

Telling of the Tale: Text, Context, and Narrative Act in Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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Salman Rushdie published *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in 1990, a year after the *fatwah* was issued against him by the Ayatollah Khomeini for publishing *The Satanic Verses*. The effect of the *fatwah* on Rushdie, and, by extension, on the perennial question of freedom of artistic expression, has been the subject of much debate and even more ink. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, coming within a year of Rushdie's personal and artistic travails, seemed to many to indicate a signal triumph of his unfettered imagination over his fettered freedom. The reviews of *Haroun* have unanimously hailed the work as a remarkable testament to Rushdie's resilience in the face of his difficulties, a work that affirms the imaginative power of the novelist.

In fact, however, *Haroun* had been in the making even before the predicament created by the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In an interview with *The New York Times Magazine* (November 4, 1990), Rushdie mentions that the idea for *Haroun* originated in "a story I told Zafar my son. It was not so much a bedtime story but a bath-time story, something I'd tell him when he was in bath, or while I wrapped him in towels. I would have these basic motifs, like the Sea of Stories, but each time I would improvise—not only to please him but to test myself to see if I could just say something and take it elsewhere."¹ But it is the *fatwah*, Rushdie admits, that persuaded him to commit the story to paper.² The context of *Haroun's* origin, in this sense, informs both its form and approach.

In his earlier novels—*Grimus* (1975); *Midnight's Children* (1980); *Shame* (1984); and *The Satanic Verses* (1989)—Rushdie incorporates a variety of genres, particularly myth and magical realism, to deal with the recurring themes of ideology and identity, i.e., the displacement and dislocation of nations and individuals, of cultures and values, in postcolonial societies. In *Haroun*, which shares thematic and narrative affinities with *Grimus* (an epic fantasy), Rushdie again relies on the mythic mode as a fictive strategy to shape his ideological intentions. As Frederic Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious*, "The aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions."³ In *Haroun* Rushdie creates an allegoric framework within which he explores issues of individual freedom and political authority in a way that suggests the work is as much an exercise in the art of nar-

¹ Gerald Marzorati, "Rushdie in Hiding," *The New York Times Magazine*, 4 Nov. 1990: 30.

² "Rushdie in Hiding" 30.

³ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981) 79.

ration as it is a discourse across cultures, a discourse that insistently points to its postcolonial refashioning.

Haroun has larger implications, as well, for the discursive practice it employs and the self-referential nature of the Manichean opposites that seemingly frame the fiction. Abdul JanMohammed explains that "the colonial mentality is dominated by a Manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object."⁴ In terms of the text, and in the context of its origins, *Haroun* is not only Rushdie's retelling of an oft-told tale, it is also an iteration of the ideology of the "other" which, in deconstructing itself through the narrative act, privileges the self—of the writer and his culture—over what Edward Said describes as "a double kind of exclusivism": "the sense of being an excluding insider . . . and second, being an excluding insider by virtue of method."⁵

The binary opposition of Silence/Speech informs the central proposition of *Haroun*: the loss of the storytelling ability of Rashid Khalifa, the Shah of Blah, whose talent seems to have disappeared at the same time as his wife, who has eloped with his upstairs neighbor, Mr. Sengupta. Rashid's silence intimates the imminent destruction of collective imagination, because it would appear that the very source of the stories, the Sea of Stories, is being slowly poisoned by the Arch-Enemy of stories, the tyrant Khattam-Shud. As Rashid explains to his son Haroun, "Khattam-Shud . . . is the Arch-Enemy of all stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and Foe of Speech. And because everything ends, because dreams end, stories end, life ends, at the finish of everything we use his name. 'It's finished,' we tell one another, 'it's over. Khattam-Shud: The End.'"⁶

Silence (Chup) reigns in perpetual darkness, while Speech (Gup) is awash in perpetual light. The war between Speech and Silence, however, is fought on many fronts: between good and evil, between freedom and repression, between democracy and dictatorship. Rushdie's intent is not merely to pose facile choices between Manichean opposites, but rather to attack such dualism. As M. Keith Booker observes, Rushdie's fiction "consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is by carefully constructing dual oppositions . . . only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent. This deconstruction of oppositions functions as a transgression of the boundaries societies (especially authoritarian ones) maintain to define themselves."⁷ For instance, the initial polarities suggested by the characters of Saleem and Shiva in *Midnight's Children* and Iskandar Harappa and Raza Hyder in *Shame* in the end prove to be less oppositional than extensions and inversions of one another.

