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Thematisation of Narrative Space: A Study of Salman Rushdie's Novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

Chhutan Dey
Research Scholar
Department of English
Tripura University
799022.

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Abstract:

This paper by engaging the theoretical framework of spatial form of narratives in fiction, seeks to explore Salman Rushdie's intricate and multi-dimensional engagement with the symbolic organisation of narrative spaces in his novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. A cognitive mapping of the novel as a narrative text would reveal the intricately structured symbolic map of the narrative world which comprises the many fictional or fantastic spaces such as the country of Alifbay, the Land of G, the Valley of K, the Gup City, Kahani and others, which are invested with meanings relevant to the contemporary world. The unfolding of the story in the novel across a number of symbolically charged fictional spaces, is evocative of the 'adventure chronotope' located by Bakhtin in Greek romances. The insertion of fantastic spaces by Salman Rushdie is a predominant motif that operates on multiple levels in his entire corpus of novels. The author's natural fascination for the fantastic spaces is proposed to be read as an artistic attempt on the part the novelist at redefining and rediscovering the Bakhtiniann chronotope of ancient Greek romances in the context of the postmodern society in which the construction and dissemination of narratives have undergone significant changes with the transformation of the physical world in the wake of the unprecedented development of technology. By the phrase "thematisation of space" this paper seeks to refer to the act of attributing meanings, be it symbolic, metaphorical or literal, by the author or the reader to the narrative spaces in a text. Thus the paper proposes to undertake an interdisciplinary study of the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in the light of the spatial theories of fiction and narratives.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, spatial form, narrative space, thematisation of space, fantastic space, cognitive mapping.

Even a cursory reading of Salman Rushdie's novels reveals that his entire body of works is characterised by a constant presence of the fantastic spaces. His serious works such as *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *Fury*(2001) and others which seem to tell stories that concern the real world we live in, suddenly depart into the fantastic, leaving the reader brooding over the possible rationale behind such novelistic strategy of the author. The paper has its genesis in the

attempts of the researcher to understand and explore the seemingly irrelevant and unnecessary “fairytalesness” to use Justyna Deszcz’s word that Rushdie’s works seem to relentlessly revel in. An engagement with this aspect of Rushdie’s novels would surely give rise to several questions— does the engagement of the author with the fantastic spaces in his novels suggest that narrating and understanding the contemporary world must require a departure from the real to the fantastic? Is the author’s strategy to embrace the fantastic while telling contemporary stories of the contemporary world is a way of responding to and compensating for realism as a novelistic strategy which has long proven inadequate to understand and inscribe the world around, undergoing colossal changes? This paper shall be an attempt at understanding Salman Rushdie’s multi-faceted engagement with the fantastic spaces in his novels.

The stories in *Grimus*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and *Luka and the Fire of Life* are situated in fictional spaces in a way which is evocative of the ‘adventure chronotope’ of Greek romances. These fictional spaces may be understood, using Bakhtin’s concept of ‘chronotope’ as a theoretical tool, located by him in the Greek romance as ‘Adventure Novel of Ordeal’. Rushdie, in his fictional works, exhibits a natural fascination for fantastic spaces such as the Land of G, the Valley of K, and the Country of Alifbay, the Lake of Wisdom, the Mountain of Knowledge in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life*. This motif may be read as an attempt on the part of the novelist at redefining and rediscovering the Bakhtinian chronotope of ancient Greek romances in the context of postmodern society where distinct boundaries between real/ fictitious, physical/imagined have collapsed. The author’s intentional indulgence in obliqueness in the representation of spaces in *Shame*, may also be read in the light of Lefebvre’s idea of ‘rediscovering space’. Henri Lefebvre in his influential book *The Production of Space* argues that ideas on earth do not and cannot exist independently of space. He notes, “What is an ideology without space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and kinks it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?” Every idea has to be located and must unfold in space. For instance, the idea of Church does not exist without some kind of its presence and manifestation in and through a physical space such as churches, the physical institutions in the real world. He rightly observes, “What would remain of the Church if there were no churches?” For him any attempts such as revolution and others at abolishing existing social order and ideas at any given point of time in human history is actually abolishing the spaces that the social order and the world of ideas correspond to. In the light of Lefebvre’s observations, it may be argued that if Rushdie’s project in *Shame* has been an attempt at retelling a truthful story of Pakistan, the only alternative the author is left with, is to rediscover and unearth Pakistan from under the rubble of monolithic narratives of violence, terror, shame, partition, and others. Rushdie avoids naming the place of his story ‘Pakistan’ because naming itself would be an act of acknowledgement and reinforcement of the narratives that have defined and shaped Pakistan. The best way is to transpose the place of narration to a whole new space, and narrate and inscribe it a new. Rushdie’s reappropriation of the physical space that is Pakistan whose story the novel tells, by fictitious spaces like Q, may, thus, be studied as the author’s self-conscious novelistic effort at liberating the physical topographical place from the tyrannies of

