

*Politics and Children's Literature:  
A Reading of  
"Haroun and the Sea of Stories"*

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A CHILDREN'S STORY about a sinister carnivorous bird would seem an unlikely choice for inclusion in a high-profile literary anthology, but the presence of Satyajit Ray's "Big Bill" (the original title in Bangla is "Brihat Chanchu") in Salman Rushdie's *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, a commemorative volume for the golden jubilee of India's freedom, is explicable only when seen in the perspective of Rushdie's long-time interest in Ray.<sup>1</sup> No anthology is ever objective; each attempt to bring together representative texts from a country, period, language, or genre is destined to become an exercise to validate the editor's own position through the construction of a personalized canon (witness, for example, in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, the wilful conflating of Indian Writing in English with Indian writing). The inclusion of Ray's children's story in this volume reflects Rushdie's personal predilection for Ray's work, particularly for the bizarre and fantastic aspects of his imagination—both in fiction and film—testified though many indirect references in Rushdie's novels, one complete essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, and multiple echoes in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. This paper attempts a reading of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* using the Ray intertextual element in it as the starting point. The parallels between these two storytellers—one intensely and controversially political, and the other the last of the humanist artists of our century who eschewed political engagement—may not, however, stretch too far, but the occasional links illuminate the text.

Most people outside the Bangla language region know Ray as the maker of serious films like *The Apu Trilogy* (1955, 1956,

1959), *Jalsaghar* ("The Music Room," 1958) *Debi* ("The Goddess," 1960), *Ghare Baire* ("The Home and the World," 1980), and many more; but within his own language community, he has a huge and enthusiastic following as a children's writer and a film maker in the comic mode. His children's films include *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* ("The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha," 1968), *Sonar Kella* ("The Golden Fortress," 1974), *Joi Baba Felunath* ("The Elephant God," 1978), and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* ("The Kingdom of Diamonds," 1980). His dozens of books written for children in at least three different genres—detective stories, science fiction, and comic tales—continue to remain at the top of the bestselling list even today, five years after the author's death. Rushdie, by declaring *Sonar Kella* to be one of his favourite movies, is said to have made Ray feel like "the proud parent whose least appreciated child has been lavished with unlooked-for praise" (*Imaginary Homelands* 11). The praise must have been "unlooked for" coming as it did from a "non-Bengali" (a blanket term used often in Bangla to lump the rest of the world as "not-us") because the local critics had always been enthusiastic about the film, and along with *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, *Sonar Kella* has remained the favourite of two generations of children and adults. The film critic Chidananda Das Gupta explains the enchantment thus: "Ray's children's films have a secret core of joy, a Mozartian Magic Flute quality in which the children are little Papagenos, unimpressed by evil, which is a cloud that only makes the sun shine brighter" (84). This is also the iridescent quality that permeates Salman Rushdie's only children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*; the affinity is worth a closer look.

In an interview, Ray was once asked a question that bordered on an allegation: why did he in his children's film *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* allow the effervescent mode of fantasy to get congealed into a fable by the end?<sup>2</sup> The same charge has been brought obliquely against Rushdie by many reviewers of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), a text on which I suspect Ray's influence extends far beyond the occasional borrowing of proper names. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* too has been seen as a moral and aesthetic parable dressed in the garb of a children's

story. The book appeared one year after Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa (14 February 1989) and the allegorical relationship between a storyteller who has lost his power to create and a writer who has been sentenced either to silence or to death was too strong for the critics to pay attention to the fantasy or fun element in the tale. Ray did not see any dichotomy in the two modes deployed by him: "I am not sure a clear demarcation can be made between the two. Fantasy . . . meaning the use of the supernatural and the magical can be part of the fable and the two can merge naturally" ("Ray in the Looking Glass" 33).

An attempt has been made here to examine the process or the possibility of this merger, not only of the two narrative modes—fantasy and fable—but of several other concerns—moral, aesthetic, political, ecological, and intertextual—that are allowed to converge in this slender tale meant for children. Before doing so, I should explore the Ray-Rushdie connection briefly.

