

# Meta-Fiction and The Status of Language in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*

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## Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* may be analyzed in relation to the concept of meta-fiction. Meta-fiction emerges in the form of the language which highlights the deeper personal and political undertones of the text. With the help of fairy tale tropes and imaginary places, the novel addresses the idea of freedom of expression of an artist and also of human beings. The novel through stories emphasizes on the importance of language. The power language holds both as mediums of communication and control is also touched upon. The novel helps to realize that the easiest way of control is the controlling of the flow of communication in the society. The language of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* also help to identify the novel as an allegory. Through fiction, the novel also addresses the role of language in society.

**Keywords:** Meta-fiction, freedom, language, communication, control.

This article tries to address Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as a meta-fictional text. Meta-fiction is, "fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status"(Baldick 219). The text constantly questions its own status as a piece of writing. The text in the very first chapter questions "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?"( Rushdie 22) thus bringing attention to its consciousness of being a fictional work of art. The novel may be analyzed with the concept of meta-fiction which emerges in reading the text as a part of the language used to highlight the deeper personal and political undertones of the text. Rushdie through the use of meta-fiction addresses issues such as censorship, freedom of expression etc. in the text. Apart from that, Rushdie also touches upon the concept of intertextuality in regards to meta-fiction. Accordingly, this paper tries to study the status of language and the meta-fictional elements present in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

Written for his then twelve years old son Zafar and published in 1990, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a fantastical story which revolves around the adventures of its young protagonist, Haroun Khalifa. Haroun embarks on an adventure to the second and hidden moon of planet Earth called Kahani to restore his storyteller father Rashid khalifa's "Gift of the Gab"(Rushdie 70) or his storytelling abilities. Amidst his struggles to reinstate his father's storytelling abilities, he also encounters and befriends certain magical creatures which not only aid in his journey but also help him in the realization of his true self and the world he lives in. Behind its fairy tale tropes and surreal imaginings, the novel also addresses the bigger question of freedom of expression of an artist or any human being. The novel can actually be called a member of the subgenre suggested by Jean-Pierre Durix in his paper "The Gardener of Stories: Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*" as "the children's story which only adults can really understand"( Durix 343).

Meta-fiction is predominantly a Post-Modernist genre.known as "fiction about fiction"(Baldick219), the meta-fictional texts are seen having a kind of self-awareness about their own fictional qualities. Prominent American literary critic and theorist, Robert E. Scholes "popularized metafiction as an overall term for the growing class of novels which depart from

realism and foreground the roles of the author in inventing the fiction and of the reader in receiving the fiction”(Abrams 258). The genre is seen functioning through the use of techniques such as incorporating stories within a story, multiple viewpoints, pastiche, breaking the boundaries, parody etc. As the author breaks the traditional rules of story-telling, he or she sometimes ends up becoming a companion of the reader himself. As such *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* also incorporates various meta-fictional elements which not only complement but also help in the resolution of the story.

Meta-fiction is represented in the form of the language which highlights the deeper undertones of the text. The meta-fictional qualities of the text are talked about in the very first chapter of the novel when the protagonist Haroun questions his storyteller father, Rashid “what’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?”( Rushdie 22). Through this dialogue, the text goes beyond itself by questioning its own existence as a piece of fiction. By talking about the various streams in the Ocean of the Streams of Story, the writer emphasizes on the fact that stories are as alive and important as the real world. Within each story stream exists a story world which is unique and independent of other story worlds. Rushdie through stories tries to put emphasis on the fact that language and stories are equally meaningful and worthy of our consideration. As said by one of the characters of the novel, Rashid Khalifa, the storyteller “all names mean something”(Rushdie 40). By constantly addressing and exploring purposes of the stories written within its pages, Rushdie’s tale brings attention to its own fictional status and its place as a story. The novel emphasizes on the efficiency of language in conveying and expressing human emotions in the guise of stories. Stories are also ways of influencing people as advocated in the speech of the politician, Mr. Buttoo to Rashid, the storyteller-

“ 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.”( Rushdie 47)

The stories also interact and flow within each other. The story water as observed by Haroun is “made up of a thousand thousandthousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity”( Rushdie 72). As Iff, the water genie explains to Haroun about the Ocean of Stories-

“And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the 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” ( Rushdie 72).

For Rushdie, storytelling is synonymous with the idea of livingness. Stories through their universal appeal shadows and echo the real world. With the help of the stories, the novel also addresses certain real-life issues. Blending its self-awareness and tragic comic undertones, the novel shows its awareness towards various socio-political issues. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* addresses the broader picture of the society by emphasizing on the importance of stories which are a part of the plot of the novel.

The concept of meta-fiction can also be read with regards to the debate of absolute freedom of speech versus censorship. Freedom of speech is connected with liberation whereas censorship is connected with the notions of control and domination. Salman Rushdie presents this binary

through the use of the two sides of the moon Kahani called Gup and Chup respectively. Gup represents absolute freedom of speech whereas Chup stands for complete silence. Rushdie through his novel emphasizes on the fact that it is because of the absolute freedom to express themselves that the Guppees could live a harmonious life. The Guppees realized the importance of free use of speech and language in society. As said by Butt, the Hoopoe to Haroun-

“And is not the power of Speech the greatest Power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the fall?” (Rushdie 119)

On the other hand, the Chupwalas without any direct method of communication lived in constant fear and became suspicious of one another. The silence has created such rifts that the chupwalas can not even trust their own shadows which are ironically a part of their own existence. Rushdie through this comparison emphasizes on the fact that to be called a free world, that world should be able to accommodate its subjects with the space to express their thoughts.