histories and politics as all-pervasive narratives. For Rushdie, this transposition of the real place to a fictitious place is perhaps the only way to tell its counter stories which could never have been told because of the onslaught of the metanarratives¹ of politics, religion and power disseminated in the 'place'.

Monika Fludernik in her book *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) views narrative as the discourse of human experience. Human experience, on the other hand, as elaborated by Immanuel Kant in his philosophical treatise *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), is structured by man's perception of time and space. If literature is narrative, it must unfold in time and space. But conventional literary criticism and definitions of narratives have failed to recognise this inseparability of space and time from each other as the fundamental constitutive categories for the construction of any narrative. Conventional formal criticism of fiction has always characterised narratives as mere "sequence of events, foregrounding time at the expense of space" (Ryan 421). In fact, prior to the publication of Bakhtin's essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics," literature has always been considered a "temporal art" (Schenck 87). It is Bakhtin who, for the first time, in the history of the criticism of novels, has recognised and explored into the role of time and space as fundamental categories that structure and constructs narratives. Bakhtin uses the term 'chronotope' to refer to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (44). The term "chronotope" implies a complex relationship between time, space, and narrative. In his essay, Bakhtin critically analyses and explores a series of generic techniques that have been employed throughout narrative history and explains their spatio-temporal frameworks, mapping out the various shifts that have occurred within narrative space-time. Bakhtin's seminal study of the intrinsic interconnectedness of time and space in literature opened up new horizons in literary studies which had initiated critical tools to study the spatiality in literature. G. E. Lessing in his famous essay "Laocoon or on the Limits of Painting and Poetry," has made the first attempt to make generic distinctions between the verbal and plastic arts. He notes that literature is essentially a temporal art while the plastic arts are primarily spatial. Lessing attempts to justify his contention by suggesting that literary narrative is unfolded over time while painting or sculpture are apprehended in a moment of time as complete works (Schenck 87). Literature, then, is inherently temporal for Lessing, while painting is spatial (McAllister 2). In his essay "Spatial Form in the Modern Novel," Joseph Frank argues that early twentieth century authors such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Gustav Flaubert attempt to invert spatio-temporal relationship (2). Frank also suggests that modern literature "is moving in the direction of spatial form" (8). Both Lessing and Frank seem to reject the possibility that time and space may exist within a kind of complementary relationship. But Bakhtin's chronotope, offers a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of literary time and space. Whereas Lessing and Frank disconnect time and space, Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotope', for the first time, in the history of criticism of novels, acknowledges and asserts an essential interconnectedness that establishes definitions for time and space through their relationship to one another (2).

