregrounding the significance of freedom of expression, harmful consequences of autocracy, and the universal theme of the victory of good over evil.

Literature Review

Many writers have given their views and arguments on the aspect of language play and the essence of storytelling in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Such as Avishek Parui (2014) in his article "What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?": *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and the Epistemology of the Storytelling Self" emphasizes on the storytelling mind, that is creative but at the same time, constantly at the threat of opposing factors, which are heavily guided by scientific and overcritical domain like political censorship. His analysis contributes to serve instances to the larger theme of storytelling, as it draws parallel between the ability to tell stories with the constitution and the location of one's self which is fulfilling and happy to narrate tales of magic. His interpretation is interesting in the sense that it explicitly highlights Rushdie's inherent message, stating that here, loss of happiness is directly related with the loss of individual agency, as evident in Khalid's inability to narrate stories after his wife Soraya left him.

Meenakshi Mukherji (1998) in her study suggests the intertextual references and an allegorical relation of the text in her article, "Politics and Children's Literature: A Reading of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*." Her

work situates Rushdie's children's novel in the larger political scenario, decoding the language play to allude to Rushdie's attempt at subverting the authorities that imposes censorship on the free flow of creative ideas. She calls attention to the minute serious details that Rushdie intends to provide under the garb of a children's novel. Further, it highlights the essential tension between those who celebrate the power of imagination and those who feel threatened by its energy. She also praises Rushdie's imagination and creativity as he effortlessly delights his readers by the sheer inventiveness of the names of characters and places, also a manifestation of his literary development, chutnification. Her discussion and analysis on the political undertone of the novel, explaining the various connotations that the *chutnified* words hold contributes to a better understanding of the text, while also unfolding Rushdie's motive of critiquing those antithetical to life, creation, novelty and freedom.

Furthermore, Jean-Pierre Durix (1993) examines the art of storytelling in his article "The Gardener of Stories": Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*." He emphasizes the close relation between real and magic in the story as it develops, leads people to dream, offers them a beautiful story, and suggests that people can find in themselves the strength to overthrow their despots. Moreover, even if stories are made up it essentially helped Rashid to entertain and appease the crowd in his sad city for the moment, suggesting that the stories which are not harmful, demeaning, blasphemous and dismissive, but made up with pure imagination and creativity to provide a moment of joy and deeper introspection needs to be preserved and carried on, just like the Mali or the gardener in the second moon of earth, Kahani. The fictive Rashid and the real Rushdie are both the creators of stories, and as attendants to the creative flow one needs to adapt the protective role of the Mali. In his critical essay, Jean-Pierre Durix suggests that an artist, if led to compromise its free flow of ideas and perceptions in the real world, would eventually rise against it to subvert authority with its imaginative powers.

Thus, a brief review of the existing literature reveals that much discussion has already been done on this aspect. However, the present paper will try to augment the discussion and contribute to the scholarship of the above aspect.

Analysis

Salman Rushdie's children's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is an adventurous tale of a father-son duo on the fictional land of Kahani, which

is the second moon of earth. The novel deals with a myriad of important issues presented in a very nonchalant manner. As a children's novel Rushdie has employed spontaneous rhyming, play with fantasy, nonsense, sounds and with linguistic structures. Furthermore, the text is also a meta-narrative in the sense that it is a constant attempt on the larger narrative to emphasize upon stories, as Rashid Khalifa, the storyteller and his son, Haroun have taken the risk to enter into a magical land of uncertainties and unusual creatures so as to protect the very source of stories.