The "plentymaw" fish in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which speak in doggerel verse are called Goopy and Bagha—pointing our attention to one of the many pre-texts from which *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* draws. The purpose the stories serves in Rushdie's novel is analogous to the function of songs in the film *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, both countering the principles of silence, suspicion, and strife with a celebration of art, articulation, and consequently, of life.

Not unlike the battle between the lands of Gup and Chup in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the action in *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* climaxes in the battle between the two nations Jhundi and Shundi (the people in Shundi have lost their speech) and eventually Goopy and Bagha are able to stop the war through their songs—bringing back peace, harmony, and voice. Rushdie too in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, as in all his other novels, valorizes a plurality of voices, privileging polyphony over an enforced unity of silence.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, heterogeneity is seen as more cohesive than the monolithic idea of a nation. In the uneven battle between the Guppees and Chupwalas, the Guppees have the advantage of possessing multiple voices. "All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of friendship between them" (185), while "the vows of silence and

the habits of secrecy had made [the Chupwalas] suspicious and distrustful of each other" (185). Most characters in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* outside the dark land of Chup have their distinctly different ways of speaking—the fish speak in rhyming couplets; Mali speaks in quatrains; Mr Butt's sentences are punctuated with "but, but, but" and "no problem"; General Kitab's speech is peppered by a series of innocuous oaths ("stop and blast me," "spots and fogs," "drat it all," "dash it," "rot it all"); and Prince Bolo uses the clichéd rhetoric of romance, while Princess Baatcheat communicates through execrable love songs—all contributing their bit to a lively din of heteroglossia.

In Ray's film, this heteroglossia is to be found in its musical score—quite natural in a text where not stories but songs carry the theme forward. Although Goopy and Bagha mention in a song that they are simple folk who know no other language but Bangla, it becomes clear very soon that the verbal content of the songs is incidental to the communication of their meaning. What is more important is that Goopy and Bagha know the language of music that transcends speech. In any case, the people of Shundi do not speak at all, so Goopy and Bagha could not know what language the people would be able to understand—hence they plead, "True, you may not understand what we speak, but we hope that what we sing, even if it is not intelligible, will travel through your ears and reach your hearts" ("Ray in the Looking Glass" 37).

The unorthodox music of *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* freely incorporates elements from Western symphony, Hindustani classical as well as Karnatak music and Bangla folk tunes, using a whole range of string instruments—cello, *ektara*, *dotara*, violin (sometimes played so as to sound like a *sarinda*—a folk instrument of East Bengal) and twelve types of percussion instruments—including *mridangam*, *ghatam tabla*, *Khanjira*, *murshrinka*. Visually too this plurality is sustained in the well-known ghost-dance sequence in the film, where varieties of ghosts—fat and thin, black and white—(actually they are *bhoots*; the Bangla word *bhoot*, with its slightly comic connotation is inadequately translated as "ghost") are choreographed together in an eerie yet hilarious ballet. Ray explains his design this way:

I thought of those who lived and died in Bengal and became its resident ghosts—people of diverse roots and races . . . kings and chieftains as well as tillers of the soil right from the Buddhist period, as also the Englishmen of John Company.

(“Ray in the Looking Glass” 39)

This multiplicity is replicated in the sea of stories that Rushdie's text *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* conjures up, where several streams coexist—the title itself invoking at least two traditions of narrative cycles—the *Arabian Nights* from West-Asia from which the name Haroun originates, and *Katha-sarit-sagar*, a compendium of stories in Sanskrit attributed to Somadeva, who lived in Kashmir in the eleventh century. The name of the caliph of Baghdad, Haroun-al-Rashid, gets split into the names of the father and son invoking the cycle of tales that, for Rushdie, has long been a synecdoche for an inexhaustible storehouse of stories. Even six years after *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Scheherzade returns on the last page of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. But in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the houseboat called “Arabian Nights Plus One” also shades into the 2001 *Space Odyssey*, deliberately bringing in the ambience of science fiction (the resolution of the plot is, after all, predicated upon making a planet turn), and the story of Prince Bolo and Princess Baatcheat weaves in through a parodied romance rhetoric—yet another diverse strand of knight errants and damsels in distress. Both Ray's film and Rushdie's story are thus celebrations of plurality.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie has paid tribute to Ray in an essay (107-14), but a passage in *The Moor's Last Sigh* reveals more about Rushdie's natural preference for Ray's fantasy films over his realist ones, even though the filmmaker now gets a fictitious name:

The great Bengali film director Sukumar Sen . . . was the best of those realists and in a series of haunting humane films brought to Indian cinema—Indian cinema, that raddled old tart!—a fusion of heart and mind that went a long way towards justifying his aesthetic. Yet these realist movies were never popular . . . and Vasco (openly) and Aurora (secretly) preferred the series of film for children in which Sen let his fantasy rip, in which fish talked, carpets flew and young boys dreamed of previous incarnations in fortresses of gold. (173)

The final reference in the last sentence is obviously to another children's film by Ray, *Sonar Kella*, and the flying carpet is evi-

dently a trope to signify all fairy tales. But the talking fish would puzzle even the most knowledgeable viewers of Ray's films unless they have also read *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* because Ray's films never show any fish—talking or otherwise. The rhyme-spouting fish in Rushdie's novel (Goopy and Bagha) have derived their name from the singing heroes of *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, and, by a sleight of syntax, Rushdie gives back to Ray what he has received from him, in the process conflating *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* with *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*.

Like Vasco and Aurora in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie clearly prefers fantasy to mimesis. His most recent novel articulates in various ways the basic aesthetic position on which the entire Rushdie oeuvre is based—suspicion of the literal and the realist, and a faith in the epic-fabulist mode, only which, according to him, can do justice to “the narrative of our magic race and the dream-like wonder of our waking world” (*Moor* 173). *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* chronicle the recent history of the Indian subcontinent in the extravagant language of fantasy with intermittent and indirect references to Bombay films, another realm of the non-real. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, continuing with the film allusions Rushdie makes, the painter Vasco urges Aurora, a greater artist, not to attempt naturalism which might be the mode of nation-building because it stifled creativity:

Will you spend your life painting boot-polish boys and air-hostesses and two acres of land? Is it to be all coolies and tractor drivers and Nargis-y hydro-electric projects from now on? . . . Forget those damn-fool realists! The real is always hidden . . . inside a miraculously burning bush! Life is fantastic! Paint that. . . . (174)<sup>4</sup>

If *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* are both parables of art, one focusing on songs and the other on stories as the specific metaphor for creativity, *The Moor's Last Sigh* has a comparable agenda, but it uses painting as its dominant trope. The sea of stories here turns into a carnival of canvases, extravagantly proclaiming the inadequacy of mimesis for representing life which is never completely rational. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* makes it apparent that if the real world is full of magic, the magic world could also be real—and “fearsome too”—as the dedication to the novel alerts us. Fantasy in children's fiction

hardly needs justification since it has always been the staple of fairy tales. As a professed practitioner of the nonrealist mode of narration, Rushdie is hardly "an unlikely children's writer" as Judith Plotz supposes,<sup>5</sup> because while only the sophisticated adult readers take to his kind of "magic realist" fiction, children, never surprised by miracles or incredulous of metamorphoses, enjoy this mode of narration most naturally. They find it easy to accept metaphors as literal truth (as in the sea of stories) and when actual events are turned into metaphors—a transformation frequently achieved in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*—that too is taken by them in their stride.