This paper aims at undertaking a spatial reading of the fantastic spaces present in select novels of Salman Rushdie. The principal argument of the paper stems from the basic premise that all narratives are spatial for they must unfold and actualize in a space-time continuum which Bakhtin calls “chronotope” in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics”. This paper by engaging the theoretical framework of spatial form of narratives in fiction, seeks to explore Salman Rushdie's intricate and multi-dimensional engagement with fantastic spaces in his novels. The present study shall, first, take up Salman Rushdie's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to read into his “symbolic organisation of narrative spaces” as a self-conscious novelistic strategy for thematising space in the text (Marie-Lurie Ryan 429).

The term narrative space in the theoretical parlance of the spatial studies of narratives is defined, approached and analysed from myriad perspectives. While engaging in the spatial criticism of novels, one has to remember that most of the spatial concepts relating to literature and narratives developed so far in literary and cognitive theory are “metaphorical because they fail to account for physical existence” (Ryan 421). Narrative space thus may be broadly as the physically existing environment inhabited by the characters in a story. This paper draws on this definition to read into the imaginary or fantastic spaces such as Kahani, the Land of up, the Land of Chup and others in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, as the narrative spaces across which the story unfolds.

By the phrase “thematisation of space” this paper seeks to refer to the act of attributing meanings, be it symbolic, metaphorical or literal, by the author or the reader to the narrative spaces in a text. In this paper arguments shall be made regarding the inadequacy of the conventional readings of novels which assume that meanings or themes of a particular text emerge out of the complex interaction between events, incidents and actions of the characters, spread across different time frames. The spatial organisation of a text by the author may include visual or verbal descriptions of the spaces, physical, mental or imaginary that the characters inhabit in the story itself. This contributes as much as temporal organisation to the production of meaning. Every reader while reading through any narrative text automatically gathers spatial information scattered throughout the narrative, which goes into constructing a cognitive map or mental model of narrative space (Ryan 428). Hence every act of reading becomes an act of cognitive mapping to chart out the symbolic map of the narrative spaces. Thus the symbolic map of a text comprises the spectrum of real or imaginary spaces and various landmarks of the narrative world systematically organised in the text (Ryan 429). In this context, Jurij M. Lotman's spatial reading of the structure of narrative may be used as a tool to support and substantiate the principal argument of the present study. Lotman in his book *The Structure of the Artistic Text* ([1970] 1977), argues the story in a particular text is born as the characters traverse through the vast terrains of symbolically charged spaces. The story of the protagonist Haroun in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, thus, may be understood as a hero's journey across symbolic spaces starting from the sad city in the country of Alifbay, the Town of G, the Valley of K to

Kahani, the alien Moon and the fantastic lands such as the Land of Gup or the Land of Chup on it. The fantastic spaces in these texts are considered symbolic because they are inscribed in such a way that they appear to be both imaginary and real, corresponding to the lived-in spaces of the reader of the real world: “[i]nside every single story, inside every single stream in the ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all. (Haroun 161).” This remark by Khattam-Shudin *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* may be read as a veiled metaphorical utterance of the authorial voice which acknowledges the existence of multiple universe/spaces in any story which resist definition because they evolve with the reader’s participation in the act of reading or listening. The symbolic meanings of the fictional spaces of the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (which pretends only to be a children’s story), alter significantly with the readers of different age groups. This is because symbolic organisation of the fictional spaces in the novel operates on multiple levels. At one level, the fictional spaces such as the Land of Gup, and the Land of Chup, the sad city in the country of Alifbay may be read as unreal imaginary spaces that have their existence only in the story world. On the other hand, the fictional spaces are symbolically organised and inscribed in such a way by the author within the spatial structure of the novel that they are intended to transcend their fictional status and flow into the real world outside the text, which the reader inhabits. The Land of Gup and the Land of Chup which respectively stand for the world of freedom of speech and exchange of thoughts and the world that denies freedom of speech, are oppositionally structured to represent the two conflicting halves of the real world when it comes to recognising the artists’ freedom of expression. The only strength of the Guppees is they talk while the Chupwalas do not. The Land of Gup is ‘all excitement and activity’ (80). It is a land of stories and always ‘in the daylight’; the Land of Chup is perpetual darkness, ‘Permanent Night’, and silence (80). One has to remember that the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, masquerading as a children’s novel, was written by the author in the wake of what has come to be popularly known as “Rushdie affair”, when the real world that the author inhabited seemed to have been divided into bipolar halves. As the author writes in his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012), there are occasions in life when the real familiar world that a person inhabits, suddenly changes so much that it metamorphoses into an “unreal” world in the mind of the person. “The real world [i]s full of magic, so the magical worlds could easily be real” (50). Hence the thin boundary line that divides the real and the unreal is very fluid and can easily be crossed which is why Salman Rushdie creates fictional spaces which seem at the same time real and unreal, symbolic and literal. On one hand, the fictional spaces of the text are unreal, but on the other they are real spaces which one inhabits in real life. The “story-world” that the author refers to in the above remark, consisting of imaginary or fantastic, real or physical topographical places, is labelled as “narrative world” in the realm of spatial criticism of narratives. This narrative world, different from the “story space” which refers to the “space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters”, is conceived by the imagination of the reader as a “coherent, unified, ontologically full and materially existing geographical entity, even when it is a fictional world that possesses none of these properties” (Ryan 423). In this context, reference may be made to Iff the Water Genie’s remarks in response

