CHAPTER VI

HAROUN AND THE SEA OF STORIES:
CELEBRATING THE SENSUAL AND
THE SUBLIME
He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech, the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself. 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".

(Haroun and the Sea of Stories 39)

Leaving aside the trifling confusions that Rushdie’s fiction abound, the reader at the end acknowledges that the author’s primary concern is with the immediate human condition— the immense panorama of doubts and disorder and, his sustained explorations into the existential problem by mixing memory and desire and socio-political history in order to give a saner sense to the meanings of life. Rushdie has always maintained that the writer has a
responsibility to tackle the larger issues of the day. "There is a genuine need for political fiction," he sounds being prescriptive in *Imaginary Homelands*, "for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world" (12).

To render present day reality that has seemed increasingly unreal, Rushdie conjures up whole causalities, climates, creatures, and customs in a thin air of honour and suspect. He has used the half-accurate memories, equivocations and contradictory versions of magic realism in earlier works, especially in *Midnight's Children, Shame* and *The satanic Verses* in order to capture, metaphorically, the sweep and chaos of contemporary reality, its resemblance to a dream or nightmare. His characters' bizarre explorations, the numerous dream sequences in these novels, the convolutions of their plots, the melodramatic effusions of his prose— all are meant, in some heightened way, to give the reader a sense of just how fantastic recent history has become.

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the first novel to come out after Khomeini imposed ‘fatwa’ on Rushdie, events and characters are nearly as fantastic as anything in the tale. The story here narrates a terrible possibility that underscore the ability of reality to continually overtake one's imaginations to lead towards a Dystopia— a predicament that has long troubled migrant writers like Rushdie. But Rushdie seems to be recreating reality by using his power of imagination. He did it that way in *The Satanic Verses*, and now does it again in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Regarding his adopted technique, Rushdie speaks elsewhere in *Imaginary Homelands*:

This idea—the opposition of imagination to reality, which is also of course the opposition of art to politics—

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is of great importance, because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power. Techniques of comedy, metaphor, imagery, fantasy and so on are used in our conventional, habit-dulled certainty. The world is and has to be. Unreality is the only way with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed. (122)

One may not miss the temporal relation between *The Satanic Verses* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*: Rushdie started the latter while still working on the former, but it was after May 1989 the final draft was ready and the novel came out in 1990. He originally planned Haroun’s story to fulfil the demands of his young son Zafar whose middle name is also Haroun. In his interview to W.J. Weatherby, Rushdie notes: “He asked why all my books were for grown-ups and I didn’t have any answer”, hence, “it was part of the deal so I could finish *Satanic Verses*”. But it seems that the first published novel, after the imposition of Khomeni’s ‘fatwa’, remains very close to Rushdie’s heart. It throws light on the author’s character and proclamations. He reveals to James Fenton in an interview: “I began to devise the yarn that eventually became *Haroun*, and felt strongly that if I could strike the right note it should be possible...to make it of interest to adults as well as children.” In fact, the novel catapults from a domestic tragedy to a crisis of the whole nation and, still further, to the genuine human problem of living in dignity amidst totalitarianism’s terrible damage to human identity. Moreover, it points to the fact that Rushdie lives more comfortably in images and ideas than in places.

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On the surface, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a lively, wonderfully inventive comic tale with an updated *Arabian Nights* background. It follows the classic folk tale in which the hero travels to strange lands to lift a spell on his native country or cure his father of a fatal ailment. In the course of the story he is aided by supernatural companions and confronts and defeats a wicked magician. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* closely follows the pattern; it is an adventure story of a young son who undertakes a journey to the Ocean of the Stream of Story, where lies the elixir of good storytelling, to restore to his father his special Gift of the Gab.