This playful interchangeability may be an end in itself, a jugglery that entertains by its virtuosity (as did Rashid's stories, and Haroun did think of his father as a juggler), but it does not necessarily preclude fable as Ray had insisted in his interview, and as Plotz also agrees by the end of her paper: "every stylistic feature contributes to the poetics of fun, but it is simultaneously politics . . . in this endlessly and rapidly talkative book, the fun talk is also freedom talk." In a comparable manner, the comic extravagance and musical energy in *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* are not diminished by the anti-war fable of friendship and amity that emerges at the end. Since the march of the warring king's army in *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* is presented in a staccato and comic manner, reminiscent of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, several critics sought a parallel with Nazi Germany—a link that is historically improbable in a story written in 1915 by Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury (Satyajit's grandfather) and perhaps ideologically not very relevant in a film made in 1968. However, the Chaplinesque style may have been used by Ray as a comic device for caricaturing tyranny—as indeed it has been done with parodic self-consciousness by lesser filmmakers since then.<sup>6</sup> In reading *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* or watching *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, children are entertained by the fun element while the adults may find the attempt to decode the allegory more challenging, but the possible simultaneity of the two enterprises gives both the texts their durable richness.

In a disarming interview aired on ABC Radio (Sydney), on 10 December 1995, Salman Rushdie insisted that he was primar-

ily a comic writer, revelling in the absurdities and humorous possibilities in life. His disavowal of a serious agenda behind the rhetoric of comedy may be disingenuous, but perhaps understandable at a moment where the temptation to superimpose Rushdie's biography—which has probably passed into post-modern history by now—seems to override all other considerations in discussing his books. Even though a young poet in one of his earlier novels had proclaimed that the writer's job is "to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" (*The Satanic Verses* 97), we find Rashid, the archetypal artist in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, is happy enough merely to entertain his audience and bring some cheer in their gloomy lives. But he has to do this in his own way and not be dictated to by the government's policy of propagating "up-beat praising sagas" even though he does not make an issue of it as did Baal, the "proud and arrogant" young poet in *The Satanic Verses*, who stiffened at the proposal of writing political verse and retorted it "isn't right for the artist to become the servant of the state" (97).

Rashid is not interested in these larger issues. Once he is connected to the well-spring, the unending stream of stories pour out of him most naturally, hinting at the magic and fluidity of their underwater origin, a source which the reader gradually discovers with Haroun. The fairy tale incandescence with which the literal ocean is turned into a metaphoric sea of the streams of stories is achieved simply by translating from Sanskrit the title of one of the "earliest and largest collection[s] of short stores extant in the world" (Banerji 215), consisting of 18 books of 124 sections or *tarangas* (waves). In this ocean, streams/stories of different colours constantly weave in and out of each other as liquid tapestry:

... as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the ocean of the streams of story was in fact the biggest library of the universe. And because the stories were held here in liquid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and become yet other stories, so that unlike a library of books, the ocean of the streams of story was much more than a storehouse of yarns. It was not dead, but alive. (72)



What may in abstract terms be called the self-renewing attributes of narrative becomes concrete when we find the plenty-maw fish constantly swallowing the water into their many mouths and spewing out new ones, incorporating bits and pieces of the old stories.

Nothing could have been a more vivid metaphor for the playfulness and regenerative power of fancy. At a time when Rushdie in real life was pushed into a realm where the fictive was seen as literal, and all exercises of the imagination were suspect, he needed the relatively safe space of a children's book to make his statement about freedom and laughter, sport and normalcy, magic and reality. But the genre of children's literature is not a subterfuge—it is in fact the most appropriate genre for articulating these ideas because children most readily accept this correlation while some adults like Mr. Sengupta in the *Sad City* do not see the point of stories “that are not even true” (20). If Rushdie knew Bangla, he would have counted the likes of Mr. Sengupta among the “offspring of Ramgarud” (21)—a category that seems to be custom-made for him. Ramgarud is a creature invented by Sukumar Ray (Satyajit's father) in a comic verse that has passed into Bengali folk mythology. The children of Ramgarud are forbidden to smile. Disapproving of all mirth, they live in perpetual terror of the lurking whiffs of laughter which might infect their lungs.<sup>7</sup>

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a story about stories, narrated through the adventures of a boy who undertakes a journey to restore to his father his lost gift of storytelling. The allegorical core of the narrative points to the essential tension between those who celebrate the imagination and those who feel threatened by its energy. Khatam Shud, the arch villain, who looks like Mr. Sengupta, but is more diabolical in his scheme of destroying all stories, is asked by the intrepid Haroun:

- “But why do you hate stories so much? . . . Stories are fun . . .”  
 “The World however is not for Fun,” Khatam Shud replied. “The World is for Controlling.”  
 “Which World?” Haroun made himself ask.  
 “Your world, my world, all worlds,” came the reply.  
 “They are all there 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. And that is the reason why.” (161)

But this antithesis between art and power (be it political or religious) is not in itself entertaining; it has to be enlivened by comic action and by the vivacity and the verbal dexterity of the narrative—punning, word games, and bilingual semantic juggling. Rushdie delights his young readers in the Indian subcontinent (most of whom do not need the glossary at the end) by the sheer inventiveness of the names of characters—Butt and Iff (Butt is a perfectly credible Kashmiri name and Iff can be the abbreviated form of names like Iftikar), Chattergy the King (a common Bengali name which in English rendering gets split into “Chatter” and the respectful suffix “ji”), Princess Baatheat and Prince Bolo. All of them, along with Blabbermouth, are associated with the prolixity of speech eponymously celebrated in the name of the city of their residence—Gup. But the land of Chup on the dark side of Kahani is full of negative names suggesting silence: the field of Baat-mat-karo, the cult-master Bezaban, the arch-villain Khattam-Shud. Because stories are made of words, there is a textuality in the entire fabric of the Guppee society and even in their institution of the Army, where soldiers are called “pages”; they are organized in “chapters” and “volumes,” and wear laminations on their bodies. When the infantry meets under the leadership of General Kitab, there is a loud rustling of “pages” until order is established through proper “pagination,” and “collation.”

Even the topography of the novel is textual, or rather alphabetical—the country being Alifbay (comprising the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet) thus subtly linked with the Xanadu invoked in the dedication where Alph the sacred river ran. Like the river in Xanadu, the places in the land of Alifbay have alphabets for names. The valley of K once had another name which might have been Kache-mer (a place that hides a sea) or Kosh-Mar (nightmare)—transparent variations of the name of the troubled valley of Kashmir, Rushdie’s own land of origin—a place conjured up in the text by a host of not-so-subtle hints; Dull lake (the lake in Kashmir is spelt “Dal”); and the spectacular view of the valley as one came out of the “Tunnel of I which was also known as J” (Jawahar Tunnel at Banihal) with “its fields of gold (which really grew saffron) and its silver mountains (which were

really covered in glistening, pure, white snow and its Dull Lake (which didn't look dull at all)" (39).<sup>8</sup>

Use of verbal and textual tropes for foregrounding the primacy of language in storytelling is to be found in abundance in Rushdie's work. One sustained and extravagant example can be cited from *Midnight's Children* describing the unborn Saleem's growth as a foetus in his mother's womb:

... what had been (in the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say—a book—perhaps an encyclopedia—even a whole language. (115)

It is not only verbal play that delights the young reader, but also the eccentricities of the characters and the amazing exploits of the young hero, the old-fashioned tale of whose barehanded bravery to save his father merges into the apparatus of a science fiction quest in which the secret of moving a planet has to be discovered.

In the mythology of this tale, the earth's second moon, Kahani, has a dark and a bright side. The dark half is silent while the other is bubbling with voices. As in the ghost-dance sequence in *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, black and white get reversed in the land of Chup: "They all had the same strange reversed eyes, with white pupils instead of black ones . . . and blackness where the whites should have been" (148). Haroun, who inadvertently gets involved in the battle between the two, is struck by the number of opposites that confront each other in this war: "Gup is warm and Chup is freezing cold. . . . Guppees love the ocean; Chupwalas try to poison it. Guppees love stories and speech; Chupwalas, it seems, hate these things just as strongly" (125). Evidently, the struggle is also between life and death, between clean air and pure water on the one hand and a polluted landscape and an acid sea on the other. Just as in the Sad City—inhabited by men like Sengupta—"black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news" (15), the Chupwalas were infecting the live ocean with the virus of anti-stories manufactured in the poison factory located in a black ship—trying eventually to plug the well-spring—the original

source of all stories, which lay directly under the ocean bed. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* may be a parable of art and its enemies, but it is ingeniously dovetailed with contemporary ecological concerns linking the restoration of creativity with the saving of the ocean from pollutants.

