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The World Breathes in Polyphony: Rushdie's Resistance to Designed Uniformity through *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie's very name arouses mixed reactions and responses which happens to rare number of people. His is a name you are either proud of or ashamed! Most of his writings are accepted to be complex, packed in their post-colonial and postmodern attitudes conglomerating East and West from different perspectives. He does not let you sleep until you move forward with the stick of his words. To the point of being blunt, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is usually remembered for its tone of atonement from a literary criminal or sinner. This paper tries to trace out that aspect of innocence regained in its post-modernity with a rejuvenated strength of voice to resist.

Keywords: fantasy, fiction, history, post modern, fairy tales, empire, child, wisdom.

Ihab Hassan, one of the prolific theorists of Postmodernism begins his essay entitled "*The Critical Scene: Issues in Postmodern American Criticism*" (1987) in a sensational way of announcement. He writes in his inimical manner-

"The news is out: literary and critical theory has become the rage on the American academic scene – "rage and scene" in every sense. Ideas clash; slogans fill the air; heresies follow heresies, becoming dogmas within a decade. The critical laity is in disarray. Sometimes the smoke clears, the alarum subside, revealing the abstract body of a critic signaling to us through the flames. Some spectators cry: "chaos, anarchy, nihilism!" Others rejoice bravely in the fray, or whisper seductively with Barthes: "Happy Babel!" (Taylor and Winquist, pp-262).

The present paper tries to trace out some of these very postmodern traits in this immensely allegorical, funny and technically innovative novel of Salman Rushdie entitled *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). Rushdie wrote this novel with the intention of contributing to the oeuvre of children's literature. But as children enjoy this novel for its amazing and baffling story telling style, adult and mature readers find it attacking upon the omnipresent totalitarian bodies acting as authority in different parts of the world. 'Ocean of Notions' is presented as a character, besides other interesting beings like the Shah of Blah, moon of *Kahani*, Controller Walrus, cult leader *Khattamshud*, General *Kitab*, Prince *Bolo*, Princess *Batchit*, Iff and Butt, Eggmen, the lands of *Gup* and *Chup* along with a life marked with *Processes Too Complex To be Explained*, and many others. All the names themselves hide and reveal so many ideas and perceptions.

The novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is usually read as a criticism of Enlightenment theory but at the same time, Rushdie is cautious of erecting simplified dichotomies. Because, for the most part, humankind as a race and as individuals finds itself immersed in the ambiguous grey zone of judgement in which right and wrong, good and bad, civilization and barbarism cease to exist in a tidy binary opposition. Distinctions among them are rather blurred and confused, as God Himself is *Bezabaan* (tongueless), according to Rushdie.

Rushdie lets Haroun adopt a postmodern spirit of skepticism and critique but with a political motive. Haroun is accompanied by Iff and Butt, the two Genies straight from the tales of *Arabian Nights*, with additional power of seeing beyond the restrictions of perceived reality. He literally shifts the world on its axis by clashing the past, the present and the future. He acknowledges that we exist simultaneously in all three temporal modes and must therefore, acknowledge the authority, claims and limitations of each. Thus, as no rule can claim to be holy in the present 'postmodern' times, we can always move towards a new beginning and a deeper, more progressive understanding of our reality. That's the polyphony, Rushdie seems to advocate throughout the novel.

Haroun and the Sea is a product of a revolt against the genteel tradition, with a credo directed against rigidity and dogma, against a designed and imposed uniformity. His indulgence in this bohemian style is marked with another polarity, that of a commitment to social reconstruction as a possibility through art. *Haroun and the Sea* begins with a description of a place in a country named *Alif Bay* (the first two letters of Urdu-Arabic alphabet), smoked and clouded by sorrow in every aspect. The very first paragraph hooks one as it reads-

"...a sad city, the saddest of the cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name...with ruined buildings which looked like broken hearts...it stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish,...it had mighty factories in which sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world" (*THSS*, pp-15).

