

Fantasy as a Tool for an Allegory of Censorship in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

Sumaiyah Naaz

Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202002, U.P, India

Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* caused a major controversy in recent literary history that culminated in the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 declaring a death sentence upon the author. One of the most significant instances of censorship in the literary world; it pitted freedom of speech and expression against the tenets of religious fundamentalism. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* which was published in 1990 while Rushdie was in hiding is a children's fantasy story that doubles up as an allegorical critique on censorship and bigotry, stemming from the author's personal experiences. Literatures of imagination have long served as tools for allegory, first as religious mythologies and later as speculative fiction. Fantasy through its tropes of secondary-world creation, imagined realities and dream states enables the formation of an allusive structure that engages with both the explicit and implicit meanings in a fictional narrative. This paper analyses the fantastical elements, symbols and motifs in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as tools for an allegory of free speech and censorship. It also examines how these elements create a secondary universe that parallels and evokes the inherent state of conflict arising from contradictory ideologies in the primary or real universe.

KEYWORDS: Allegory, Fantasy, Secondary-world Creation, Censorship, Free Speech

Allegory has been part of humanity's artistic expression ever since human imagination evolved from the real to the symbolic and began to distinguish in the world symbols and associations between objects that would expand semantic boundaries and allow meaning to be perceived beyond what is explicit. Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* proposes a theory of allegory whereby he posits that –

“Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else...all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things...Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued.” (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 175)

The use of one narrative to signify a higher, perhaps more profound narrative can be found in the earliest of humanity's artistic endeavours. Ancient literary works like religio-mythic texts used allegory extensively as a tool to represent various moral and ethical ideas. In the absence of scientific logic, the universe was understood through a symbolic and anthropomorphic lens. Fables used animals as stand-ins for humanity's virtues and vices, and gods and goddesses became embodiments of powers and existential concepts. In a letter to his brother and sister-in-law John Keats wrote that, “A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the mystery of

life – a life like the scriptures, figurative.” (*The Complete Works of John Keats Volume 5*, 29) The very act of living therefore can be interpreted as an allegory suggestive of a greater hidden truth with facts of life and human behavior being indicative of epistemological and metaphysical concepts. Translated into literature and art it becomes a potent device to explore the realm of ideas. Modern allegory can offer a powerful narrative in a politically and ideologically complex society. Both George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* are allegorical works that interestingly critique opposing ideologies and are the products of the political environment of their times. *Animal Farm* which originally had the subtitle *A Fairy Story* has elements of fabulation in its allegory as it supplants humans with animal counterparts. Fantasy, a device used by many allegorical works, provides a framework of symbols that can serve as counterparts to the real world, paradoxically creating a more direct and striking allegory than is perhaps possible with the material restrictions of reality. The pro-communist nature of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* written at the height of US McCarthyism led him to be convicted for contempt of Congress. The indirect nature of criticism in an allegory can make it a useful device in a politically charged landscape and can become a mouthpiece for its authors’ true ideological opinions. An example of this is Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* which was published in the wake of the infamous and controversial *The Satanic Verses*.

The publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 found Salman Rushdie in the middle of a religious and political controversy that can be considered one of the most sensational and violent instances of literary censorship in modern times. The fatwa issued in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran accusing Rushdie of blasphemy and calling for his death escalated the violence that had already started in protest of the book in the Muslim world. The entire affair brought into focus the stark ideological and cultural divide between those who championed free speech and those who would impose restrictions upon it. Thirty years later Rushdie’s name continues to be an anathema in certain sections of society and *The Satanic Verses* controversy is one that refuses to die. A discussion of this prolonged obsession with the alleged blasphemy in *The Satanic Verses* becomes even more relevant in the present time when a certain atmosphere of intolerance has become evident in the world at large. Similar instances of violent literary censorship can be found in recent times such as the January 2015 attack on the office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. One of the earliest reactions to the entire controversy was from the author himself in the form of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Released in 1990, it was the first published work from Rushdie after *The Satanic Verses* and was written while he was still in hiding. It is a children’s fantasy story and is Rushdie’s first foray into the genre. While magical realism is the mainstay of Rushdie’s writings, *Haroun* is a full-blown fantasy in the tradition of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz* and others. One of the tropes that it borrows from these works is that of a secondary or dream world within the story that the protagonist travels to both as a means of adventure and as an escape from mundane reality. The Pevensie siblings in C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* books find the entrance to Narnia at a hard time in their lives when they have been displaced by the Second World War, Dorothy travels to Oz which is the exact opposite of the stark and boring Kansas landscape and the Darling children run off with Peter Pan to Neverland to escape the problem of growing up. The evils of the world are embodied in conquerable villains and its hardships become challenges that can be