But behind the deceptive simplicity of the novel one cannot blur the motivation as well as the pretext of the narrative. Rushdie seems to have exploited very astutely the mediaeval allegory of the *Arabian Nights*, recent history of religious intolerance, and his own moral and political position to support the freedom of imagination in artistic creation. The affliction of speech, which is central to the book, is paralleled by the affliction of the country, where Haroun lives in “a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name (15). In the story sadness is said to be “manufactured and packaged” and “hung over the city like bad news” (15). There in the story sorrows cause one to forget one’s name and lose the ability to speak; but no wonder, considering the recent life of its author, one wonders in how many sad cities Rushdie had to hide himself in the past few years since the ‘fatwa’ was pronounced on him.

It may seem from the beginning that Rushdie has worked out *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* on the model of Harry Potter for ‘the crossover book’
that narrows away the gap between the kids' book and book for adults. It has been quite deliberately written in such a way that people will not ask whether it is a children's book or a grown-up's book, it can appeal across age groups. While writing the story for his son, Rushdie was also writing for himself; his first task was to please Haroun's eleven-year-old self and, then to find out more of what his father was trying to tell him. Rushdie reveals in the interview to Kadzis:

You know your child very well; you can even project the adult he might turn into and write for that. I thought if I could get that right it would probably appeal to other eleven-year-olds and other grown-ups. It struck me while I was writing the book that a lot of the children's books I most admire, the great classics of children's literature, were written for one child. *Winnie-the-Pooh* was written for Christopher Robin Milne. *Alice in Wonderland* was written for Alice Liddell. And so on. You can identify, in many of those great classics, a particular child that was to be pleased. Somehow, if you could please that one child, you'd end up pleasing children.

Actually amidst the controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie had turned in 1992 to one of Hollywood's most memorable fairy-tales and published a monograph on *The Wizard of Oz*. There he acknowledges the movie's driving force is the inadequacy of adults, even of good adults, and how the weakness of grown-ups forces children to take control of their destinies. As appropriate in children's story, Rushdie's hero Haroun is a child of only eleven;
he is the son of the famous storyteller Rashid Khalifa—an anagram of Rushdie himself—who is known as the Ocean of Notions. Rashid is able, like Orpheus, to command the fascinated attention even of the birds and beasts. But “luck has a way of running out without the slightest warning” (21); one-day his wife Soraya runs off with a thin, whiny neighbour Mr. Sengupta, who hates stories; and the Ocean of Notions, the Shah of Blah loses his gift of the gab and only croaks like a stupid crow, “ark, ark, ark” (26).

Read at this level, the novel appears an interesting mix of fantasy and the everyday world, with such characters as the reckless mail-coach driver Butt or the unpopular politico Mr. Buttoo and so on. But the immediate starting point of the story springs from the domestic catastrophe, as Soraya appears to have been confused by Sengupta over the tormenting question about her husband: “What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” (20). The question reappears again and again throughout the novel and is italicised.

One of the answers to clerk’s the terrible question seems to have been provided by the politicians. They find Rashid’s stories really useful, not for their falseness, but because of it. During electioneering Rashid is needed to win votes for them:

“Nobody ever believed anything a politico said, even though they pretended as hard as they could that they were telling the truth. (In fact, this was how everyone knew they were lying.) But everyone had complete faith in Rashid, because he always admitted that everything he told them was completely untrue and made up out of his own head.” (20)

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The suggestion is that the storyteller's imagination, even though sounds propagandist, is still a better alternative to destroy the blatant falsification of reality by the politicos. Moreover, the narrative contract provides an unstable ground on which political consensus can be forged; a shared set of counterfactual wishes and admitted lies open the real world up to political action. The magic of storytelling begins after its fictiveness is confessed.