to Haroun's distrust for the magical world. When asked by Iff the Water Genie to pick up a bird that would carry him to the Gup City on Kahani, Haroun finds it impossible to do so because, for him "the only bird around here is a wooden peacock" (Rushdie 63). And for him a wooden bird can never fly and carry a human being. Iff the Water Genie asks Haroun to invent and name, in his mind, any bird he intends to fly with, even though such birds and names do not exist in his real world. Haroun being an inhabitant from Earth finds this logically impossible and will not trust in the magical world—in "what he can't see". On the contrary, for Iff the Water Genie, "to give a thing a name, a label, a handle; to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the Place of Namelessness, in short to identify it" is a "way of bringing the said thing into being" (Rushdie 63). Addressing Haroun as a thief let for he has stolen the genie's Disconnecting Tool used to disconnect supply of story water for a story-teller, Iff the Water Genie bombards Haroun with a series of questions:

"How much have you seen, eh, Thieftlet? Africa, have you seen it? No? Then is it truly there? And submarines? Huh? Also hailstones, baseballs, pagodas? Goldmines? Kangaroos, Mount Fujiyama, the North Pole? And the past, did it happen? And the future, will it come? Believe in your own eyes and you'll get into a lot of trouble..." (63)

Such deceptively simple conversations, spread all over the text may be read as veiled metaphorical commentary on the existence of the perceived distinction between what is real and unreal, real and imaginary/fantastic. The novelist seems to be hinting at the fact that the boundary line between the real and the fantastic, the real and the imaginary is very thin, and hence, susceptible to collapse. The seemingly distinct frontiers of the real and the imaginary may easily be crossed over. Hence even if the fictional spaces in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* such as Kahani, the Land of Gup, the Land of Chup and others are ontologically impossible and incomplete topographical spaces, they become real through the spatial information provided by the author—the very act of naming, describing them through language. For the reader who is engaged in an act of cognitive mapping as he reads on, the fantastic spaces in the text are as real as any real topographical place of the real world. The cognitive mapping is, to be simple, is an act of making sense of the narrative world by the reader. This act of cognitive mapping gives birth to a symbolic map of the narrative in the reader's mind in which the roles and laws of longitudinal/latitudinal coordinates for map making in the real world are rendered non-operational.