overcome with bravery and wit. The epigraph to *Haroun* addressed to Rushdie's son Zafar, to whom the book is dedicated, declares –

“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.”

Home is therefore found by journeying through a dream or fairy land. The chaos of the real world, in this case Rushdie's problems after the fatwa, is countered by exchanging that difficult reality for a fantasy that mirrors its struggles but also cathartically provides resolution. Therefore the censorship and threat of violence that Rushdie experienced gets translated in the language of fantasy into an allegory of the same.

To discuss *Haroun* merely as an allegory of censorship and free speech would of course be an incomplete analysis. The story that it tells is in both form and subject matter a children's fantasy adventure, but the context of its creation and the obvious symbols of allegory used in its narrative are its most defining characteristics which place it within the larger narrative extending from *The Satanic Verses* controversy. It also acts as a mouthpiece for the author to voice his protest against the censorship he was experiencing. Rushdie's use of a children's book to do so is particularly interesting as the genre allowed it to escape the notice of the religious fundamentalists who were out for his blood. Stories or rather the very act of storytelling becomes an act of subversive defiance both in the real world and within the plot. The eponymous character Haroun is the son of a storyteller named Rashid Khalifa who is a representation of Rushdie himself. Like Rushdie he is perceived by his audience in very different and opposing ways. Those who admire him and his stories call him the Ocean of Notions, while to those who do not share this enthusiasm he is the Shah of Blah. Haroun and Rashid live in a sad city that has forgotten its name and over which an air of complete melancholy hangs along with smoke from nearby factories that manufacture sadness. In the midst of this misery Haroun's household is a happy one on account of his father's storytelling prowess. This happiness is short-lived when Haroun's mother Soraya leaves causing Rashid to lose his talent for storytelling. While stories and storytelling represent free speech and creative agency, silence becomes a metaphor for censorship and suppression. Rushdie expresses his own despair through Rashid – the loss of his gift of gab is akin to the way Rushdie had been silenced by the fatwa. Since Rashid is a professional storyteller he is hired by political figures to speak at their rallies and one such event brings father and son to the Valley of K which represents Kashmir. The fantasy in *Haroun* operates on two levels. One is the country of Alifbay which consists of the sad city and the Valley of K among other places and is a more direct allegory with counterparts in the real world. The other level is the moon Kahani where much of the action takes place and which is a fantastical place within the narrative itself. While Kahani is Oz, Alifbay is Kansas. However unlike Kansas which is devoid of all things magical there are elements of magical realism to be found in Alifbay itself, such as the sadness producing factories or the Dull Lake in the Valley of K that changes its weather according to the moods of its inhabitants. Rushdie displays a particular penchant for puns in *Haroun* and the Valley of K is also known as

Kosh-Mar, a reference to the French 'cauchemar' or nightmare, indicating that all is not right with the Valley. Rashid remembers it as a joyful place but finds it changed with people on streets wearing hostile expressions and a surplus of armed guards at the disposal of dishonest politicians. This is clearly meant to represent the ongoing political turmoil in Kashmir and Rashid like Rushdie, who is of Kashmiri origin, mourns this change in the Valley.

