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The Isolated Navigator: Salman Rushdie's Manifestation of Self in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie is often called an ‘exile,’ ‘emigrant,’ ‘expatriate’ or an Indian writer in England. Candidness of expression and complex socio-political situations have earned him rather an exclusionary space than an inclusionary space among the writers. He eludes confinement within a specific boundary and, yet, at the same time, he has a keen longing to return to the places which were spaces of his childhood memories. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) partially reveals certain autobiographical facets of the writer. Strange are the hybrid creatures in the Land of Kahani which are threatened into extinction. Outlandish populace in the Land of Kahani is a reminder of the writer’s sense of dislocation on the topographical plane of reality and his earnest desire for a space equivalent to the ‘Land of Kahani,’ an imaginary locale, where all impossibilities can be dispelled off in a whiff. The present paper aims to analyse Rushdie’s nostalgic wish fulfilment and his sense of dislocation and alienation as revealed in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

Keywords: homeland, hybrid, imaginary, space, fiction.

I

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990) and its sequel *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) are often considered ‘Rushdie’s novel[s] for children’ (Teverson 89). In an interview he had conceded that the novel was the outcome of a promise made to his son Zafar. He had for long wished to write a story that would be much to his son’s liking. At the same time, he planned to write a story of a father and a son for his son, recalling the days when he himself was a son. Rushdie’s father was ‘a magical parent of young children’ (Dingwaney 308) who could weave ‘tall, short, and winding’ (Dingwaney 308) tales into new ones. His mother always preserved them with a good

deal of pride. Without Rashid Khalifa's tales, home is no home in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Haroun Khalifa's restoration of Rashid's power of story-telling is a manifestation of Rushdie's quest for 'imaginary homelands' (*Imaginary Homelands* 10). The author had divided his stay among three countries – India, London and Pakistan and, in the 1980s, he had returned to Bombay after spending two decades in England. Sadly, ethnic riots and communal violence had torn his hometown apart.¹ Overwhelmed by a nostalgic longing for the city of yesteryears, his "Imaginary Homelands" differentiates the mournful city of August 1987 from the happy moments he had spent there in the 1950s and 1960s. His childhood memories vivify the familiar city generating a sensation of unease as he tries to reclaim the city he had known. He remains an unfamiliar stranger struggling with the present; the city disowns him revealing the bitter reality: "that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (9).

Rushdie has received acclaim more as an outsider than as an insider. He is variously defined as an 'exile,' 'emigrant' or 'expatriate' writer or an Indian writer in England. In *Imaginary Homelands* he expresses his acute sense of dislocation as

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge... that our physical alienation... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will... create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands... of the mind. (10)

He had spent considerable time in different countries but he could neither feel a sense of belongingness nor identify with any one of them. He finds himself caught between cultures drifting from one to the other. Usually, cultural alienation makes one vulnerable to trauma or neurosis. However, Rushdie dispels off his crisis with a whiff of positivity and Teverson observes that he

claims to speak from the perspective of the privileged migrant Indian intellectual in a complex, even compromised, but not entirely unworkable position. This is a position that, by his own admission, has its drawbacks – it means that he writes as an 'outsider' from several cultures and an 'insider' of none, and it means that his writing emerges out of an experience of disjunction and discontinuity. It has

always been Rushdie's insistence, however, that this position may also have advantages, and that it is on the basis of these advantages that the value of his fiction should be judged. (9)

The awareness of the grave reality and the nostalgic longing for the past lead to the creation of the make-belief town of Alifbay, the queer story-teller Rashid Khalifa and the quest that Haroun embarks upon to restore Rashid's gift of the gab. What Rushdie aspired to attain in reality made him recreate imaginary home fronts of the mind.