At times it may seem to a casual reader that the narratives of Salman Rushdie's novels lack a centre or locus. The readers have to grapple with baffling multiplicity of narrative spaces in almost all his novels. For example, the sad city in the country of Alifbay in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is said to be located on Earth, as it becomes evident from the conversation between Haroun, and "Butt the Hoopoe and Iff the Water Genie". It is needless to say that such country or place does not exist on Earth; hence it is an imagined or imaginary place. Now Haroun being an inhabitant of a fantastic space called Alifbay on Earth travels to another fictional space, Kahani

in which the greater part of the narrative unfolds. Kahani, the second moon of the Earth as the text explains, also happens to be a mysteriously fantastic space for Haroun because, he believes such a place does not exist. This fantastic space Kahani as inhabited by Haroun who hails from another completely fictional space called the country of Alifbay, is thrice removed from the immediate reality of the reader. Thus Salman Rushdie indulges in insertion of multiple fantastic spaces superimposed on each other in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to play with and menace readers' sense of belonging to and rootedness in reality. His is a conscious artistic attempt at pointing out to the constant threat that our sense what is real and imaginary is beset with. "I don't think I'll ever get the gang of this place," (Rushdie 85) says Haroun, the protagonist of the story, to Iff the Water Genie, with frustration at his inability to make sense of the elusive place called Kahani, the second Moon of the Earth as explained to him by his companion Iff on his journey to the Land of Gup. Through such endless number of questions, doubts, and disbeliefs of Haroun, raised and left unanswered intentionally, throughout the narrative, about the nature and existence of the place he is travelling through, Salman Rushdie is emphatically hinting at the impossibility of knowing and representing the fictional world through a verbal medium, whose existence cannot be explained and proven through mathematics or logic. They just exist. The sporadic interventions of the authorial voice expressed through Haroun's remarks throughout the narrative, questioning and inspiring the belief and disbelief of the reader about the existence and truthfulness of the story world, are novelistic strategies that interrogate and reinforce the ancient logic of story-telling and listening. At the surface level, the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* like any other adventure tale, seems to be presenting a minimalist sequential arrangements of events as if meant to only satisfy the curiosity of a child. But a careful inquiry into the spatial organisation of the same narrative would reveal Rushdie's skilful and subtle engagement with a space-time or 'chronotope' in the novel. Here various threads of the narrative are organised and tied, in an intricate and multi-dimensional manner. The author intentionally disrupts the space-time continuum of the conventional adventure tale, which Bakhtin calls the "adventure chronotope" located by him in Greek romances. Unlike the adventure chronotope which binds events, actions and characters into a static matrix, the space-time continuum of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* evolves. The novel shows a self-conscious effort on the part of the author to foreground space as a constitutive category of the narrative in the sense that time, as treated in the novel, is static and frozen, whereas space is dynamic and evolving. The beginning of the story spans a few days starting with the day on which Haroun's mother elopes with Mr. Sengupta and the next few days when Rashid travels to different lands such as the Town of G, the Valley of K and others to address and entertain political gatherings for garnering support for the political party that commissions him. But the main action of the story, the transportation of Haroun and Rashid to a whole different universe comprising a spectrum of fantastic spaces, where wars are fought and won to bring back Rashid's gift of story-telling, takes place in one single night. The night as a temporal unit receives less attention than the spaces across which the narrative unfolds.