The description is unlike any place at present because globalization is already blurring lines of differences, and we are virtually living in a capitalist age of packed, sold and purchased merriments and happiness. But it does remind one of the times of the abrupt and violent transition to modernism which shocked individuals and common social bonds into anonymity with industrial revolution, conflict of religion and new enlightenment along with a swarming urbanization. Rushdie uses this fable form to mediate the problems of the hyper-real world caused by techno-science and the power of domination accompanying it.

Very much like Zygmunt Bauman, Rushdie tries to legitimize postmodernism through an appeal to ethical understanding and tolerance, that "each step towards the horizon (of knowledge), new unknown lands appear" (*The Postmodern Reader*, pp-23). Thus, the West's claim to be the super power or the centre of civilization sounds myopic. The Postmodern theories thus show an unworried awareness that "there are many stories that need to be told over and over again, each time losing something and adding something to the past versions. There is also a new determination: to guard the conditions in which all stories can be told, and retold and told again differently. It is their plurality and not (the fear) of the extinction of the lesser fit that

the hope now resides in” (Chris, pp- 417). Rushdie’s non-chalant attitude towards the traditional morality and ethics thus read free of all shackles.

Haroun and the Sea is usually remembered for being the first post-fatwa novel, surprisingly simple and innocent as a tale for children to revisit the half forgotten but highly marketed fairy tales, Daastaans, fables and folklores. It has the potential of dragging out the teenagers of the ‘stinking pink’ (Suroor, pp- 01) monotony by filling their imagination with innumerable colours that he makes Haroun wonder about-

“The surface of Kahani appeared- as far as Haroun’s eye could see - to be entirely liquid. And what water was it! It shone with colours everywhere, colours in a brilliant riot, colours such as Haroun could never have imagined...” (68).

The emphasis on colours in context of post-colonialism immediately sprinkles so many connotations. Rushdie’s credo in harmony and beauty of differences begins in this innocuous manner; though on surface, they stand for different stories. Thus, one sniffs parodies and pastiches of Snow White, Wizard of Oz, Rapunzel, Sindbad, Aali Baba, Arabian Nights and many more tales that a child gets acquainted with in all sides of the world. It has elements of adventure tales, the Fairy Queen quests, Miss Havisham’s stopped clocks, and Romeo and Juliet. The list goes on and on, underlining the fact that the world is really made up of so many tales that it’s an unending ocean in itself, if we care to swim in it. Rushdie also emphasizes on the multicultural aspect here, without putting either the East or the West on a priority basis. Like literature, stories and the wisdom embedded in them are border less, available for everybody. Thus, all stories are of equal value. Postmodern in a way, flattens out all hierarchical structures.

The postmodern nihilism can be seen in the nomenclature of god as *Bezabaaan/ Tonguless*. He remains a god mentioned twice in the whole narrative without any role to play. Rather it is a world ruled and reigned by cyberspace and the wealth of information it entails. Khalifa Haroun Rasheed as characters going through all vagaries of the quest plot without bestowing upon them the Godly and providential helps unlike their namesake caliphs of the Islamic history. They are common beings mostly, one of them with the gift of the gab to weave stories out of nowhere, criticized for being not the truths, which Rashid’s own wife also could not tolerate. She was swayed by Mr. Sengupta’s remark that “what’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” (27). Rushdie makes the young boy Haroun carry the Cross of this important question which takes him to a journey mixed with all the wonders and dangers of a mythological sci-fi . But this quest doesn’t end with rescuing of the damsel in distress, princess *Batchit* (Chitchat) only. It meanders to some other rational and imaginative paths simultaneously, very characteristic of the postmodern tone. The medieval epics’ bird Hoopoe becomes his mode of transport to travel all those places connected with the *Kathasaritsagar/* the sea of stories. He is accompanied by Iff and Butt, the two supernatural beings, aptly named for his incredulous outlook for the established metanarratives, the man-created jungle of weeds to clog the free flow of tale-streams which he feels compelled to clear and untangle.