Rushdie's recognition of the influence of *The wizard of Oz* includes a further admission that *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is actually a revision of the Oz myth that seeks, in part, to correct the censorship at work in Hollywood's narrative of departure, recognition and return. The problem for both the movie and Rushdie's novel is how one locates the imaginary elsewhere in everyday life and how one understands the dream as a reconstruction of the real. For Rushdie, Dorothy's journey to Oz anticipates the migration of post-colonial subjects to the various emerald cities of the west, but the movie's documentation of her travels fails to recognize the truly profound confusions between home and elsewhere, imaginary and real, that shape the migrant sensibility. As Rushdie has described in the interview, the movie achieves its status as a myth, articulating the relations between the real and the fictive. The aesthetic of *The Wizard of Oz* has helped establish pleasure both in demystifying the humbug of artificial utopias and in willfully misrecognizing the real as the fictive, in learning how to see home or Kansas as Oz. Rushdie had seen Oz at Bombay's Metro Theater in 1956, and it appeared to the ten year old Rushdie as an alien heterogeneous presence among the Bombay talkies. On the one hand, its trappings of magic and the supernatural met the expectations of a child steeped in Hindi popular cinema, and on the other, the movie had presented itself as a "good film", introducing not just high production values to cinematic fantasy but
something Rushdie calls "imaginative truth." It may be that the very "goodness" of the film had disturbed Rushdie more than anything else; however, his British Film Institute monograph tries desperately to isolate the movie's "imaginative truth" from the narrative that contains it by distinguishing moments of mythic power from the sentimental machinery that gives the movie its closure.

Rushdie confides to Kadzis that *The Wizard of Oz* has made a writer out of him, perhaps primarily because it manages simultaneously to delight and disturb, to satisfy and disappoint the young Rushdie. The adult author, however, has returned to the tropes and figures of the film on more than one occasion, especially when he deals with the movie's central cinematic device, believing that the migrant sensibility can only regard its present as a foreign country while seeing home as irrevocably lost in *Midnight's Children*. This type of narrative colorization is supposed to give both home and past less a new reality than a garish palpability as his imaginary homeland. Logically, the color of the present foreign land must, by the same gesture, be imaginatively impoverished. Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* wants the reader to see in India a place as imaginary as Oz, a territory that can be recreated and rendered homely and familiar by the narrative itself. But the story of Saleem's narration is a tragic one, and the reader watches both the narrator and the narrative crack up as the novel progresses.

Of course what appeals most to Rushdie in *The Wizard of Oz* is not its narrative, but rather a set of highly mythic moments that stand out as images of the migrant sensibility. Judy Garland's signature song, for instance, becomes a hymn to 'elsewhere' and an anthem for all the displaced, uprooted people searching for a home in that elsewhere. The song's popularity testifies that "the
human dream of leaving" is at least as powerful as its countervailing "dream of roots". Dorothy's wish to be elsewhere is, in fact, a rejection of the pretense that Kansas must be home simply because she is and has always been there. Rushdie rewrites the moral of the Oz myth in his *Imaginary Homelands* where in almost every pages one hears his suggestion that there is no longer any such pure and homogenous place as home except, of course, the home one invents and reclaims as one's own. However, in the film Dorothy unfortunately chooses to accept the homestead envisioned by American frontier mythology rather than keeping faith with the burdensome freedom of life in Oz.

In his *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha rejoices at locating the hybrid, incommensurable narrative subjects in Rushdie's fictions, where one is never either in one place or the other. The theoretical identification of postcolonial subject with postmodern literary strategies is simply a demand that one recognizes that one always needs to be elsewhere, that the illusion of being at home is the real problem. Returns are either pathetically nostalgic or, as in the case of Rushdie's characters, 'ironic' and 'insurgent iterations' by figures who choose to be at home in homelessness.

The plot of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* seems to fly in the face of this imperative to make Oz one's own home. Rushdie acknowledges that the "voice" of the novel is borrowed from Baum, and Haroun does undertake a Dorothy-like journey from a gray house to an imaginary realm that reproduces home in garish colors. But the book also includes a return home that doesn't seem like an ironic, insurgent iteration. Of course, as Rushdie's first 'post-fatwa' work, it makes a meta-fictional argument, not only about the necessity of free
speech and storytelling – even when they descend into “chit-chat” or fatuousness – but also about its status and nature of closure. It is in the context of this latter argument that Haroun's return home becomes significant.