In *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen*, the evil magician who brewed the drugs to keep the two brother kings apart belonged to the world of fantasy, while Khattam's poison factory in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, with its devices for "converting mechanical energy into electrical energy by means of electromagnetic induction," belongs to the realm of science fiction. Haroun is aided by a bird with a brain-box with a memory-cell and command modules; he has a "bite-a-lite" torch to illuminate his path; but ultimately what saves him, rescues Princess Baatcheat, and purifies the ocean is not technology or science fiction strategies, but a bottle of "wish-water" of pure fairy-tale variety. The power of this magic potion finally could combat all the "immense supercomputers and gigantic gyroscopes that had controlled" the movements of the planet. The wish-water from the magic world finally vanquished the science fiction world because it "possessed a force beyond [their] power to imagine, let alone control" (172).

Once the moon begins to move, the solidity of shadows melts (like "ice-cream left out in the sun" [173] or like butter or cheese softening in the heat) exposing ultimately the insubstantial nature of evil. In the epigraph to *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie had quoted a passage from Daniel Defoe's *The History of the Devil*, which referred to Satan's "empire in the liquid waste or air" without any solid anchoring place on the earth. Haroun's act of will counters the shadowy machinations of Khattam-Shud, who is as dull<sup>9</sup> as he is unreal; and as the moon starts to move, light and dark, silence and speech become dialogic again.

Thanks to Haroun's mediation, Princess Baatcheat is rescued, the ocean is saved, normalcy restored and "peace breaks out" (193). But the fable of the battle is framed by two other stories—of the family and of the state. The novel begins in the Sad City where Haroun lived with his once-happy family, then moves onto the valley of K, where he travelled with his father at the invitation of Mr. Butto, whose unpopular government was trying to use

stories to win the next election. Gup's victory over Chup has to be re-enacted in these two frame-stories also, before the book can have an ending satisfactory to children—who generally do not like loose ends left hanging. An interweaving of the stories is attempted through pairs of identical characters (Sengupta and Khattam Shud, the bus-driver Butt and the Hoopoe bird with a mechanical brain) and a conjunction of incidents (the wishing water that enables Haroun to achieve the double miracle of making Kahani resume its lunar movement and prevent the well-spring of stories from being plugged, in addition to restoring his father's subscription to story-water). The story that had been blocked at the political rally in the valley of K is finally told at the end. Rashid's story that inspires the people to rise against the oppressive ruler is also called "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," demonstrating in a tangible way the thesis that stories can be a cohesive force in constructing a community. So far, the synthesis of the fabular and the political is seamlessly done. But beyond the fabular and political there is a personal story about a family, and Rushdie's real problem must have been the intractability of the family story into this general atmosphere of joy and jubilation.

Salman Rushdie's dedication of this book to his son Zafar in acrostic verse is very much a part of the text, providing clues to the adult reader for reading the story. The dedicatee is about as old as Haroun, and Haroun's father's name is a close anagram of that of Zafar's father. Both the fathers—fictive and real—have suffered the loss of their voice. So far as the biography remains in the public domain, the situation can be allegorized, and the different levels—romance (king/prince/war/rescue of princess), science fiction (AP2C2E, the instrumentation centre) and politics (Snooty Buttoo, his armed bodyguards and his election campaign) be made to merge—creating a delightful fantasy where a young boy, Pinocchio-fashion, is able to rescue his father. But the story of a child's sadness over his parents' broken marriage is too personal to be allegorized and resolved at a stylized level. The Manichaeic binaries of dark and light, speech and voice, do not work at this human level, and therefore the happiness of Haroun's and Rashid's return to their own city acquires a

thicker patina of fantasy than their sojourn in the fabulous land of Kahani. The rains bring joy, Haroun's mother comes back, the house is full of her songs, and all is well again. Thus the flourishing of art is seen as co-terminous with the well-being of life. Misfortunes had started when Haroun's mother's songs and father's stories simultaneously had dried up; felicity returns when both are restored, even though the account of only one restoration is narrated to us. The other cannot be told because it lies outside the realm of children's fiction.