Language Play and Storytelling

Haroun and the Sea of Stories by Salman Rushdie is explicit in its play of language, the author has very minutely shaped words or has employed the technique of chutnification in order to achieve its intended effect. Chutnification is the act of mixing up, blending together differences, and stirring things up, so as to recreate and trans create stories on the part of the author. Additionally, children's literature often surpasses censorship from intellectuals and religious leaders, considering it as a frivolous but delightful literature. Rushdie has woven his story with extensive play-oriented activities, such as verbal puns, jokes and rhymes, role play and storytelling, that at the surface it implies a story intended exclusively for children. However, the playful tone of the novel holds a serious undertone, calling attention to the message that needs to be decoded by the readers. This is his first novel after the issue of fatwa and in order to claim his freedom of speech, he employs parallel but imaginative situations in the text from the very beginning to the end. The incantatory poem at the beginning uses acrostic invoking the name of Rushdie's son Zafar to the readers:

Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:
All our dream-worlds may come true.
Fairy lands are fearsome too.
As I wander far from view
Read, and bring me home to you (Rushdie)

Here, Rushdie initiates his playful tone and uses his son's name as a code, as if he is addressing him, and the wider readership to read between the lines. Thus, he prepares his readers for a series of experimentation in nomenclature of places, characters, processes, things and rivers. The names of characters are often in relation to their function and the names of places are modified to imply the kind of its environment. The country of Alifbay

has a sad city named K, suggesting a letter among the alphabets. However, in the very description of the city there is an adjective, sad, implying the state of that place as suggested in the expression, "There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glum-fish, which were so miserable to eat that they made people belch with melancholy even though the skies were blue" (Rushdie 15).

The sad city is also the place inhabited by the storyteller Rashid, his wife, Soraya, and their son, Haroun. Rashid was sort of a comforter to the sadness of the people there, because his magical stories were liked by many. Moreover, Rashid, by adding novelty to each story, has become a popular figure among the crowd. He is renowned as the legendary 'Ocean of Notions' and the 'Shah of Blah' suggesting that he is the creative expert of making stories. However, those critical minds antithetical to creation also played the role of impediments in Rashid's art of storytelling. Mr. Sengupta and his equivalent, Khattam Shud are actively engaged in eliminating imagination and uprooting the source of stories, as implied in the statement, "Mr. Sengupta has no imagination at all" (Rushdie 22) said by Rashid's wife as she subscribes to the perception of Mr. Sengupta, she too has knowingly and unknowingly followed the path of chupwalas. Rashid, being confronted by the reliability of his stories, fell short of words every time he attempted to tell one. Also, only the sound 'Ark,ark,ark' would come out of his mouth and the Shah of Blah's creativity is reduced to the sound of a "stupid crow" (Rushdie 26).

Nonetheless, along with Rashid, Haroun also suffered the pangs of loss and realizing that his father's assertion about the great sea of stories was rather true, he goes on to take the adventure of his life as he meets Iff, the water genie. Before that, there is an elaborate description about the places that Haroun and his father have crossed in their journey towards the valley of K by bus, and the bus driver, Mr. Butt, is habitual to introduce the various attractions of passing scenery to his passengers, as he points towards the mountain of M. Here, Rushdie draws a similarity with the structure of the letter with its pointed top equated with the mountain's sharp ridges, and the fictional Dull Lake might allude to the real Dal Lake of Kashmir.

The similarity of his function of driving Haroun is shared with Butt the Hoopoe, a mechanical bird who is endowed with the ability to read people's mind. Moreover, Iff and Butt are characters in the story, but they are also conjunctions that have shifted word category to become nouns, and

it is through the narrative context that we are able to make sense of this shift engineered by Rushdie, as important element of stories, Rushdie has personified them while granting them special roles in the rescue mission of the source of stories towards the end. Furthermore, "Butt appears as the friendly Mail Coach Driver on earth who has the ability to feel other's needs, further, he intuitively tries to meet those needs, even as Butt, the technologically adept Hoopoe bird, moves between Kahani and earth, between what is thought (in language) and what is spoken (in words), to become infinitely responsive." (Bongartz and Richey 463) Then there are Eggheads who are the scientists of Gupcity working at P2C2E, that is, Processes too Complicated to Explain.