But besides all, *Haroun and the Sea* is a political fable in every aspect with scathing attacks upon many of the established and accepted facts and arguments for change.

Chris Walmsley finds Rushdie's stand to be that of ethical postmodernism maintaining the critical skepticism of Lyotard and tolerance of Bauman (Rushdie's ethical postmodernism- *Haroun* as a cautionary fable, pp- 422). The town of G, valley of K with the Dull lake which should be named 'Interesting' according to the young Haroun easily bring one the picturesque Jammu and Kashmir for its enigmatic present situation. It was declared the paradise on earth by beauty lovers but Rushdie ironically traces the name game of Koshmar and says that it meant 'nightmare' in the old tongue (40) which has become so true today. The characters comment that the citizens are not happy here and nothing is being done to make them happy. The nightmarish bloodshed and gory violence, how every son of this land has been suspected of being a terrorist, a beautiful place with the stigma of trespassing the country rules which later on burst in the form of the Kargil wars only led to a more and more compressed and repressing life under the least willingly chosen government. The people have no say, no voice, but their dormant emotions do erupt up in occasional violence. The author touches this wounding fact that even the everyday life is a struggle for generations of this state, nurturing the hope for a change of fate.

Jean Francois Lyotard identified two controlling modes of metanarratives dominating human thinking- 'mythic religion and Enlightenment' (*The Postmodern Condition*, pp- 29). The age of reason freed human kind of the tyranny of myths and God's wrath, but it brought its own set of metanarratives. It hailed 'liberty, equality, relentless progression through capitalist techno-science' (Chris, pp- 412). Rushdie makes it obvious in this novel that even these narratives like the previous myths have 'the goal of legitimating social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics and ways of thinking' (pp- 29), Lyotard had well illustrated it as well. Postmodernists believe that the West's claims of freedom and prosperity continue to be nothing more than empty promises and have not met the needs of humanity. They believe that truth is relative and truth is up to each individual to determine for himself. Most believe nationalism builds walls, makes enemies, and distresses Mother Earth while capitalism creates a "have and have not" society, and religion causes moral friction and division among people. Rushdie also depicts that a unilinear, one sided credo can never claim to be complete or superior. Perhaps, the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin was apt when he stated that "there's no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (*Philosophy of History*, pp- 248). We esteem the present as the fulcrum of civilization for the advancements we have achieved. The author exhibits that the other side of this polished surface is primitively crude and corrosive.

The land of *Chup* (meaning *silent* in Urdu) represents a world under rule of a repressive government headed by *Khattam Shud* (meaning: it ends)! It at once brings the image of Khomeini to the readers' minds, the Iranian spiritual leader firing the *fatwa* with death sentence on Rushdie's head. *Chup* is a strange country where nobody speaks, or rather nobody is allowed to speak, except in gestures. Sewing of lips is a state-borne punishment everybody undergoes as a national ritual. The army is also called Zipped Lips. The only man speaking in the land is *Khattamshud*, delivering rules and regulations time to time; to remind the inhabitants that expression of any kind is sinful and criminal. They live a perpetual "vowed" life of

silence, darkness and shadows “to show their devotion” (101). Of course, the sun does not dare to rise upon a place so much enveloped by the bestial power of totalitarian authority, living such an unnatural life! All schools, law courts and theatres are closed because of the “silence laws” (101). The land of *Chup* is thus, a rendition of the times hushed and shrouded by the hard and strong Khomeini *Fatwa* – representing a space slowly giving in to death, evanescence and anonymity. The *Fatwa* was an incredible blow to the psyche of a people, celebrating the decentred life, relishing the liberty of fragmentation, hell bent upon experimenting with all the possible forms of freedom. It was a time when the people were bracing up to enter a life without any notion of God Almighty, without belief in truth and morality. They were declaring the absence of the ideas called good and bad, creating a culture where everything is possible.