⁴ Abdul JanMohammed, *Manichean Aesthetics* (Amherst: Massachusetts, 1983) 40.

⁵ Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," in *Literature, Politics, and Theory*, ed. Francis Baker et al. (London: Methuen, 1986) 229.

⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta, 1990) 39. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

⁷ M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* (Gainesville: Florida, 1991) 50.

In *Haroun* such dualisms are both explicit and implicit. For instance, Rashid Khalifa himself is an ambiguous figure. The "Shah of Blah's" storytelling magic is not always at the service of the public. Rather, he is in constant demand during election time: "The Grand Panjandrums of various political parties all came to Rashid smiling their fat-cat smiles, to beg him to tell his stories at their rallies and nobody else's" (20). The ambivalence of Rashid's position is indicated by the fact that both he and Haroun are the guests of Mr. Snooty Buttoo in his houseboat, *Arabian Nights Plus One*, precisely so that Rashid can facilitate the election of Buttoo. Rashid's talent for creative myth-making, therefore, is at the service of contemporary politicians seeking votes and political power. As Buttoo tells Rashid, "My enemies hire cheap fellows to stuff people's ears with bad stories about me, and the ignorant people just lap it up like milk. For this reason I have turned, eloquent Mr. Rashid, to you. You will tell happy stories, praising stories, and the people will believe you, and be happy, and vote for me" (47). Buttoo's entreaty to Rashid to make up "praising stories" suggests a debasement of language and myth-making, a process in which, in spite of his temporary loss of storytelling capacity, Rashid is complicit; as a storyteller he has the power to enthrall and ensnare, so that his ideological construct can both shape and subvert the language of discourse. What Rashid is asked to do, in effect, is to launch a public relations campaign to burnish Buttoo's image. Earlier, in the town of G, when Rashid's eloquence fails him, the politician's "image-makers" accuse Rashid of "having taken a bribe from their rivals," and threaten that "they might cut off his tongue and other items also" (27).

If in his role as the storyteller Rashid himself essays a duality of appearance, beyond this opposition, however, lies the gray area where such dualities seem less rigidly oppositional than they are inversion—mirror-reflections—of each other. For instance, "The Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held in fluid form, they retained their ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive." (72). At the same time, "For every story there is an anti-story . . . so every Stream of Story—has a shadow-self" (160). Thus, the traditional "princess rescue story" may be inverted, commingled with other stories, its romantic outcome subverted, just as Haroun, the hero of this tale, could find himself "looking out through the eyes of the young hero of the [princess] story" (73); just as Rashid, the "Ocean of Notions," may as well sell his talent to the politician as to the public.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan notes that "Rushdie seem[s] to think that no old forms or genres were capable of sustaining ideology in postcolonial societies, since there was no ideology untainted by a Manichean subject-object dialectic. With his latest novel [*Haroun*], however, it seems that he is trying . . . to break out of this Manichean binarism."⁸ Much like the shadow warriors of Khattam-Shud who can separate their "selves" from their shadows, and seemingly endow their shadows with the substance of self—certain Chupwalas and their shadows set up entirely separate existences—the narrative simultaneously privileges both speech

⁸ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (University Park: Pennsylvania, 1993) 175.

and silence. For instance, the Eggheads are culpable in Khattam-Shud's success in establishing his reign of silence, since it is the Eggheads' talent in manipulating the rotation of the Moon, Kahani, that has enabled Khattam-Shud to exercise his will; in ensuring, by a Process Too Complicated to Explain (P2C2E), daylight to shine perpetually on Gup, the Eggheads have correspondingly assured a permanent mantle of darkness over Chup.

In suggesting the ambiguous relationship between Silence and Speech, Rushdie has Haroun muse on contradictions that seem to undermine the nature of such fantasy tales. Wondering at the "strangeness" of his adventure, Haroun nevertheless seems to sense the alliance between opposites: "As he watched the Shadow Warrior's martial dance, Haroun thought about this strange adventure in which he had become involved. 'How many opposites are at war in this battle between Gup and Chup!' he marveled: Gup is bright and Chup is dark. Gup is warm and Chup is freezing cold. Gup is all chattering and noise, whereas Chup is silent as a shadow. Guppees love the Ocean, Chupwalas try to poison it. Guppees love stories, and Speech; Chupwalas, it seems, hate these things just as strongly.' It was a war between love (of the Ocean, or the Princess) and Death (which was what Cultmaster Khattam-Shud had in mind for the Ocean, and for the Princess, too)" (125).