As elaborated in the statement that, "How the Story Waters find their way to the storyteller is a P2C2E – a process too complicated to explain. It works without conscious awareness on the part of the storyteller; in fact, an introspective analysis of how it works is impossible" (Bongartz and Richey 454). Again, in Kahani, the effect of Khattam Shud's evil mechanisms to pollute the source of stories is felt. The ocean of stories is polluted leading to the degrading health of the Plentimaw fishes which concerns Haroun as well, as he inquires that, "These particular Plentimaw Fishes seemed unhealthy to Haroun. Their multiple mouths frequently spluttered and coughed, and their eyes looked inflamed and pink. 'I'm no expert,' Haroun called to them, 'but are you both quite well?'" (Rushdie 85).

To elaborate, these fishes have plenty of maws i.e. mouths, and they always speak in rhymes Sen (1995) remarks as follows:

in societies like that of India where a large percentage of the population is illiterate and the ear assumes greater importance as a channel for information exchange. One encounter rhymed couplet everywhere; they are used for advertisements, political propaganda, and arousing social awareness on issues such as birth control. Rushdie's pair of rhyme-loving glumfish, Goopy and Bagha, are very much creatures of Indian popular culture (670).

Rushdie's emphasis on novelty in story is reiterated many times in the text and one instance is when Haroun learns that these fishes with multiple mouths can consume many stories at one time when they are hungry, and inside them a similar to digestion process occurs that leads to the combination of all the stories they took in, and as they emit the stories out, they are not the same stories previously consumed, but are made new with twists and turns.

As detailed in the statement that, "Iff replied that the Plentimaw Fishes were what he called 'hunger artists' – 'Because when they are hungry, they swallow stories through every mouth, and in their innards miracles occur; a little bit of one 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, Thieflet; 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 – so just think how sick they must be feeling now! All these filthied-up sagas passing through their insides, front to back, top to bottom, side to side – no wonder they look green about the gills!' (Rushdie 86).

The above statement is also suggestive of the fact that every story that is told is a twist of a story already been told and it is all a circular process. However, if the old stories are poisoned, all the new stories that have not been written yet would also be poisoned. Therefore, Haroun leads the army of Gupwalas to restore the old stories and unclog the flow of new ideas, towards Chup city. Surprisingly, during this journey he discovers that the binary notion related to speech and silence or Gup and Chup as good and evil is a nuanced argument, because when people misuse their voice that is just as bad as being silenced. Their primary motive of going to Chup city was to restore the ocean by destroying Khattam Shud's machineries, but Prince Bolo who is to be the future son in law of King Chattergy of Gup city is totally unbothered about the polluting ocean, just as his name suggests, he is uninterested in listening to the valued opinion of others and is quick to respond in ways that annoyed everyone including the king. Moreover, Bolo's fiancé and king's only daughter, princess Batcheat shares the same attitude with him, they stand for speech without sense or blabber. However, Blabbermouth, the girl who disguised herself as a man to get a man's job of a page to participate in the restoration of stories is a feminist and her name does not imply talk without sense, rather it is indicative of nonstop but informative talk. Blabbermouth is smart and opinionated, who is not afraid to offer her opinion, and is an exceptional juggler.

So far in the Gup city Haroun was alone without his father's company, however, Rashid is soon transported to Kahani through a process called Rupture, his entry into the scene is through a magical process casually told and received because there are a series of such interventions wherein magic and real overlap and none is separable from the other. Rushdie's magical transportation is explained as below,

As a frequent insomnia sufferer,' Rashid went on, 'I have learnt that particular foodstuffs, properly prepared, will (a) induce sleep, but also (b) carry the sleeper wherever he may wish. It is a process known as Rapture. And with sufficient skill, a person may choose to wake up in the place to which the dream takes him; to wake up, that is to say, inside the dream. I wished to travel to Gup; but owing to a slight directional miscalculation, I woke up in the Twilight Strip, dressed only in this inappropriate garb; and I froze, I confess it freely, I froze half to death" (Rushdie 98).