The second line of the acrostic—"All our dream-worlds may come true"—makes space for this elision, deliberately locating the book at the level of a wish-fulfilment fantasy. If in the magic world Haroun can be the saviour of his father through deeds of adventure, in the real world the son can rescue him through the act of reading: "As I wander far from view / Read and bring me home to you" urge the last lines of the dedicatory verse. But the text is not only the site for the mutual reclamation of father and son, it is also a political arena for contesting coercive erasure and an ethical space for asserting the final insubstantiality of evil that only children's stories can make with impunity.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, Rushdie mentions including only one translated piece—an Urdu short story by Sadat Hasan Manto. He does not refer to the fact the Satyajit Ray's story "Big Bill" was originally written in Bangla and published in *Aao Baaro*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1980.
- <sup>2</sup> "Many have complained that *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* starts as fantasy but ends as a fable. In the beginning it is propelled by the logic of absurd or fantastic story-telling, but midway becomes sermonizing and moralizing, splitting the story into two Unlike parts" (*Ray in the Looking Glass* 32).
- <sup>3</sup> Rushdie's latest novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, may be read as a lament on the transformation of a multivalent metropolis called Bombay to a city intolerant of those outside the majority culture.
- <sup>4</sup> The references are to a number of 1950s films—Raj Kapoor's *Boot Polish* and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*, for example. "Nargis-y dam" refers to Nargis's complaint about Ray portraying poverty and not projecting modern India. When the interviewer asked her what was modern India, she replied "Dams." Rushdie quotes this in *Imaginary Homelands* (109). The veiled allusion may also be to Mulk Raj Anand's early novel *Coolie* and social realist fiction of this kind.
- <sup>5</sup> In a yet unpublished conference paper, Judith Plotz argues that Rushdie "consistently (even self-servingly) has positioned himself as an *important* public writer with large political and social ambitions, one who writes of a sphere from which

childhood concerns are largely banished." Only after the fatwa, she observes, Rushdie is marginalized like children and children's writers. "And Rushdie, liberation writer that he is, since the Ayatolla's fatwa has become a pent-up constricted subject, suddenly infantilized, or at any rate, bechilded." Plotz's premise is that children's literature has historically been produced by marginalized, and often disempowered writers, frequently women. This may be true of children's literature in English but, incidentally, the situation is quite different in Bangla, the language in which Satyajit Ray made his films, and built up an enormous reputation as a children's writer. All the major (male) writers including Rabindranath Tagore have written for children. This, however, does not affect the validity of Plotz's argument regarding Rushdie.

- 6 For example, in *Sholay*, a popular Hindi film of the 1970s, a tyrannical prison warden is made to walk like Chaplin's Great Dictator.
- 7 This poem appears in a volume *Aabol Taabol* (Nonsense Verses) by Sukumar Ray, reprinted numerous times in the last six decades.
- 8 It is curious that Aaron Ali, in his erudite paper on the significance of names in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, dwells on the semantic implications of "Kache-mer" and "Kosh-Mar," without mentioning that they play upon the name of a well-known place name on the real map of the Indian subcontinent.
- 9 The dullness of evil is underlined by the repeated linking of Khatam Shud with clerks: "a skinny, scrawny, sniveling, driveling, mingy, tingy, measly, weasely, clerkish sort of a fellow" (190). It may be recalled that his counterpart in the Sad City—Mr. Sengupta "was a clerk in the offices of the city corporation and he was . . . sticky—thin and whiny-voiced and mingy" (19).
- 10 I thank Judith Plotz of George Washington University for letting me read her unpublished paper on *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, T. Vijay Kumar for drawing my attention to Aron Ali's piece, and Anjana Srivastava for useful suggestions.

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