Haroun instinctively understands that such dualities are not irreconcilable, that such contradictions as there are, are less contradictions in fact than in appearance, just as his own adventure is real only because it is imagined. "'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 creatures of darkness could be as lovely as the children of light. 'If the Guppees and Chupwalas didn't hate each other so,' he thought, 'they might actually find each other interesting. Opposites attract, as they say'" (125).

In what must be an ironic nod at both the precept and practice of the writer's art, Rushdie has Haroun note, "I always thought storytelling was like juggling. You keep a lot of different tales in the air, and juggle them up and down, and if you're good you don't drop any. So maybe juggling is a kind of storytelling" (109). In the land of Gup, Haroun has had to constantly reconcile the behavior of the Guppees with those on the Earth. For instance, "Such was the freedom evidently allowed to the Pages and other citizens of Gup, that the old General [Kitab] seemed perfectly happy to listen to these tirades of insults and insubordination without batting an eyelid" (119). Surprised that the Pages have the freedom to vociferously disagree with their general's war strategy, Haroun thinks, "If any soldier behaved like this on Earth, they'd be court-martialled quick as thinking" (119). As Butt the Hoopoe points out to Haroun, "what is the point of giving persons Freedom of Speech, if you then say they must not utilize the same? And is not the Power of Speech the greatest power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the full?" (119). Again, the Hoopoe's response, however it appears predicated on a monologic view of freedom and democracy, yet points to the inherent use as well as abuse of such freedom. Freedom of speech also implies anarchy, and the interpretation of the Pages' argument and dissenting views depends on ideology and conditioning: responsibility is an implicit corollary to the exercise of such freedom; to exercise this freedom without the attendant responsibility will lead to

chaos—a problem faced by many emerging democracies. In effect, it is to separate the shadow from the self, and the shadow, as Khatam-Shud's metamorphosis suggests, "plainly possess[es] a will of its own" (124).

In *Haroun*, the victory by the forces of Speech over those of Silence, then, is to be viewed as less a victory than Speech's recognition of and reconciliation with Silence, a clear undermining of the Manichean opposites: "The new government of the Land of Chup, headed by Mudra, announced its desire for a long and lasting peace with Gup, a peace in which Night and Day, Speech and Silence, would no longer be separated into Zones by Twilight Strips and Walls of Force" (191). Mudra the Shadow Warrior and rebel, of course, precedes even language. He is "Abhinaya," the "most ancient Gesture Language of all" (130), one whose forced speech is a garbled and grotesque contrast to the grace of his silent movements, and whose gestures simultaneously signify both silence and speech.

In combining diverse literary modes—magical realism, romance, science fiction—Rushdie's aim, as Afzal-Khan notes, "is not so much to strive for a wholeness born of a pleasing commingling of genres as it is to mirror the state of confusion and alienation that defines postcolonial societies and individuals."⁹ In framing his tale within both the traditions of the *Arabian Nights* (in itself a concept coined by Western hermeneutics) and *Panchatantra*, the Indian aphoristic stories with metamorphosing characters, Rushdie's discourse incorporates subcontinental cultural significations which underscore the narrative act. Rushdie deliberately sets out to play on, and reinscribe, the Western notion of the romantic East, by investing his fantasy with an ideological role which, as Timothy Brennen has noticed in Rushdie's fiction, often represents "imaginative expression of 'freedom'."¹⁰ In referring to García Márquez's influence on Rushdie, Brennen notes that Rushdie "theorizes his own use of fantasy, and does so by referring to colonialism."¹¹

As a romance, *Haroun* insistently deconstructs itself: Princess Batcheat, with her romantic notions about her Prince Bolo—she would substitute her Bolo in all of the *Arabian Nights* tales—is herself hardly the beautiful heroine that romantic tales require, and is not worth the rescue effort; Prince Bolo is less a hero than a whiner and complainer. As romantic characters in a fantasy tale, they do not spark the reader's interest, or even Haroun's. "It's not as if," Iff the Water Genie tells Haroun at the end of their adventure, "we really let our crowned heads do anything very important around here" (193). But the text of the tale is romantic; after all, Rashid Khalifa's predicament (and Haroun's adventure) begins only when romance goes out of the Shah of Blah's life—the elopement of his wife Soraya with the most unromantic Mr. Sengupta. Yet the narrative insistently calls attention to itself. One recalls the Plentimaw Fishes—"hunger artists"—whose business it is to reconstitute stories: "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. . . . New stories are born from old—it is the new combina-

⁹ Afzal-Khan 143.