As the story opens, Soraya has already become disillusioned with the Shah of Blah, started listening to the City Corporation clerk Mr. Sengupta criticizing the Ocean of Notions: “What are all these stories? Life is not a storybook or joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What's the use of stories when they aren't even true?”(20). When she runs off with the clerk; the Shah of Blah loses his storytelling powers and Haroun gets “stuck in time like a broken clock” probably owing to, as Miss Oneeta puts it, "pussy-collar-jeecal [psychological] sadness" (24). Haroun blames himself for having accused his father of being nothing more than an ineffectual humbug. “So it's up to me,” the young hero decides, “to put things right. Something has to be done” (27). His responsibility lies not just in restoring his father's brilliant Gift of the Gab, but also in finding an answer to the terrible question of the adult world: “What's the use of stories when they aren't even true?”

It is from this matter-of-fact home that Haroun departs on his sojourn into the imaginary. The fantastic world he enters is the earth's invisible moon whose "story waters" has been, he learns later, the source of his father's narrative powers. The moon has two sides; if the one half remains in perpetual darkness and silence, the other is the site of the sea of stories where streams of brilliantly colored water flow together in a liquid tapestry. The only "authors" of this "fluid library" are fish who swallow, digest and excrete the story waters in ever new and intriguing patterns. At the same time Haroun's story seems to allegorize the Oedipal narrative in which the child tries to undo the damage supposedly
done by his own wish, to recover his mother and his father?
overcome the clerical rival who reappears in this second
Shud, the Cultmaster and Arch-Enemy of all Stories. "He is the
and the Foe of Speech" (79), and as the glossary apper
Khattam-Shud means "completely finished" or "over and done with.
clerk Mr. Sengupta has been reimagined as the very principle of closure.

**Haroun and the Sea of Stories** has many similarities with *Grimus* as both deal with abstract and bizarre figures and imaginary lands. In both stories tyrants have their exact doubles, complicating as well as enriching the texture of the narrative. Mr. Sengupta brings fatal blow to the happy home as Haroun's mother runs away with him. Both he and Khatam-Shud ask the similar question: "What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" In **Haroun and the Sea of Stories** Rushdie pits the dictator against the artist as an attempt to establish that the stories though factually incorrect are conceptually true and, therefore, intrinsically threatening to the dictator—no matter whether Grimus or the Cultmaster—who wishes to control the minds of the people. Khattam-Shud is determined to dam up the very wellspring of stories. When he finally confronts the tyrant, Haroun asks: "But why do you hate stories so much? Stories are fun" (161). The Cultmaster replies: "The world, however, is not for Fun. The world is for Controlling". He goes on to describe his cool, calculated plan for destroying each and every story as well as the art of the storytellers. The Arch-Enemy of all Stories belches out his hatred against the spirit of human dignity and freedom for imagination, thus:

‘Your world, my world, all worlds,' came the reply, ‘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. And that is the reason why.’ (161)

Repeating the Oz formula, Haroun arrives just as this fantasy world reaches a crisis: the “story waters” are being polluted by Khattam-Shud, their brilliant colours turning dull and gray. It turns out that the free play of revision has had its price since the genies of the story world have neglected the old zone of the ocean where the source of the story waters lies: “We lost touch with our beginnings, with our roots”, they confess (146). It seems as if the story suggests that the demand to create new stories – one expression of the human dream of leaving – has led to this crisis because the countervailing demand for stories that brings one back to one’s roots has been ignored.

Consequently, the crisis in the imaginary realm threatens the real because the real world is already suffering a crisis of its own. The names of places have been lost and with them the power of people to make themselves at home. What the real has to gain from the imaginary is precisely the ability to name and thus to liquefy or destabilize the given; redescribing a world is necessarily a step towards changing it. Hope itself is grounded in the possibility of renaming or restating, in the possibility, of course, that the things can be or at least be described as otherwise.

