

The Allegory Of Censorship In Salman Rushdie's Haroun And The Sea Of Stories

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Abstract

This study aims to highlight the allegorical issue of censorship politics in Haroun and the Sea of Stories. It is Salman Rushdie's fifth novel following the publication of The Satanic Verses. Haroun and the Sea of Stories appears to be a children's book on the surface, but it also contains an adult cautionary story. Rushdie's personal experiences with censorship are reflected in this highly metaphorical book, which can be interpreted in the light of the global uproar that followed the release of The Satanic Verses. The Ayatollah of Iran issued a 'fatwa' against Rushdie as a result of the novel's contentious portrayal of Islam. He began living a secretive and reclusive lifestyle as a result, and it was at this time that he published Haroun and the Sea of Stories. The separation between the Guppees and the Chupwalas, as well as the Old Zone section of the Sea of Stories, serve as vehicles for Rushdie's experiences with censorship. Rashid, Princess Batcheat, Prince Bolo, and even Haroun are all characters in the book who allegorically represent Rushdie. By using an allegorical method, Rushdie provides his own opinions regarding his circumstances and those in charge of censoring while discreetly making fun of himself and his place in the bigger scheme of things. In the end, however, Rushdie wrote the book with the greater issue of censorship in mind rather than the significance of his particular circumstance.

Keywords: Allegory, Censorship, Politics, Freedom, Expression.

Introduction

A story or painting that uses people, images, and/or events as symbols is known as an allegory. An allegory's symbolism might be read to mean many different things. A political or historical condition, as well as a moral or spiritual truth, may be illustrated by an author using allegory. Allegory is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "a story, poem, or picture which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one." In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie used a variety of people, places, and things as allegories to not only give his readers a personal tribute but also to illustrate the flaws of needless censorship.

We encounter the fictional lands of Gup and Chup in this book. They stand for speech and quiet, respectively, as their names imply. On the one hand, the Guppees, or residents of Gup City, have absolute freedom of speech, even to the point of openly criticising their government. The Chupwalas, or citizens of the city of Chup, on the other hand, are coerced into silence to the extent of even sewing their lips shut. While the sun is seen shining brightly over the blessed and gay city of Gup, the land of Chup is depicted as being plagued with endless darkness, cold, pin-drop quiet, and utter censorship. As a result, in the first half of the book, a binary is established between the two countries.

The characters further contribute to this distinction. Khattam-Shud is the leader of the Chupwalas. He and his people are ardent worshippers of the sternly silent God Bezaban. 'Bezaban' means 'without a tongue' in Hindi and it accurately describes the plight of the Chupwalas. Although, Khattam-Shud advocates complete silence to his subjects, he, himself, does not give up speech. His sinister character is, to some extent, representative of the duplicity and the double-standards of those agencies of power, who in order to avoid criticism and disparagement, repress and censor mercilessly.

Throughout the novel we come across the question "What is the use of stories that aren't even true?" (Rushdie 20) asked several times by characters such as Mr. Sengupta, Khattam-Shud and even Haroun. This question poses an uncanny resemblance to Plato's concern regarding poetry and art, in general, in his book *The Republic*.

Then if he does not make that which exists he cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence; and if any one were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth. (Plato 459)

According to Plato, God is the real Creator as he creates the transcendental ideas or archetypes of every existing thing in the world. He uses the example of a bed in order to clarify his point. God created the idea of a bed. A workman, say, a carpenter imitates the idea in order to create a physical bed and then comes the poet who represents the carpenter's bed in his literary work. Therefore, he is thrice removed from reality or the truth. The poet is merely an imitator and not a creator.

And so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtues as well as vice, and divine things too, for that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet, we ought to consider whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities?... (Plato 461)

Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher and essayist, in his essay *The Storyteller* argues that storytelling is the anti-thesis of information, because information thrives on limitation and containment whereas good storytelling is characterized by expansibility and ambiguity.

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (Benjamin 366)

The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them,

and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin 366)

For both Benjamin and Rushdie, the means of storytelling, when unfettered, becomes the anti-thesis of totalitarian thinking because it resists the fascistic or Platonic drive to control society by limiting potential definitions and controlling interpretations. In other words, storytelling is complicit with the 'liberated man'.

This is a point made clear in Haroun and the Sea of Stories in the fear of Khattam-Shud, who is representative of the totalizing tradition from Plato to Ayotallah Khomeini, towards storytelling. For Khattam-Shud, storytelling is one of the greatest threats to his power because the eclecticism implicit in any uncensored story, along with its expansiveness and ambiguity, undermine the lust for closure and finitude that his name represents i.e. completely finished. Hence, he tries to poison the Sea of Stories. When Haroun asks him why he hates stories so much, given that stories are such fun, Khattam-Shud replies:

"The world however is not for Fun... The world is for Controlling."

"Which world?" Haroun made himself ask.