Khomeini’s hammering order to behead Rushdie for writing blasphemy was a shocking declaration which nobody had ever conceived of coming across. It brought a hush to fall over half of the world for a long time as people related or even not related to Rushdie began to be stabbed, killed and assassinated; because they happened to be from the coterie of either the publisher, the translators or going on a protest march. Rushdie had to remain in a hideout for years and he conceived *Haroun and the Sea* as the first piece of fiction post-fatwa. Critics were astounded by its simplicity, some found it a form of apology in terms of William Blakes’ concept of regaining innocence after an experience of the world, in Rushdie’s case – it was not only bad, but intolerant too. Thus, some found it a song of innocence re-realized, marking apology and repentance. But we readers can easily gauge out the parody woven here in the characters of Walrus and *Khatamshud*, and how the sea of stories is in peril because the dark forces of Silence are letting in poisonous medicines to the clear, happy and candid streams of human thoughts. The author succeeds in putting across the idea that curbing minds of its freedom is the worst enemy for the natural development of any person or generation. Restraining people to any established ideology is very much a suicidal act which could be the cause of the extinction of very life. Because, human beings are no machines to be switched on and off as per the whims of a governor or supreme leader.

Haroun and the Sea presents a horrifying scene of high technology-created monsters prowling the lands of *Gup* and *Chup* who are clogging the river streams of the Story sea and throttling the free speaking men and women. In some ways, this ‘too complicated to be explained process’ reminds one of George Orwell’s celebrated novel advocating human freedom in his *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). The land of *Chup* resembles a lot to the Orwellian dystopic world of Oceania with its oligarchical dictatorship, a pervasive government surveillance, and incessant public mind control, enveloping all like a “Web of Night” (142). Thus, the deified Khatam Shud is the new Big Brother here with a highly complicated and heinous manipulative political agenda, making *Chup* to “...fall under the power of the mystery of Bezaban, a cult of dumbness” (101). He advocates restraining all kind of liberty to keep the *Chup* past and future intact of any defilement, as a responsibility for the collective good. But the worst of all is their ‘poisoning of the ocean of streams of stories’ (91), a propaganda upheld as a religious duty.

The hyper-real technical epoch is vividly presented in the *Haroun* text, which caused the fragmentary life style of the postmodern times- things are once again magical and miraculous through modernized technological efficiency. Imaginative powers

are involved in fulfilling every kind of desire, nothing seems impossible; but what comes obvious is that easing of matters leads to complication of further degrees. In presenting both sides of the east/west, secular/religious, real/fantasy, colonizer/colonized binary, Rushdie exposes his readers to various aspects of our world histories and cultures; because any one metanarrative is unacceptable in the postmodern ideology. By doing this, the author is also foregrounding hybridity over clarity and open-endedness over closure. The sea of stories thus, is an allegory for the ever-evolving world cultures on all sides of the human civilization. It is a space that centralises hybridity, intermingling, and experimentation. For this, Rushdie takes help of Magic realism as technique.

Salman Rushdie amply uses the technique of magic realism in order to explore the various postmodern themes he has undertaken in the present novel. Stephen Slemon writes that 'in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a fictional world from the other' (pp-11). In *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*, it is obviously the worlds of fantasy as Gup and Chup and the world of reality; the sad city of *Kahani*, the nightmarish Koshmar with their intolerant and unimaginative people like Mr. Sengupta and Butto. The binary factors can be seen to be present and competing for the reader's attention. The fantastic is easily discerned in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, dominating it and through it, the realistic makes its presence felt and voice heard. The imaginative characters, themes and places constantly refer back to the real world Rushdie intends to critique. Rushdie's principle use of magic realism in this text involves the fanciful abilities of Haroun because of his being acquainted with hundreds of stories of a marginalized Orient culture and the mainstream together, which enable him to communicate with both sides, so far kept apart by propagated dichotomy theories regarding Orient and Occident. He confluences both-to create a new order of harmony and synthesis with a "claim to liberate creativity from the predetermined, central discourses of society" (Chris, pp-410).