While Dorothy was more or less tricked into confronting the wicked witch, Haroun volunteers, for his father’s sake, to enter the heart of darkness and confront Khattam–Shud. Of course, like Dorothy before him, he meets with
what can only be called an anti-climax. The terrible Cultmaster turns out to be nothing more than the shadow self of the sniveling clerk which, like Dorothy’s witch melts away when Haroun, by the sheer power of his wish, causes the light of the sun to fall on the moon’s dark side. The threat all along has been excessive normalcy or abnormal absorption in utilitarian realities and values. The clerk’s disdain for stories, for the power of imagination, is really only his fear of the incalculable and fluid; his alter-ego Khattam-Shud thus declares:

> Each day we synthesize and release new poisons!
> Each day we murder new tales! Soon now, soon, the Ocean will be dead—cold and dead. When black ice freezes over its surface, my victory will be complete.

(160-161)

But the power of imagination ultimately prevails upon the mammoth “myth of shadowiness” (151) which is the present-day reality that Haroun or to that matter the whole humanity has to face to salvage dream, hope and dignity. “Imaginative truth,” says Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, “is simultaneously honourable and suspect...” (10), but it is still preferable to the ghetto mentality of avoiding reality. It is, in fact, a choice of “shadow-become-human rather than man-grown-shadowy” (154). Using his sheer power of imagination, Haroun not only restores Rashid Khafa’s Gift of the gab but also manages to stop the pollution and save the Ocean:

> The light that poured out from his mouth was as bright as the sun! The Chupwalas all around him were blinded, and broke their vows of silence to shriek and

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utter curses as they clutched their eyes. Even Khattam-Shud reeled back from the glare. (165)

But his triumph profoundly disturbs the relations of power on the moon. His wish breaks the machines that kept the moon divided into zones of light and darkness, and restores the natural, rhythmic alternation of night and day. If the threat of complete closure has been averted, the result is not universal light but a punctuation of night by day in both realms. Haroun has opened up an exchange between the two imaginary realms, but it would be wrong to say that he has completely overcome the seductions of the dark side; rather, he has made them seem essential to the production of future stories. From now on the brilliant colours of the sea of stories will be subjected to an alternation of light and dark.

The exchange opened up between the two moon’s hemispheres prefigures a similar exchange between the real and the imaginary. Haroun’s actions in the dream world cannot be dismissed as empty gestures or the expression of a wish that can never be fulfilled. He does return home to a reconstructed nuclear family, to a father whose storytelling powers actually incite a revolution, and to a city that has remembered its name as ‘Kahani’, means “story” (209). It is as though Kansas on Dorothy’s return has suddenly remembered that its name all along has been Oz. As Haroun overhears his mother singing, he remarks, “But the way things are just now, I honestly don’t need to go anywhere at all” (211). The “just now” here is significant. Rushdie’s point seems to be that the door to the other world remains open, but it locates the fantasy world as a punctuation of the real and not its potential substitute.
The novel, however, offers another model of the connection between real and imaginary. It is raining as Haroun returns home, and he recognizes the rain as synthesized happy endings pouring down from the sea of stories. He is oddly troubled: "It isn't real", he insists. "It's all fake. People should be happy when there's something to be happy about, not just when they get bottled happiness poured over them from the sky" (208). The remark seems to be a more unqualified rejection of the imaginary than anything Dorothy says or is made to say. It lingers long enough to make one feel that "bottled happiness" can't replace real happiness and imagined worlds can't replace actual ones. Instead, they present counterfactual models against which one measures the real, and they pose a challenge to the real to make it equal to the imagined.

Though there is darkness and death-like silence about the zipped-lip Chupwalas in the 'Land of Chup'—a place of shadows, of books that wear padlocks and tongues torn out—and the Cultmaster of Bezaban, have been painted all in dark, most of the novel is full of comic energy and lively verbal invention. In contrast to the sorrows and slavish attitude of the Chupwalas, 'Gup City' is all excitement and activity (87); there is a brilliant optimism about the Gupees that transforms hopelessness and sadness through the magical power of freedom and imagination. 'Gup' is bright, warm, full of chattering and noise, while 'Chup' is dark, freezing cold, and silent as shadow (125). The narrative goes thus:

...even though he was full of a sense of hopefulness and failure the magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one is a different

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colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid
tapestry of breathtaking complexity...the Ocean of the
Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the
universe. 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. (71-72)

In the course of his travels into the Twilight Strip, moreover, Haroun, like Dorothy
in Oz, comes across fantastic Guppee companions who love to talk: Iff, the
Water Genie; Butt, the Hoopoe with telepathic abilities; Mali, the Floating
Gardener; and Goopy and Bagha, the Plentimaw Fishes—all are lively and
interesting.