"Your world, my world, all worlds" came the reply. "They are all 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..." (Rushdie 161)

Rushdie, through this novel, aims to reveal the destructive potential of this viewpoint, by showing how the frenzied pursuit of totalitarianism and censorship results in a society riven with jealousy, suspicion and mutual mistrust and how, on the contrary, freedom of thought and speech gives way to a stronger community. He symbolically employs various incidents and characters in the novel to establish his point. For instance, the Guppees' tendency to dissect and thoroughly discuss every command they receive gives rise to better communication and trust among them. However, the lack of speech and communication between the Chupwalas left them vulnerable, confused and suspicious of even their own shadows. Some of them even sided with the Guppees during the battle and fought against their own men. This shows how uncoordinated and divided they were

owing to their vows of silence. The Chupwalas who fled the battleground had little knowledge about what was going on.

The Pages of Gup, now that they had talked through everything so fully, fought hard, remained united, supported each other when required to do so, and in general looked like a force with a common purpose. All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of fellowship between them. The Chupwalas, on the other hand, turned out to be a disunited rabble... their vows of silence and their habits of secrecy had made them suspicious and distrustful of one another. (Rushdie 184)

Haroun notices that the Guppees devoid of skilful warfare or proper planning were actually winning over the great warriors of Chup who were either fleeing the battleground or killing their own people out of confusion.

Rushdie deploys a scathing criticism on the meaninglessness of such censorship through the light-hearted and humorous, but highly symbolic, observations of Haroun. For instance, the chilly weather of Chup compels the Chupwalas to wear a certain nose-warmer to prevent their noses from freezing off.

Chup City was in the deep heart of the Perpetual Darkness, and the air was so cold that it would freeze into icicles on people's noses, and hang there until it was broken off. For this reason, the Chupwalas who lived there wore little spherical nosewarmers that gave them the look of circus clowns... (Rushdie 179)

This symbolizes the nonsensical and clownish nature of such inexorable censorship of the freedom of speech and expression.

In another instance, Haroun observes that in Chup, where everyone has taken a vow of silence, the Chupwalas including Khattam-Shud, himself are entirely separated from their shadows and the shadows have their own individual lives. This is symbolic of the deceptive nature of such crude censorships which can, very effectively, break the unity among people and result in mistrust and incredulity. However, it may also symbolize the Chupwalas' psychological state of mind. It is obvious that the life led by the Chupwalas in absolute silence and uncommunicativeness is not, at all, an ideal or preferred

lifestyle. Therefore, their shadows having a separate and free existence might be indicative of their desire for an emancipated and unrestrained alternative life.

Although, it is evident throughout the novel that Rushdie strongly opposes censorship and restrictions, he does not support absolute or unmitigated freedom. He tries to reduce the gap between the two binaries that he seems to have created in the beginning of the novel. Nothing in the world can be declared as entirely black or white i.e. completely vicious or absolutely perfect. Likewise, Rushdie attempts to bring out the grey areas in the supposed goodness of freedom and tyranny of censorship. For instance, Princess Batcheat from Gup City speaks and sings endlessly to the point of irritating others. The Guppees were oblivious about her abduction and some of them were even happy to let her go. Prince Bolo, who is supposed to be an influential member of the Gup society, is portrayed as an absurd character, owing to his unrealistic and imbecilic nature. He has no sense, whatsoever, of reality and is often seen making a fool out of himself. His orders are never taken seriously and sometimes even hushed down by the Guppees. Both Princess Batcheat and Prince Bolo have little dignity and worth in the Gup society due to the unnecessary exercise of their freedom of expression. On the other hand, Mudra from Chup City is widely honored and celebrated by all. Even the Guppees hold him in high esteem. Mudra, through his gesture language speaks pearls of wisdom. His leadership qualities and expertise in warfare fetch him great love and admiration. His character is representative of the prospect of goodness in Chup City.

In another instance, the Eggheads in Gup City, through a Process Too Complicated To Explain (P2C2E) fixated the sun over Gup, thereby condemning Chup City to perpetual darkness and winter. This indicates that excessive freedom is not always synonymous to good, when in wrong hands. On the other hand, the scorn of the Chupwalas towards their leader, Khattam-Shud and their lack of allegiance in the battle show the corrosiveness and futility of extreme censorship. Although, he inclines more towards freedom of speech and expression, Rushdie also acknowledges the need to strike a perfect balance between the two because excessive of either can prove to be a harmful thing.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that Salman Rushdie criticises the politics of censorship in his highly allegorical novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and promotes freedom of speech and expression in the process. However, he does not intend to eradicate censorship entirely because such a society would descend into chaos and anarchy. Such a society is neither ideal nor desirable in the real world. Therefore, he speaks out against censorships that are unwarranted and brutal, like the one he personally experienced. Rushdie also urges everyone to exercise their right to free expression in a responsible and practical manner.

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