¹⁰ Timothy Brennen, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World* (New York: St. Martin, 1989) 10.

¹¹ Brennen 67.

tions that make them new. So you see, our artistic Plentimaw Fishes really create new stories in their digestive systems" (86).

The romance, then, is in the telling of the tale: "Anybody can tell stories. . . . Liars, and cheats, and crooks, for example. But for stories with that Extra Ingredient, ah, for those, even the best storytellers need the Story waters" (58). The narrative therefore becomes a self-referential act. Telling a tale, any tale, this tale, is "To give a thing a name, a label, a handle; to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the Palace of Namelessness, in short to identify it—well, that's a way of bringing the said thing into being" (63). In structuring his tale as a romance while simultaneously positing the anomaly that exists between the structure and the tale, Rushdie points to the problematic of "writers from colonized lands [attempting] to transform their past, their culture, and their people, from being determinate objects to becoming living subjects, from constituting the antagonistic other to becoming a sympathetic self."¹² This struggle, which epitomizes postcolonial writing in general, is even more forcefully articulated by García Márquez: "We have had to ask very little of the imagination as our greatest problem has been the inadequacy of a convention or a means by which to render our lives believable."¹³ In an interview with John Haffenden, Rushdie himself acknowledges that he thinks of fantasy "as a method of producing intensified images of reality—images which have their roots in observable, verifiable fact."¹⁴ As James Harrison points out, "Rushdie's fictional world openly and matter-of-factly acknowledges the unmatter-of-fact to be a part of any vision of the world he shares with his readers."¹⁵

Ultimately, however, it is in his use of language and imagery in *Haroun* that one encounters the most direct evidence of Rushdie's deconstruction of the discourse of romance. In its use of colloquial expressions ("goodname") and images—Goopy and Bagha are Rushdie's not-so-sly allusions to Satyajit Ray's art—*Haroun* insistently directs attention to the context rather than the text, the style rather than the structure. Like all romances, *Haroun*'s singular desire to literally give voice to his father's storytelling ability, and his wish for the return of his mother (both of which are realized in his actual life), concludes the tale. This "romantic" gloss, however, does not obscure the idea that, indeed, there is nothing fundamentally romantic about the death of imagination; that only a storyteller's art keeps alive the very concept of romance. In *Haroun* the narration is text, inasmuch as the language of the text both makes and unmakes the tale.

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie presents a variant reading of the dominant framework of myth that consistently deconstructs itself in the process. Rushdie represents the enemy of Speech both as a horrifying monster as well as a creature contemptible, vile, and base. Both Khattam-Shud and Mr. Sengupta are one and the same, and appear "a skinny, scrawny, measly, weaselly, sniveling, clerical type" (153), for they are both the same monster of the mind, imagined and real. In *Haroun* the real is made magical, and the magical, real: "The real world was full of magic, so the magical world could easily be real" (50). In this context,

¹² Afzal-Khan 5.

¹³ Gabriel García Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," in *Granta* 9 (1983): 58.

¹⁴ John Haffenden, "Salman Rushdie," in *Novelists in Interview* (New York: Routledge, 1985) 246.

¹⁵ James Harrison, *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne, 1992) 34-35.

Rushdie's comment on García Márquez may be equally well applied to himself. Magical realism, notes Rushdie, "expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new. . . . In the works of Márquez, as in the world he describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun. It would be a mistake to think of Márquez's literary universe as an invented, self-referential, closed system. He is not writing about Middle-earth, but about the one we all inhabit. Macondo exists. That is its magic."¹⁶ *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is Rushdie's postcolonial telling of myths and monsters, in homelands real and imagined. That is *its* magic.

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism: 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 302.