Haroun's adventure begins on a house boat on the Dull Lake portentously called the Arabian Nights Plus One where he encounters the Water Genie Iff who has come in the night to cancel Rashid's Story Water subscription. It is with this fateful meeting that Haroun realizes that many of his father's stories were actually true and that a special talent for storytelling comes from drinking the water of the Ocean of the Streams of Story which is located on the moon Kahani. In order to fully appreciate the allegorical world Rushdie has created it's important to understand the geography of Kahani and its celestial movements. Kahani is the Earth's second moon which moves at so high a speed and in such a varied orbit that it is undetectable by human beings. On this moon is the Ocean of the Streams of Story which, as the name suggests, is composed of colourful streams of stories which merge and interact and are continuously in the process of creation. The Ocean is therefore representative of the imagination, an innate ability to spin a yarn, to tell a tale, an ability that Rashid Khalifa loses at the beginning of the novel. Rashid's incapacitation is paralleled by the pollution that overtakes the Ocean. Rashid's misery over the loss of his wife acts as a pollutant upon his creative imagination just as the poisonous anti-stories undo the Story Streams of the Ocean. Avishek Parui writes that –

“As a living cognitive process that operates through a fluid self-reflective mode of assimilation and growth, story-formation in Rushdie's novel is an embodied as well as an existential activity that straddles materiality and fantasy. A cessation to this process brings in deadness and loss of agency, which is continually connected throughout *Haroun* with the inability to imagine and create stories.” (“*What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?*”: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories and the Epistemology of the Storytelling Self*, 5)

A lack of imagination and in fact a lack of language itself is what distinguishes the two sides of the moon Kahani. It is interesting to note that Rushdie in the style of traditional allegories like Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress* and Sidney's *The Faerie Queene* uses charactonyms for his characters and locations, with free speech indicated through names like Gup, Chattergy, Batcheat and Bolo, and silence hinted by names like Chup, Bezaban and Khattam-Shud. Allegorically interpreted various elements of Kahani can be seen to exist in a certain duality of nature, a binary opposition that lends to the idea of good vs evil. Speech and silence along with light and dark become the two most important binaries that represent the allegorical divide between democracy and free speech on one hand and censorship on the other. However as Haroun says “it's not as simple as that” (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 125) and this obvious binary is subverted in many ways. One side of Kahani is bathed in sunlight at all times and is inhabited by the Guppees, while the other is shrouded in perpetual darkness and is home to the Chupwalas. This divide between light and dark is not a natural phenomenon and has been achieved by

controlling the rotation of Kahani by the Guppee scientists. Therefore the darkness that engulfs the Chupwalas can be blamed as much upon the actions of the Guppees as it can upon the Chupwalas for succumbing to it. Rushdie therefore takes an almost neutral view of the conflict between the two sides and lays responsibility upon both. This view is furthered with the idea that the corruption of the Sea of Stories is compounded by the neglect and disregard of the Guppees for the Old Zone which contains the Wellspring or Source of Stories and can be interpreted as a direct allegory of religion and religious scriptures. The implication is that scriptures being among the most ancient of writings are in many cases the source of subsequent literature and allowing them to stagnate and be ignored can make them vulnerable to corruption in the wrong hands. This is a weakness that Khattam-Shud exploits endangering the entire Ocean of Story and its allegorical parallel can be found in what Rushdie sees as the corrupting influence of religious leaders who use religion to incite violence. Dividing the two Lands of Gup and Chup, light and dark, is quite literally a grey area, the Twilight Strip. It is here that the Old Zone is located, implying that the role that religious scriptures and tradition play is a matter of choice. The Zone may turn dark or light depending upon the choices that those tending to it make.