In *Haroun*, Rushdie chooses the protagonists' names with care. Rashid Khalifa and Haroun Khalifa are reminder of the fifth Abbasid Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid of Baghdad. During the glorious reign of the Khalifa the city reached its cultural heights and the tales of *Alif Laila*, *Wa Laila* or *Thousand Nights and One Night* were composed. Goonetilleke emphasises: 'Their very names are signs that it will be a story of wonders and fantastic happenings.... This reflects Rushdie's own relation to Anis, father and storyteller, underlined by the fact that 'Rashid' alludes to the writer's own name too' (107 – 8). The dedication that Rushdie makes before *Haroun* opens, prepares the readers for the impossibilities that it has in its store: "Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:/ All our dream-worlds may come true./ Fairy lands are fearsome too./ As I wander far from view./ Read, and bring me home to you." Acrostic reading not only spells out the name of Zafar, but the places Zembla, Zenda and Xanadu also remind us of fantastic locales in the fictions of Vladimir Nabokov (*Pale Fire*, where the backdrop is the imaginary land of Zembla), Anthony Hope Hawkins (*The Prisoner of Zenda*), and the mysterious summer capital of Kublai Khan in Xanadu. *Haroun* is not a single tale but a tale that keeps on unwinding into several others that preceded it and several more that were to succeed. The legacy of story-telling continued from Anis Ahmed Rushdie to Salman Rushdie down to Zafar, the youngest of all. Just as Rushdie was the preserver of his father's tradition, Haroun was to remedy Rashid's loss of stories.

Rashid Khalifa is a story-teller. His unusual occupation is the cause of his wife's desertion. Soraya considered his brains to be filled with 'make-believe' (*Haroun* 22) with 'no room... for facts' (*Haroun* 22). For many like her, Rashid seemed nothing more than a man fond of incessant talking and he is dubbed as the Shah of Blah. Haroun loved his father's stories but his mother's departure makes him burst with an insensible fury. He accuses his father, "What's the use of stories that aren't even true" (*Haroun* 22; emphasis original)? Factual truths and the

skepticism of his family sadden Rashid and he loses the power to weave tales. Caught in a bout of depression, he becomes an object of ridicule in front of the expectant audience as he stands croaking awkwardly ‘ark, ark, ark’ (*Haroun* 26) instead of telling tales. With the disruption of the family ties Rashid loses his touch with the happy world of stories. Perplexed by the grim situation, Haroun visits the fictitious Land of Kahani to renew the Story Water subscription for his father. Rashid’s unintelligible utterance ‘ark’ resonates with significance. It brings to the mind the image of the Biblical flood, Noah and his ark, one pair of all beings taken into it by God’s command and the incessant wait till the flood abates. Rashid too is caught in troubled waters. He is surrounded by the evils of factuality which needs to be conquered by the imaginative story-world. Prior to Haroun’s voyage to the Land of Kahani, he spends his night on a houseboat named *Arabian Nights Plus One*. Thus, aboard on the ‘ark’ Haroun journeys to the Sea of Stories to renew the story water subscription for his father. The make-belief story-world stands as a symbol of perfection, contentment and creative spontaneity for the writer as for Rashid and Haroun. It is a world denied to those like Mr Sengupta, the sticky-thin, whiny voiced mingy looking clerk in the office of the City Corporation, or his wife Oneeta who are caught on the vain plain of materialism.

Rashid Khalifa was different from those in Alifbay. He was impractical; his ‘cheerfulness was famous throughout the *unhappy metropolis*’ (15; emphasis added). Their house was situated beyond ‘an old zone of ruined buildings that looked like broken hearts’ (15) painted with pink, lime-green and blue which gave Haroun the impression of ‘a cake than a building’ (18). The cracked and dilapidated buildings manifest the unhappiness and broken lives of the inmates. On the contrary, the Khalifa family was the enviably happy ones in a city gripped by sadness. Rashid’s stories added freshness to the dull atmosphere of Alifbay; it lifted the spirits of his wife and children too. He lived in Alifbay; his mind in the realm of dreams and fantasies. Neither was he ‘super-rich’ (18), having too much money, nor ‘poor’ (18) or ‘super-poor’ (18), having too little. He had enough to realize his imagination. Rashid could not afford a skyscraper but gave his home a unique aura making it covetable for others. Haroun always thought of a delicious cake each time he saw it. The homeliness within is hinted through the sweetness of Soraya’s songs and Rashid’s make-belief tales to Haroun who innocently savored them. Herein was the secret of Rashid’s happiness, the essence of his being. The happy space of Rashid’s home undoubtedly replicates Rushdie’s younger days when he was surrounded by his father’s tales, his

mother, the ‘keepers of the tales’ and the inexhaustible volumes of books in Colonel Arthur Greenfield’s library purchased by his father.