The title and concept of the novel seem to have been taken from those
of the Kashmir poet Somadeva's eleventh-century compilation *Katha-Sarit-
Sagar*—The Ocean of the Streams of Story. It originated in Kashmir and it is
logical that Rushdie adopts the valley of K as main setting of his novel. The
valley of K, moreover, inevitably ties up Rushdie with his ancestral home in
Kashmir. Somadeva's work, which is a literary version of a lost work
*Brihadkatha*, has been hinted in the novel itself (51). Thus the concept of
creativity has been linked to Kashmir—derived from "Kache-Mer" which can
be translated as "the place that hides a Sea" (40)—and, of course, India.
Rushdie's imagination continues to be connected with his early, impressionable years in India; it is natural that he should nostalgically turn to it especially in a book about a child's experience. With the valley of K (Kashmir), the Dal lake, (Gulmarg), with characters like Goopy and Bagha which figure in Satyajit Ray, and with names impregnated with rich meaning in Urdu or Hindustani, *Haroun and the Story of Sea* has been woven not to make India just a setting but as an emotional image hanging on the expatriate writer's mind so as to give him a sense of rootedness in the cultural matrix of the subcontinent. Moreover, it shows that Rushdie has come out of his 'mental fog' to realize that the true subject of his writing lies in the memory of the people and places that were so precious to him as a boy.

Rushdie's marvelous achievement in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* lies in his sustained use of myth as a creative mode. His art expounds a contextual continuity with the best efforts of Indian literature by using literary myths taken not only from *The Ramayana* and *The Puranas*—Haroun's army of the 'Gupees' against the Cultmaster Bezaban finds a mythic parallel to Ram's army, comprising monkeys and bears, in his war against Ravan—but also from local legends, folklore as well as primitive rituals. The use of the mythic mode shows that the novelist not only grapples with some fundamental questions about good and evil, but he is also able to explore into the possibility of a kind of self-realization. Myths have timeless significance to literature because they illustrate essential principles of storytelling by helping modern man rediscover a new meaning and pattern of life in the light of past experience. Despite their remoteness from contemporary reality, myths provide amazing opportunity to go into the 'roots' to discover the unity and identity of human condition. According to Carl Jung:

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Myths have a vital meaning. Not merely they do represent, they are the psychic life of the primitive tribe, which immediately falls to pieces and decays when it loses its mythological heritage. A tribe's mythology is its living religion whose loss is always and everywhere, even among the civilized, a moral catastrophe.

Through the mythic mode Rushdie has been able to bring home the idea that telling of stories is central to human identity: "Stories are part of the glue which holds families, tribes and nations together" (192).

According to the classical Indian literary theory of 'rasa', the main objective of literature is to arouse sympathetic moods in the reader's mind. The responsibility of the poet lies in recapturing his own history in an impersonal context, since feelings are based on personal, accidental, and incommunicable experience and become literature only when they are depersonalized, ordered, and rendered communicable by literary techniques. The poet transmutes his original feelings into a made up poetic world that the reader can appreciate and share. Rushdie's recollection of his childhood through the eyes of Haroun seems to have captured the essence of this theory. Rushdie's comments on transmuting emotion into metaphoric language in *Midnight's Children* has been really very illustrative in *Imaginary Homelands*:

Writing my book in North London, looking out through my window on to a city scene totally unlike the ones I was imagining on to paper, I was constantly plagued by this problem, until I felt obliged to face it in the text, to make clear that (in spite of my original and suppose
somewhat Proustian ambition to unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory) what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: “my” India, a version and no more than one version of all of the hundreds of millions of possible versions. (10)

His success as a writer consists in part in arousing those hundreds of millions of individual versions of childhood that lie dormant in the minds of his readers. Though the language and flavor of life, which one experiences in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, arouse specific memories for Rushdie’s Indian readers, his prose transcends the intensely personal mode of recollecting to strike a broader, universal tone.

