

Haroun and the sea of stories: salman rushdie's use of allegory

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Haroun and the Sea of Stories: An Allegory for all Readers

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* tells a fictional tale of a young protagonist named Haroun who travels to the Sea of Stories to help his father gain back his skill of storytelling. This narrative was a consequence of Rushdie's many years in hiding. After he published *The Satanic Verses*, a novel about Pagan Meccan goddesses which insulted many Muslims, former Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering the death of Rushdie. As a result, the English government put Rushdie in hiding and he was forced to be separated from his young son, Zafar. In an effort to reconnect and entertain his son, Rushdie wrote an entertaining story for children: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Although the tale resonates with younger audiences and portrays a sense of magical realism, the allegory also makes several allusions to works only familiar to older audiences. Rushdie's references to *King Lear*, Plato, and The Beatles demonstrate this dichotomy, resulting in a work which aims to please a child's sense of wild creativity, yet also attracting more experienced readers familiar to complicated topics. One way in which Rushdie hooks his second, presumably older, audience is by explaining the importance of speech and storytelling in a profound philosophical context. Describing the circumstances of his fatwa, Rushdie appeals to the second audience which an overarching framework of how speech promotes a richer private and public life. In the tale *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie simultaneously appeals to children and experienced older readers. By utilizing magical realism to further the plot, allude to other known children works, and introduce a myriad of magical creatures, Rushdie immediately grabs the interest of children. Almost contrastingly, Rushdie

informs the readers about the importance of storytelling, painting Khattam-Shud, the opposition to all storytelling, as an antagonist and developing Haroun's gradual love for storytelling and culture.

After several years of hiding and isolation from his family, Rushdie longed to connect with his young son, Zafar through a story which would entertain him. Thus, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is formatted as a children's book to demonstrate the bond between Rushdie and his son. The first way in which Rushdie exemplifies this is through using the art of magical realism to further the book's plot. Magical realism is defined as genre of fantasy fiction which expresses a distorted, magical account of the real world. Magical realism is a commonly used when writing children's stories, such as *Peter Pan* or *Harry Potter*, both of which begin with a protagonist living in reality and discovering a revolutionary, magical world. Rushdie's first allusion to other children's works is early in the third chapter, when Haroun is introduced to Iff, the Water Genie. The character Iff most closely resembles the genie from *Aladdin's Magical Lamp*, as he serves as Haroun's guardian throughout the plot and has some physical similarities. Iff is described to have baggy pants and a turban, common Middle Eastern garments which strongly resembles the genie's background from *Aladdin*. The description and role of Iff, a significant role in the allegory, shows the reader Rushdie's primary intention was to write a book that caters to younger children, especially his son.

Furthermore, in the fourth chapter, Rushdie makes an explicit mention of the fairy tale *Rapunzel*, writing, " What Haroun was experiencing, thought he didn't know it, was Princess Rescue Story Number S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi; and because the princess in this particular story had recently had a haircut

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and therefore had no long tresses to let down (unlike... Rapunzel)" (Rushdie 73). The story is placed into the narrative of a different, popular story which furthers the adventure and reaffirms Rushdie's intention to make this a story accessible to children. Finally, another visible allusion is in the seventh chapter, when Haroun observes a man viciously fighting against his own shadow with a sword. However, the shadow was fighting back " with equal ferocity, attention and skill" (Rushdie 124). The reference to Peter Pan in this scene is evident, as Peter Pan similarly fought his own shadow. The adventurous and magical plot of the book makes it far more accessible to younger children. Similarly, using magical realism to shift a change in the storyline is common for children's fairy tales. Thus, the use of magical realism, the countless allusions to popular child fairy tales, and the introduction of different bizarre characters affirms the notion that Rushdie wrote Haroun and the Sea of Stories in an attempt to entertain his son and other children.

Although Rushdie's primary intention when crafting Haroun and the Sea of Stories was to write an entertaining fantasy for his son, he also wrote it to explain the circumstance that fatwa had put him in. Rushdie begins this process by telling the reader of Khattam-Shud, translating to " silence." Khattam-Shud is the story's antagonist who poisons the streams of the Sea of Stories and captures Princess Batcheat. Haroun best describes Khattam-Shud as a " a skinny, scrawny, snivelling, drivelling, mingy, stingy, measly, weaselly, clerkish sort of fellow, who had no shadow but seemed almost as much a shadow as a man" (Rushdie 190). Immediately, the reader is presented with a negative connotation of the character responsible for

silencing Haroun's father. Rushdie stresses the importance of free storytelling, which Khattam-Shud vehemently opposes. Rushdie continues to write, "The Chupwalas... turned out to be a disunited rabble... many of them actually had to fight their own, treacherous shadows! And as for the rest, well, their vows of silence and their habits of secrecy had made them suspicious and distrustful of one another...The upshot was that the Chupwalas did not stand shoulder to shoulder, but betrayed one another, stabbed on another in the back, mutinied, hid deserted" (Rushdie 185). The Chupwalas, translating to "the quiet ones," were silenced by Khattam-Shud, and as a result, suffered due to censorship. Rushdie once again argues that a society which suffers from censorship can never stand when challenged and fight themselves and their own shadows. He viciously criticizes the Khattam-Shud character for his lack of tolerance and authoritarian rule, but also portrays the acceptance of storytelling in a positive light. He explains from Haroun's point of view, "he looked into the water and saw it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity... these were the Streams of Story... each colored strand represented and contained a single tale" (Rushdie 71-2). Haroun's realization of the beauty of storytelling indicates a shift in the plot, as he admires both his father's and Rushdie's occupation. Khattam-Shud, the enemy of speech and destroyer of myth, most closely resembles Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, as he attempts to silence and orders a fatwa on Rushdie. As a result, Rushdie indirectly criticizes Khomeini in his tale, while also explaining the societal harms of censorship and why

storytelling and free speech is so valuable. As Haroun comes to discover, imaginative storytelling promotes a rich inner life and a stronger, healthier, human community. Thus, to address the injustice of having the fatwa placed upon him, Rushdie explains to his experienced audience why unrestricted and creative storytelling has such merits.

In the tale *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie simultaneously appeals to children and experienced older readers. By utilizing magical realism to further the plot, allude to other known children works, and introduce a myriad of magical creatures, Rushdie immediately grabs the interest of children. Almost contrastingly, Rushdie informs the readers about the importance of storytelling, painting Khattam-Shud, the opposition to all storytelling, as an antagonist and developing Haroun's gradual love for storytelling and culture. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is the product of a father-son relationship. As Rushdie certainly appeals to younger readers through his vivid description of bizarre events, he also attracts older, experienced readers by formulating a storyline which philosophically addresses the importance of speech and words. Rushdie proceeds to tie these two components together by explaining the circumstances of his fatwa. The publication of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and the framework of free storytelling are byproducts of the fatwa and being forced into hiding.