The Chupwalas have been seduced by Khattam-Shud to follow the cult of the idol Bezaban which is illustrated by the symbol of zipped lips. This is the most direct allegorical symbol Rushdie uses to represent censorship. Khattam-Shud as the big bad of *Haroun* is regarded by most critics as a parallel for Ayatollah Khomeini, but more than that his very name implies the ending of stories, an act of silencing. He decrees that all residents of Chup must sew their lips shut and assume complete silence. Khattam-Shud's opposition to stories comes from his desire to consolidate his power by homogenizing all narratives within a single totalitarian whole. As he admits to Haroun –

“The world is for Controlling...Your world, my world, all worlds...They are all there to be Ruled. And inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.” (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 161)

Censorship, rather than simply being a matter of hate and prejudice, is seen to be born out of the fear of losing power in a society that is exposed to ideas that are in opposition to the imposed narrative of the state. Stories or, in the broader sense, ideas, can be powerful instruments of change and their introduction in a seemingly homogenous society can prove to be the undoing of its established power structures. Rushdie's allegedly blasphemous ideas in *The Satanic Verses* came into direct conflict with what are held to be the infallible facts of Islamic history and theology and were therefore viewed as an attack upon the very institution of Islam by some of its followers. The endorsement of censorship by the Ayatollah lent further credence to the reactionary violence as it came from such a powerful and revered figure in the Muslim community. Likewise in *Haroun* Khattam-Shud becomes the focus of all that is wrong with the Land of Chup, but much like real world leaders it is found he ultimately does not speak for the entire community he claims to represent. He controls a small group of followers who have sewn their lips shut at his command and have even separated their shadows from their physical bodies. Since Chup lies in perpetual darkness the shadows of its inhabitants share an individual

but connected existence with their bodies. It is a bond which gives them power and a certain democracy of self, however this bond is broken by Khattam-Shud and balance is forsaken for single-minded evil. It is interesting that Khattam-Shud himself does not take the vow of silence indicating that leaders sometimes hypocritically eschew the very restrictions that they place upon their followers. For Khattam-Shud it is not the ideology of silence that is most important but the power it allows him to have over the people of Chup.

Gup on the other hand is a very vocally democratic society. Power in Gup is not centralized and its monarchy is mostly ornamental. Decisions are reached through vigorous debate in their Parliament called Chatterbox and all citizens have a right to air their opinions without fear of punishment from the authorities. This state of affairs is however not as utopian as it seems at first and Guppees can have a tendency for excessive and often flamboyant talk. Princess Batcheat who is kidnapped by Khattam-Shud has a very terrible singing voice that she insists upon using and her fiancé Prince Bolo comes across as a loud and pompous fool. While Rushdie criticizes these aspects of speech there can be no doubt that he is ultimately in the camp of the Guppees. While Haroun is initially alarmed at the endless debates that take place in the Guppee army, it is seen that this democratic if slightly chaotic approach is preferable to the totalitarian regime of Khattam-Shud –

“The Pages of Gup, now that they had talked through everything so fully, fought hard, remained united, supported each other when required to do so, and in general looked like a force with a common purpose. All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of fellowship between them. The Chupwalas, on the other hand, turned out to be a disunited rabble...their vows of silence and their habits of secrecy had made them suspicious and distrustful of one another.” (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 185)

Rushdie suggests that a society which gives its citizens free speech and expression as equal rights will be fundamentally more successful than one which is held together by authoritarian ideas and a dictatorial illusion of unity. Inclusiveness however goes both ways and is demonstrated with the character of Mudra the Shadow Warrior. Mudra is a Chupwala who is opposed to the ideas of Khattam-Shud and joins the Guppee forces in defeating him. He however is not appropriated by the ‘speech’ of the Guppees but retains his ‘silence’ which is expressed through Abhinaya, the language of gestures. Therefore silence is not simplified as a lack of communication and expression, and is discovered to have a beauty that has been corrupted by the interpretation of Khattam-Shud’s brand of silence, which is enforced and absolute. Mudra’s relationship with his Shadow in which both retain their individuality but act in unity is in contrast with Khattam-Shud’s creation of a separate shadow self. Allegorically this points at an embracing of what is culturally unique without allowing it to be perverted and therefore destroyed by a fanatic ideology. That the differences of Mudra are accepted and respected by the people of Gup is important. Andrew S. Teverson writes –