The author’s preoccupation with recollection and memory, moreover, leads him to create in the novel a time and space that faithfully echo, in English, the Third Worldist reality. Yet the novel transcends geographical and cultural boundaries by addressing the fundamental contemporary issue of individual freedom and responsibility within the context of one’s cultural identity. Rushdie’s writings may well be the first examples of the natural fruition of the Indian acceptance of English that he strongly advocates in many of his essays and interviews.

Postcolonial India has definitely become a hotch-potch culture; industrialization and technological advancement has curiously affected the identity of an individual, especially in the field of language acquisition. Scientific
or technical language presently has come to be regarded as similar to the magical chants the mythical heroes used to gain power. Naturally, children growing up in such an environment pick up the positive nuances that emanate from scientific language and use that language to their advantage. Rushdie addresses this facet of post-Independence Indian culture with great humour in passages depicting the mechanical hoopoe—the Imaginary Flying Organism.

While traveling on the back of Butt the Hoopoe, Haroun is surprised as the bird anticipates his thoughts:

>'You can read my mind,' Haroun said, somewhat accusingly.... 'But but but certainly,' answered the Hoopoe. "Also I am communicating with you telepathically, because as you may observe I am not moving my beak, which must maintain its present configuration for aerodynamic reasons....It is P2C2E. A Process Too Complicated To Explain'. (66)

Again, as Haroun spots ‘Kahani’, the Earth's second moon at a distance, he is baffled:

>"But but but,' Haroun stammered (much to the Hoopoe's amusement), 'surely the Earth has just the one Moon? How could a second satellite have remained undiscovered for so long?'

>'But but but it is because of Speed,' Butt the Hoopoe responded. "Speed, most Necessary of Qualities! In any Emergency – fire, auto, marine – what is required
above all things? Of course, Speed: of fire truck, ambulance, rescue ship. — And what do we prize in a brainy fellow? — Is it not his Quickness of Thought? — And in any sport, Speed (of foot, hand, eye) is of the Essence! — And what humans cannot do quickly enough, they build machines to do faster. — Speed, super Speed! If not for the Speed of Light, the universe would be dark and could — But if Speed brings light to reveal, it can also be used to conceal. The Moon, Kahani, travels so fast — wonder of wonders! — that no Earth instruments can detect it; also its orbit varies by one degree per circuit, so that in three hundred and sixty orbits it has over flown every spot upon the Earth.... Voom! Varoom! Only at High Speed may this be done. You appreciate the further bonuses of Machines? (66-67)

This interesting combination of scientific language with the language used to describe paranormal phenomena is typical among the young generation educated Indians. Miracles and mysterious happenings are not viewed as anomalies but rather as events that will become fully explainable when Western science attains the same level of maturity as ancient Eastern wisdom.

Rushdie’s style in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* demonstrates how language can play a crucial role in fashioning a lost world. The language and perspective of the story resound with associations that can evoke memories in individual readers according to personal experience and worldview. Iff, the water genie, in his mission to cancel Rashid’s story water supply, is in too much
of a hurry to explain how complicated the process of creating a world could be. Rushdie the real life storyteller has given the reader ample opportunity to figure out the mysteries of this P2C2E if one pays attention to his method. Rashid Khalifa, when asked by Haroun "Where do all these stories come from?" (16), replies: "From the great Story Sea" (17).