An attempt at exploring the topographical configurations of the narrative spaces in the story, would reveal that the whole story takes place across two main fictional spaces which are the country of Alifbay, and Kahani, the Second Moon of Earth. Each fictional space is subdivided into multiple spaces. In the country of Alifbay, the story moves from the sad city which is the starting point, through the Land of G, the Valley of K. and others. The most important place where the major events of the story occur is Kahani which incorporates fictional spaces such as the Land of Gup and the Land of Chup. The description of the fictional space Kahani, and the Land of Gup, and the Land of Chup within it, does not seem convincing. This may not be read as an artistic flaw on the part of the author, rather it may be understood as an articulation on the "limitations of language as a medium of spatial representation" (Ryan, 423). In its attempt at answering one of the questions of Haroun as to how Kahani, the watery Second Moon of the Earth has remained undiscovered for so long, Butt the Hoopoe says that it is because of the rotational speed of Kahani. But the hoopoe explains that the speed of Kahani is too fast to be detected by any earthly machines. The descriptions about the locations of the two lands, the Land of Gup or the Land of Chup on Kahani are equally unconvincing. The land of Gup, which is the land of "Endless Sunshine" and the Land of Chup, which is the land of perpetual darkness are located on opposite halves of Kahani. But the Hoopoe explains to Haroun that the two lands are thinly divided by the Twilight Strip in which the Gupees have constructed an unbreakable (and also invisible) "Wall of Force". The valid question of Haroun, "If Kahani orbits around the earth, even if it goes very fast indeed, there must be moments when the Earth is between it and the sun. So it can't be true that one half is always in the daylight..." (Salman 80) is inadequately answered by Butt the Hoopoe who says that he is "just telling stories" (Salman 80). This confirms the author's conviction that a story-teller cannot and is not bound to construct spaces which are real, and whose existence can be proven.

In this paper emphasis is not given on how the author overwhelms the reader through the representation of inadequately constructed narrative spaces; rather it is argued that despite all the confusion that may arise on account of the reader's confrontation with multiple narrative spaces, the reader in the end, through his/her cognitive engagement, constructs a symbolic map of the narrative from the author's description and organisation of spaces within the scope of the text. The reader who is engaged in cognitively mapping the text automatically constructs a "mental map" in which the seemingly inadequate, incomplete and conflicting fictional spaces do seem to find meaning, coherence and unity. The reader's construction of the mental map is manipulated by the thematisation of narrative spaces i.e the attribution of symbolic meaning by the author to the spaces represented. In a narrative text, thematisation of narrative spaces can only take place through use of language that may describe or create pictures lending spatial qualities to the narrative. For instance, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which tells the tale of two eternal opposing forces— one that fear stories and the other that celebrate their existence, the author seems to privilege the side that does not fear stories but celebrate their victory over silence and discordance— " [i]s not the Power of Speech the greatest power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the full?" The representation of the two warring lands on Kahani that is the Land of

Gup and the Land of Chup acquires symbolic meaning through the conscious use of language of the narrator. Both fictional spaces on Kahani have been placed in sharp contrast to each other. The Land of Gup has been described as the land of life, beauty, discipline, civilisation, eternally bathing in Endless Sunshine whereas the Land of Chup is the land of silence, confusion, perpetual darkness because it is “always the middle of the night” (80). Hence the process of almost instinctively identifying these two lands by a reader with good and bad, light and darkness, countries that promote freedom speech and censorship in the contemporary world, is not a spontaneous act, but it is subtly manipulated by the author by orienting the reader to his symbolically organised of spatial world of the text to elicit the intended reading. A story which explores the mysterious nature and power, its genesis and function in human lives cannot afford to flaunt an over simplistic plot. The watery Moon, Kahani has been chosen as the central location where the main events of the story unfold, to suggest the impossibility of knowing the genesis, nature or function of stories in human lives. So it can be argued that the possible meanings and readings of the novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* are not simply the result of a series of actions and events happening in the lives of the characters, it is the nature and representation of the narrative spaces where the stories are located that contributes to production of meaning.

End- Notes:

1. In his attempt at defining the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard uses the term ‘metanarrative’ in his short treatise *The postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge*(1979) to designate any narrative that claims to provide a totalising and comprehensive world view about any spheres, earthly or metaphysical, of human world. Lyotard argues metanarratives are legitimising and epistemologically flawed; they legitimise power, authority and social customs across human history. In the wake of technological advancement, according to Lyotard, the world has witnessed an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives.’ He notes, the only way to counter the onslaughts of these metanarratives is by disseminating ‘petits recits’ i.e the local narratives, small narratives, born of all-pervasive scepticism toward such grand narratives.

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