The Khalifa house merges Rushdie’s fondness for Anis’s tales and the story-telling father that he was to his son Zafar. In fact, W. J. Weatherby mentions an ‘early version... in a serialized form’ (Goonetilleke 107) of *Haroun* formed a part of Zafar’s bedtime stories. Rushdie had fondly recollected that it was a part of the deal between the father and the son so that he could finish working with *The Satanic Verses*. The bond shared between the father and the son made them carve a route into the sacred world of imagination; the attachment was so strong that in reply to Zafar’s query why his father’s stories were only for the grown-ups, Rushdie, in turn, gifted him with *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Zafar made Rushdie’s life meaningful as Haroun had for Rashid. To James Fenton Rushdie had said in an interview: “I was very lucky man to have that son. And I’m a lucky man to have that promise [made to the son to write a children’s book]. Because I needed something bigger than what was happening to me to bring back to the typewriter. The only thing that could be bigger was a promise to a child” (Goonetilleke 118). During the time of Rushdie’s ritualistic break ups with his wives, it was Zafar who had been his sole companion. Soraya’s desertion unnerves Rashid partially but Haroun’s rejection breaks him completely.

Resentment and cynicism of his family breed a sense of isolation in Rashid and such would have been the case of Rushdie if Zafar had doubted him. It proliferates to an extent that Rashid is on the verge of losing his identity or his title (‘Ocean of Notion’) as the famous story-teller of Alifbay. He moans, broods, frets and sulks on the departure of Soraya and decides to stop story-telling altogether. Bent on cancelling his Story Water subscription from the Land of Kahani, he decides to retire. He laments: “I am the Ocean of Notions... – But no, what am I saying?.... –Much better to stop fooling myself, give it all up, go into retirement, cancel my subscription. – Because the magic’s gone, gone for ever, ever since she left” (53). Melancholy seizes him as he reminisces the days spent with Soraya. On Mr Buttoo’s suggestion of taking another wife, he comments: “Ah, but you must go a long, long way to find an Angel...” (43). His alienation is deep enough to snap communication between Haroun and him. Soraya departs at eleven ‘o’ clock. Rashid could not speak or Haroun concentrate for more than eleven minutes. Such is Rashid’s condition before Haroun ventures to the Land of Kahani to help his father out. Perhaps Rushdie had grappled with a similar pain when he was deserted by his wives.

II

The Land of Kahani, the ‘Earth’s second Moon’ (*Haroun* 67), has surprises, pleasant and unpleasant. It over brims with unparallel sights; unusual birds and uncommon beasts. Rushdie’s incongruous beings in this land remind us of Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhury, the story-teller and grandfather of Satyajit Ray who filmed a series of his grandfather’s fictitious tales in 1968 into *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. Rushdie’s esemplastic imagination conjures the unfamiliarly familiar inhabitants in this world of Kahani. Ray’s father Sukumar Ray’s nonsensical verse *Abol Tabol* is populated with equally absurd hybrids, such as – the *hansjaru*, fusion of a duck and a porcupine resulting in a creature with the frontal half of a duck and having porcupine’s spines behind, the *tiamukho girgiti*, unification of a parrot and a salamander, resulting in an anterior beaked head of a parrot with a tail of a salamander for its posterior (10), the *hat tima tim* (birds with horns laying eggs on open fields), *kumro potash*, a two legged boy with a pumpkin like tummy and other curious features that Ray had sketched to assist the readers’ imagination (15) and so on.

Unlike the innocent appearance of the nonsensical beings in *Abol Tabol*, Rushdie’s hybrid beings have another dimension. Rushdie’s inhabitants in Kahani are one of its kind; but they are genetic hybrids enabled to survive exclusively within their habitat. Rushdie’s search for a homeland, his sense of dislocation and loss make him create a place where the strange hybrids could be at ease. Existence itself is threatened when they trespass beyond. Temporary dislocation leads to anxiety or loss and their longing for home as evident in the protagonists. Like many novels of Rushdie these also ‘explore themes of wandering... the quest for a homeland (or the fictiveness of homeland), the problem of hybridized identity and the status of the outsider in society’ (Teverson 79). On the one hand, socio-political causes had denied Rushdie access into his land of familiarity, and on the other, the old world where he grew up was lost and the new was too alien for him to identify with. Moreover, he was also a cultural hybrid. A homely topographical locale was non-existent; a land without geo-political barriers a futile longing. He was destined to be confined to an imaginary space, a land of his own making. This perception of the writer is explicit in the depiction of the Land of Kahani.