Thus, if the postmodern has rendered 'the illusion itself as reality', and thereby the hypnotic grip of the magic emitted by the thousands of tales surrounding us, Rushdie both questions and acknowledges the power of the medium as a component of a hybrid post-colonial Indian and world culture. In this way, he is unshackling the practical views and opinions like what's the use of stories which are not even true? Linda Hutcheon writes, 'In granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or Other, the post-modern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre' (Circling the downpour of Empire, pp-132). She concludes by noting that '[t]he regionalism of magic realism and the local and particular focus of post-modern art and narration are both ways of contesting not just this centrality, but also claims of universality' (Circling the downpour of Empire, pp-132).

Rushdie, through Haroun and his imaginative worlds, thus, propounds the idea that imaginative exploration along with scientific efficiency can be seen as 'the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth ridden nation [myth perhaps referring to the more negative influence of Western as well as Indian fictions]....or as the true hope of freedom...' (*Midnight's Children*, pp-200). It is the hope that the author associates with children and the new generation in another context. The restoration of normalcy, the unhampered flow of the myriads of story streams and

Rashid's renewed power of story narration all replicate freedom, at the end of the text.

Haroun and the Sea is thus, a fresh bloom in Salman Rushdie's oeuvre, mitigating the sour irony inherent in *Midnight's Child* Saleem's thoughts that the children 'must not become....the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind' (*Midnight's Children*, pp- 200). Rushdie implies that even if Saleem Sinai's generation could not enjoy the gifts inherent in independence, may be the next ones will do. They will definitely strive to see and utilize the opportunities and possibilities coming with changing times. Haroun is a positive reincarnation of Saleem Sinai, who keeps his mind stable without letting it to get affected by the sprawling confusion and fragmentations. He gains heroism in his ordinariness without claiming for it. He enjoys 'the privilege of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes...' (*Midnight's Children*, pp- 463). Thus, the interface of various cultures and differing times spin out a very postmodern discourse. And this becomes the new faith!

Haroun sets the sun to a new position, by moving it on its axis bringing light to the dark land of *Chup* and gifting the soothing pleasure of night to the land of *Gup*. It is a high comment on the hierarchical division of East and West, urban and rural, Rapunzel and Laila! Rushdie thus, emphasizes that erecting edifices of simple dichotomies between national and international, marginal and mainstream identities in the contemporary world is senseless, where media and communication link cultures and countries. The interchange of cultures, to varying degrees, between all countries marks the new regime if it entertains any in the present. This delicate ambiguity is emphasised in the final sentence of the *Midnight's Children*, in which Rushdie links magic with realism, the individual with history, the individual and regional identity and self-assertion with the magnet of the universal.

Haroun and the Sea indulges in postmodern freedom and power of critique. But it does not chase the sterile skepticism blindly. Rushdie maintains hope for a change towards better, for unveiling the world to its truer aspect. The realm of the imagination can provide for alternative worlds. Any attempt at controlling the world can be frustrated by creating a new world in a story. Giving scope to imagination ensures freedom from oppression. The very fact that fictional stories do not necessarily represent reality constitute their strength: even if no happy ending is likely in real life, it is always possible to create one imaginatively.

Besides all, rushdie makes this novel a source of proclaiming his freedom of speech in all conditions, which is natural. The author thus sings in the words of the Mali-

“You can chop a tree/ you can chop liver/ But you can't chop me! (164)
You can stop a check/ you can stop a leak.../ You can't stop me! (139)
You can melt Dark ships- Ice castles/ you can't melt me! (198)”.

We have all seen and witnessed that.

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