Haroun often thinks his father a juggler "because his stories were really lots of different tales juggled together, and Rashid kept them going in a sort of dizzy whirl and never made a mistake" (16). He recalls the metaphor for story telling when he witnesses Blabbermouth's art of 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" (109). Moreover, juggling as literal as well as metaphorical is given in the mesmerizing performance of the Chupwala ambassador (182) when he juggles a cover to hurl a bomb at Prince Bolo and General Kitab. Moreover, when Haroun engages himself in a verbal duel with Iff over restoring to Rashid Khalifa his Gift of the Gab, the narrative episode transforms itself into a brilliant piece of verbal jugglery:

' My father has definitely not given up. You can't cut off his Story Water supply. ' 

'Orders,' said Iff. 'All queries to be taken up with the Grand Comptroller.' 

'Grand Comptroller of what?' Haroun wanted to know. 

'Of the Processes Too Complicated To Explain, of course. At P2C2E House, Gup City, Kahani. All letters — 197 —
to be addressed to the Walrus.’

‘Who’s the Walrus?’

‘You don’t concentrate, do you?’ Iff replied. ‘At P2C2E House in Gup City there are many brilliant persons employed, but there is only one Grand Comptroller. They are the Eggheads. He is the Walrus. Got it now? Understood?’

Haroun absorbed all this information. ‘And how does the letter get there?’ he asked. The Water Genie giggled softly. ‘It doesn’t,’ he answered. ‘You see the beauty of the scheme.’

‘I certainly don’t,’ Haroun retorted. ‘And anyway, even if you do turn off your Story Water, my father will still be able to tell stories.’

‘Anybody can tell stories,’ Iff replied. ‘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. Storytelling needs fuel.’ (57-58)

The Sanskrit term for literature—‘sahitya’—means “joined together”, indicating that creating literature is an act of joining words with their appropriate meanings as well as writers with their readers. Rushdie’s writing acquires an added significance in that shared experience which acts as a bridge between him and his immigrant readers. He sees all modern men as migrants; everybody sometimes feels alienated from the surroundings, bound by uncomfortable sociopolitical conventions, and yearns for broader human experiences. Migrant writers
like Rushdie, who are fascinated by memory and its role in defining the plural and partial nature of identity, traverse an extremely delicate line, a line that simultaneously identifies with and demarcates from one's experiences as an individual as well as a member of the whole humanity community. Rushdie has said in *Imaginary Homelands* that one of the primary concerns of a writer is to explore how one can preserve one's identity without being ossified: "What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India?" (17). His own writing provides one of the best answers to such nagging question.

Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is indeed about the triumph of language and stories over dogmatism and raw power. But language and stories are the bearers of cultural tradition as much as of religious tradition, they are the very means of expressing and confirming one's sense of belonging to a supra-personal, transcendent continuity. Rushdie's fairy-tale demonstrates that on such essential and common grounds, there can be no animosity between religious and cultural stories. The animosity results from one's neglect of appreciating what binds all and sundry together and the Khattam-Shuds of the world who mandate only one form of expression in the extreme and to the absolute exclusion of other forms. If the *Arabian Nights* is repeatedly evoked in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, it is not merely because the tales epitomize the cultural diversity which predates Islam. It is also because *Arabian Nights*, itself having undergone Islamic infusion, testifies to the reconciliation between the faith and the inherent plurality of its cultures. Rushdie's fairy-tale offers the reader the same testimony in its attempt to articulate a universalist aesthetics firmly anchored in the inalienable human desire for self-expression, one that upholds the diversity of forms through which self-expression is possible.

Moreover, the novel points to a growing danger— individually as well as collectively— that people find themselves slipping into a fragmented, storyless
condition. This loss of the capacity for narrative will no doubt amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject. Rushdie supports the cause of the novel; it is “the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted”. He argues in the essay “Is Nothing Sacred?” that it is not only to entertain or to amuse but to provoke and to question— “everything in every possible way”. The reader finds this view of the author once again surfacing through Baal, the satirist in The Satanic Verses, who says, “A poet's work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep . . . and if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict, then they will nourish him”. Yet the great irony of narrative lies in that it may empower some while disempowering others.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


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