It is always the powerful who has the ability of controlling others. The Cultmaster of Bezaban, Khattam-shud is the most powerful in the land of Chup. He realizes the power language holds as a medium of communication. So, to control the inhabitants of Chup, he abolishes the use of language as a means of communication. Khattam-Shud says “the world is for Controlling”(Rushdie 161) and the easiest way of doing that is by controlling the flow of communication in the society. Because of this action, the communication hub of any society like schools, courts have already closed down in Chup. For Rushdie, the freedom to tell stories is connected with the freedom of free speech and liberty. The protagonist of the novel, Haroun Khalifattoo tries to fight against the Cultmaster Khattam-Shud and his army of the Zipped Lips to save the Ocean of the Streams of stories representative of the idea of free speech and liberty. The silence of Chup represents an extreme and potentially brutal form of censorship which stands in contrast to the free society of the Guppees. The black ice of Chup is in contrast with the warm water of the sea of stories. Khattam-Shud tries to destroy the sea of stories as he says-

“Inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.”(Rushdie 161)

He tries to completely silence and eradicate the story sea because he can not control them at all. Khattam-Shud’s actions can be compared to the countries who deny any voice to its population especially in regards to the female population. Whereas, the Guppees can be compared with certain other countries that allows its citizens to have complete freedom of expression and liberty. Importance of freedom of speech is highlighted in the battle between the two cities held in the battlefield of Bat-Mat-Karo as-

“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. Just as Mudra the Shadow Warrior had predicted, many of them actually had to fight their own, treacherous shadows! And as for the rest, well, their vows of silence and their habits of secrecy had made them suspicious and distrustful of one another.”(Rushdie 184)

Here, Rushdie suggests that a society bound by rigid policies and forced ideologies will always prove to be weaker in front of a free society that allows complete freedom of expression. By adhering to the importance of saving the Ocean of Stories, the novel comments on the importance of freedom of expression, especially in regards to certain orthodox, dogmatic societies.

The extreme version of censorship is also the indication of the existence of a totalitarian regime. Rushdie's use of the two words 'Gogogol' and 'Kafkafka' through Mudra, the Shadow Warrior in chapter eight can be read as a tribute to Franz Kafka and Nicolai Gogol who in their writings also addressed the harms a totalitarian government causes to any society. The novel also has some similarities with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in its description of Chup City as both the societies described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Chup City are engulfed in totalitarian regimes. Just like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where Big Brother controls everyone by his employment of the 'thoughtpolice' who holds independent thinking as a crime against the state, Khattam-Shud and his totalitarian government tries to control and dominate everyone by advocating complete silence. Through the text, the fact is emphasized upon that free narration is a form of free speech and as such both essential and beneficial to the society. Rushdie tries to reassert the value of storytelling as a form of freedom of expression against what he believes to be the forces of silence and oppression.

While giving importance to free speech, Rushdie does not forget to give silence its necessary importance. As said by Haroun-

"Silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly)." (Rushdie 125)

The language of Princess Batcheat and Prince Bolo are devoid of any meaning whereas the silent gesture language of 'abhinaya' (Rushdie 130) is of great beauty and grace. Through this contrast, the novel tries to prove that only in the middle that true harmony exists. When the moon Kahani rotates after a long time, a friendship is formed between the two cities which helps in the attainment of peace, "a peace in which Night and Day, Speech and Silence, would no longer be separated into zones by Twilight Strips and Walls of Force" (Rushdie 191).

Just like both happiness and sadness are required to live a complete life, it is also in the balance of both speech and silence that a healthy society can be established. The novel thus also highlights the power of language and its capacity of doing both good and harm to the society.

The language of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* also represents itself as a political allegory. An allegory is, "a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning" (Baldick 8). The story sea represents the free flow of language and knowledge in a society whereas the silence emphasized upon by Khattam-Shud ends up becoming a symbol of control and domination. The distortion of the story sea also becomes an allegorical representation of the corruption of Mr. Buttoo in the valley of K. Through Khattam-Shud, Rashid also allegorically satirises the societies where hegemony rules. Whereas, Princess Bat-Cheat becomes an allegorical representation of free speech. The fantastical peculiar worlds of the story streams are strangely parallel to our own idea of a world to a certain extent. The events that took place in the moon Kahani also allegorically represents our real world where there could be seen the juggle between free speech and censorship. Rushdie allegorically comments on some

contemporary societies through his depiction of the Chup City. The intermingling of the story streams that create new stories also becomes an allegorical representation of the importance of the exchange between different societies. The concept of intertextuality has also been given allegorical qualities. The use of the number 1001 in various stories like the “Princess Rescue Story Number S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi” (Rushdie 73) can be regarded as a reference to the famous book *One Thousand And One Nights (the Arabian Nights)*. This reference to texts from other cultures highlights the benefits that can be brought by intermingling of various cultures. *Haroun and the sea of stories* not only addresses the dangers of a narrow-minded approach to other cultures but with the help of the intermingling of the story streams which leads to the creation of new stories highlights the benefits the societies can obtain from cultural co-mingling. The text is an allegorical representation of a free and open-minded society which always proves stronger than a reserved and closed society.

Meta-fictional attributes flows through the use of language which cheekily also questions its very status as the medium for truth in Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. By commenting on its self-awareness, the text also touches upon the reality. Through fiction, it addresses the role of language in society and along with that also emphasizes on the power of speech which has a significant impact in any society.

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