The narrative gets more interesting and amusing as it progresses to the end, Haroun, Rashid and the Gup walas are on their way to the chup city, and the pages' uniform are literal pages that have stories and are numbered. The guppies were marching as an army or library, because there were pages lining up to form chapters of books and volumes and so forth. Although, the nonsensical element here is that Princess Batcheat took upon herself to change the uniform, but she transformed them by making them look rather funny as such everyone laughed at them.

And these uniforms, you wanted-to know about the uniforms,' Blabbermouth continued, ignoring him, and continuing briskly on through halls, down spiral stairways, and along passageways. 'Well, whose idea do you think those were? Hers, obviously, Batcheat's, and she decided to "take the wardrobe of the Pages of the Royal Household in hand" to make us into walking love letters, that was her first idea, and after an eternity of having to wear kissy-poo and cuddly-bunny and vomitus texts like that she changed her mind and had all the greatest stories in the world rewritten as if her Bolo was the hero or something. So now instead of Aladdin and Ali Baba and Sindbad it's Bolo, Bolo, Bolo, can you imagine, people in Gup City Laugh at us to our faces, to say nothing of behind our backs (Rushdie 106).

Throughout there has been a constant emphasis on the importance of restoring stories and sustaining speech by overthrowing Khattam Shud or the archvillain, who looks like Mr. Sengupta, but is more diabolical in his scheme of destroying all stories, because he hates speech and stories all together. However, the character of Mudra communicates neither through speech nor silence, but through gestures. Mudra is a Hindi term which implies gestures, and in the novel, Mudra's language of communication is through Abhinaya. He is a warrior fighting with his own shadow, his figure is striking. Here, Haroun pauses for a moment to appreciate the

beauty of silence.

But it's not as simple as that,' he told himself, because the dance of the Shadow Warrior showed him that silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly); and that Action could be as noble as Words; and that creatures of darkness could be as lovely as the children of the light. 'If Guppies and Chupwalas didn't hate each other so,' he thought, 'they might actually find each other pretty interesting. Opposites attract, as they say (Rushdie 125).

Haroun emphasizes on the fact that just as speech is beautiful so is silence, there can be the coexistence of both these binaries in harmony, because talking just for the sake of it without benefitting anyone is simply noise. As the very function of language is to communicate and any medium and style is appropriate if not it is a message of hate, suppression and censorship. The Chup walas in the Chup city were not in agreement with the notion of silence as propounded by Khattam Shud, but they had to oblige to the authority, suggesting that even the people who share the same culture can have disagreements or different perspectives, and every individual has the right to speak for its own. The wishwater becomes the cure to every problem in earth's second moon, Kahani, as well as in Haroun's sad city of K which has been granted happiness in the form of showers and the remembrance of the city name which too is Kahani. Rushdie, through these fictive characters, has asserted the importance of speech in one's life in order to express and tell stories that connect us to our past, because every new story is reproduced from an old one. As Rushdie (2012) said in one of his memoirs *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, man's uniqueness as a primate, lies in its being "the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was" (17).

Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion it becomes clear that Haroun and Rashid's attempt to protect the ocean of stories is successful, and everything is restored to balance. The world of binaries has united their ways, as if the stories were the very essence of their being. More specifically, the name earth's second moon and Haroun's place on earth are identical, that is, Kahani. The remembrance of the name of the sad city K has in a way revived not just its identity, but a sense of collectiveness much integral to stories. Thereby, stories are a way to reclaim one's self and retain one's past. The conditions under which neither is allowed, calls for a different medium

and technique. The use of language play allowed Rushdie to speak for himself and justify his claim. Apart from this, the narrative of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is more than just a children's novel, it is replete with magical realm of teaching lessons of morality, teamwork, justice, happiness and subversion. Haroun's voice is portrayed as a strong subversive critical voice against the totalitarian regime thereby placing the storyline in a historical context.

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