Here there are the shoals of Plentimaw Fish, the Floating Gardener and a hoopoe called Butt. A Plentimaw Fish is a curious combination of a giant shark, Angel Fish, and hydra. It is big like a shark, moves in pair like an Angel Fish, and has many mouths as that of the mythical

hydra. It juggles old tales creating new ones. The Plentimaw Fish assisting Haroun is called Goopy-Bagha, and directly resonates Ray's films. Iff, the Genie, names them 'hunger artists' and explains Haroun: "when they are hungry, they swallow stories through every mouth, and in their innards, miracles occur; a little bit of one story joins on to an idea from another, and... they spew the stories out that are not old tales but new ones... our artistic Plentimaw Fishes really create new stories in their digestive system" (86). The shoal of fish consumes non-polluted old stories, that is, stories which retain their primordial purity. With the passing of time, old tales are tampered or misshapen and made dull and boring. The fish accompanies Haroun to the Old Zone of Kahani, the South Polar Ocean filled with the tales eons old. However, the pollution of tales makes them quit midway. Illness afflicts it; it coughs and splutters and Haroun find its condition grave and 'miserable' (140). Perhaps it is the corrosion of the old-world order by the infestation of individual greed and political policies that Rushdie hints at by the polluted city of Alifbay and that of the Ocean of Stories. A simple mind weaves tales; a complex mind fabricates rumours. Anis, Rushdie and Rashid resemble the Plentimaw fish. The Floating Gardener, Mali, accompanies Haroun as Mali is endowed with a rustic toughness to endure even the worst toxicity in the Ocean of Stories. He maintains the cleanliness of the Story Sea by untwisting the knotty tales. Mali is an admixture of weeds and a gardener, 'high-speed vegetation' (82) that could 'wind and knot itself around and about until it had taken something like the shape of a man, with the lilac-coloured flower positioned in its 'head' where the mouth should be, and a cluster of weeds forming a rustic looking hat' (82). However, trouble ensues for him when Haroun's wish causes Kahani, the moon, to rotate with the rays of the sun piercing into the Dark Ship of Khattam-Shud, the arch-enemy of stories. The heat melts the ship and Mali is dehydrated and exhausted after few minutes of pushing decapitated Butt, the hoopoe, which carried Haroun and Genie Iff. Butt is a machine with a brain-box. It bears semblance with a hoopoe, but capable of thinking, feeling, flying and sailing. Telepathic psychic waves are used to decipher the thought processes of others and it communicates in silence through psychic waves. Brain-box comprising of technical devices gives life to it. However, its intelligence and existence are challenged when in the Old Zone the Chupwalas forcefully unscrew this device from its head. Fear afflicts Butt when they are made prisoners by the order of Khattam-Shud. In a 'cheerless state of mind' (145) it says without moving its beak: "To Khatam-Shud we go, all neatly

wrapped and tied up like a present!.... Then it's zap, bam, phutt, finito for us all... there is no getting away. Woe is us! Alas, alack-a-day! *Hai-hai-hai*" (145; emphasis original).

Goopy-Bagha, Mali and the Hoopoe Butt are petty beings. However, Rushdie makes their anxiety and despair akin to the turmoil of Argalia, the formidable warrior and the possessor of the enchanted weapons, in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008).² In his boyhood he was treated no better than a bait; he had been left asunder on his little boat, defenceless during the time of danger or without a route to return he epitomized, in the words of the narrator,

a lonely human soul drifting vaguely into the white. This was what was left of a human individual when you took away his home, his family, his friends, his city, his country, his world: a being without context, whose past had faded, whose future was bleak, an entity stripped off name, of meaning, of the whole of life except a temporarily beating heart. (175)

Perhaps this same feeling had also afflicted the author and he realised "that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (*Imaginary Homelands* 9). Unlike the outlandish populace in the unusual Land of Kahani, unlike the happy spring of story in the City of Alifbay, unlike the return of Soraya to Rashid Khalifa, Rushdie had to be but contend in the futility of the present.

End Notes:

1. "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987" reveals a disillusioned author; Bombay the city raised by foreigners brewed tensions, harangued with unending curfews, gruesome masquerades and loss of innocent lives.
2. In the novel, young Argalia is treated as a bait by Andrea Doria, who was at war with the Ottoman ships.

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