“Rushdie’s call for freedom of narration in *Haroun* cannot be reduced so easily to a facile, liberal plea for freedom of speech. The demand for free

interaction of stories in the story sea is linked to the demand for the freedom of individuals, groups, minorities, to be part of the nation with which they are affiliated. It is also a reinforcement of the rights of individuals, groups, minorities, not to be excluded from a nation simply because they do not conform to a pedagogical nationalist ideal.” (*Fairy Tale Politics: Free Speech and Multiculturalism in Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 461-462)

This outlook becomes especially important in light of the current refugee crises in the Middle-East and its effects on the Western world. By showing the ability of Guppees and Chupwalas to co-exist peacefully at the end of the story, exemplified by Mudra’s role in the events, Rushdie forwards the view that it is possible to overcome cultural and ideological divides without resorting to violence. The violence itself which occurs in a short battle between the forces of Gup and Chup is presented as futile and ridiculous. Both sides wear nosewarmers (red for Guppees and black for Chupwalas) giving them the appearance of circus clowns and as Rashid observes it looks like “a war between buffoons”.

The story reaches its denouement as all matters are simultaneously resolved. The Ocean is saved by Haroun, Princess Batcheat is rescued and Khatam-Shud is vanquished. The most important victory however is when Haroun in a singular act of concentrated wishing upon the magical Story Waters causes the moon Kahani to rotate again allowing the Lands of Gup and Chup to experience both light and dark in equal measure. The change in perspective for the residents of Kahani is therefore both literal and metaphoric as they experience each others’ reality and subsequently move towards a better understanding of each other. It is quite literally an act of wish fulfillment that signifies a harmonious state that might be achieved through balance and cooperation. A question that is repeated many times throughout the story is – “What is the use of stories that aren’t even true?” It is answered within the narrative when on returning to Earth Rashid tells the story of the events of Kahani to the people of the Valley of K who identify in Khatam-Shud their own political oppressor and denounce him. This is perhaps an extremely optimistic view but considering the entire controversy from which much of *Haroun* was spawned, the power of words both negative and positive cannot be disregarded. Therefore there is a metanarrative quality to the question as it speaks directly to the reader about the nature of the story’s existence. *Haroun* as a fantasy contains elements that are removed from the reality of the reader and the author and yet correspond allegorically to ideas and situations in their immediate reality. Even if the story is technically not true or realistic it is useful as a reflection of what is true in the real world and therein lies the allegory of the narrative. The question also speaks to the usefulness of fiction at large. Of the nature and responsibility of fictional writing Rushdie says –

“Fiction is telling the truth at a time in which the people who claimed to be telling the truth were making things up. You have politicians or the media or whoever, the people who form opinion, who are, in fact, making the fictions. And it becomes the duty of the writer of fiction to start telling the truth.” (*Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 73-74)

Haroun is therefore, for Rushdie, as much an attempt to tell the truth as it is a children's fantasy written as a bedtime story for his son and being both it becomes a deeply personal narrative that reflects his experiences with censorship and the effects of it upon his life. The novel closes on a hopeful note as Haroun's mother returns and the name of the sad city is finally discovered to be Kahani, same as the fantasy moon, an indication that the real and the fantastic are essentially different aspects of the same story.

References:

Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Verso, 1998.

Keats, John. *The Complete Works of John Keats*. Edited by H. Buxton Forman, vol. 5, Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1900.

Parui, Avishek . ““What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?": Haroun and the Sea of Stories and the Epistemology of the Storytelling Self.” *South Asian Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2017.

Reder, Michael R, editor. *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*. University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Granta , 1990.

Teverson, Andrew S. “Fairy Tale Politics: Free Speech and Multiculturalism in Haroun and the Sea of Stories.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2001, pp. 444–66.