
Checkmate

Linguistic and Literary Play in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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The authors use Noam Chomsky's theories about generative grammar to discuss the notion of linguistic creativity they believe lies at the core of storytelling as Salman Rushdie pictures it in his novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The production of meaning through the use of narrative helps explain the rules of the literary game, presented in part as a fantasy chess match, for the young readers at whom the work is aimed.

*I am a writer of memories, a playful writer, a writer who tries to look at history, a writer with some kind of central linguistic ambition.*¹

—Salman Rushdie

Novelist Salman Rushdie opens *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by dedicating the book to his son, Zafar, who had struck a deal with him while writing *The Satanic Verses*: Zafar had promised that he would allow him to finish the book he was writing “on condition that the next book he wrote was one that he might enjoy reading.”² Recalling the terms of this agreement, Rushdie went back to work in the dispiriting months following the *fatwa* invoked against him by the clergy, when he no longer felt like putting words on paper. “That was something I needed to keep,” he explains, “to write a book for him.”³ Rushdie's dedication, playfully spelling out Zafar's name, introduces his son (and us) to the first game of the book:

*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.*⁴

Rushdie's incantatory poem invites Zafar to pursue him in the hide-and-seek game of reading, in the rhythms of speech and silence, in the narrative play that makes Zafar look in two directions, across and down. Reading his name engages Zafar in the double vision that the novel sustains throughout, making his triumph one with his identity. During a comic interlude in the book, Rushdie inserts his own name as well:

*If you try to rush or zoom
You are sure to meet your doom (31).*

It is "rush-die," and it is funny. By establishing his "central linguistic ambition" in this book in particular, Rushdie initiates Zafar and a wider readership into how language works. How the novel establishes this initiation in terms of linguist Noam Chomsky's theory of language is our first concern. Because linguistic games illuminate literary ones, we then consider how Rushdie links the rules of language to the moves of literature through another form of play in the novel, a game of fantasy chess.

When writing *Haroun*, Salman Rushdie may or may not have been familiar with Chomsky's claim about the innateness of language. The book nevertheless illustrates how humans use their own innate knowledge of language "what we have already got" to create an unlimited number of new sentences "what we haven't got already." First, on the level of style, the novel shows how lexical and syntactic choices create playful narrative effects within the constraints of English grammar. Second, on the level of the philosophical, *Haroun* equates the salvation of *kahani* with the recovery of language and storytelling. To overcome that which is nonverbal (or silent) and hence nonhuman(e), human beings must employ the power of language. Thus, an understanding of our genetic encoding regarding language, Rushdie hints, helps us transcend perilous situations.

But if Chomsky is right and knowledge of language is universal, what is the relationship between the universal and the unique in storytelling?⁵ Again, *Haroun* offers two answers: one implicit in the theme of storytelling as such and one implicit in the novel as an act of storytelling. Both answers can be stated in terms of "linguistic creativity," a principle of human language that distinguishes

it from the iconic sign-language systems found in the animal kingdom like, for example, bee dances. Here, a dialectic exists between the finite and the infinite: by making use of a finite set of elements or words, we can use the grammatical rules of the language system to create and comprehend utterances never uttered or heard before. In other words, while the items stored in our mental lexicons add up to a finite number, the rules allow us to combine them in novel ways, in theory with no limitations on the number, since each rule can be applied to its own output. Haroun's friend the Hoopoe uses the conjunction *but* in this way. Instead of using it once only, his verbal business card is its triple usage: "But but but it is because of Speed" (67). Simply put, instead of using the rule for *but* just once, it is employed recursively.

Linguistic creativity in *Haroun* is at the core of the storytelling act because a story consists of utterances or sentences generated by means of rule application to lexical items. Because stories are made up of sentences, Rashid's storytelling within the novel and Rushdie's novel itself as a story reflect the principle of linguistic creativity. The universality of the principle, however, may make this observation one that just states what is obvious.⁶ But it is not the mere presence of the principle (its presence could not be avoided if the medium is language); it is the dialectic of the finite and the infinite in the novel which by extension of the principle form the core of the narrative act.

To see how this works, it is necessary to examine the status of the narrative act within the novel and to relate it to the psychology of linguistic creativity. The act of narration figures quite prominently as a dominant theme in all of *Haroun*. Iff, the Water Genie, informs Haroun that "even the best storytellers need the Story Waters" (58), or material that can be used to generate stories the way words may be used to generate sentences. How the Story Waters find their way to the storyteller is a P2C2E—a process too complicated to explain. It works without conscious awareness on the part of the storyteller; in fact, an introspective analysis of how it works is impossible. In much the same fashion, although all human beings have knowledge of language and can use it to generate sentences, we do not know how we know how to use language. Chomsky's claim of an innate language faculty rests on the insight that speakers of English, for example, will know the difference in meaning between *Jane painted a picture of herself* and *Jane painted a picture of her*. But the conditions under which *her* and *herself* must be used in English are so highly abstract that it takes special linguistic training to describe the kind of knowledge required. Like the story-

telling in *Haroun*, our ability to generate sentences then, is a P2C2E, a process we know exists, but one we cannot explain through introspection.

It is a P2C2E, however, only in terms of the general awareness of the storyteller or language user. The forces around Khatam-Shud possess explicit knowledge of the process of storytelling. Khatam-Shud, the silent evil threat, knows how to stop well-formed stories by polluting the Story Waters. The fact that he has this knowledge indicates that explanation is possible. The Walrus and the Eggheads guard the P2C2E at the P2C2E house and supervise the process's proper functioning, so they, too, could explain how the process works because of their special expertise.

Explanation, of course, is another key concept of Chomskyan linguistics. Unlike traditional grammar, where we find mere descriptions of verbal arrangements and sentence types, Chomsky's grammar seeks to explain the process of sentence generation as a psychological phenomenon. Language does not exist independently of the human psyche, says Chomsky, hence an adequate description of possible verbal arrangements must also explain the psychology of the arrangement, i.e. the process of generation. In particular, a linguistic theory must explain how we can distinguish those utterances that are well formed in our language (e.g., *the janitor received a present*) from those that are impossible (e.g., **janitor the a received present*). [In Linguistics, an asterisk is used before a word or sentence to denote improper usage—Ed.] This involves explaining how we come to possess such knowledge, even though most of us never receive explicit instruction about possible and impossible sentences.

Our intuitive ability to distinguish the possible from the impossible figures prominently in Chomsky's argument for innate knowledge of language, knowledge that does not have to be acquired but with which we are already equipped. This knowledge constrains the assumptions we have about possible structures. In essence, the grammar we have in our heads never generates impossible structures. When faced with impossible structures, the grammar fails to assign meaning, which is how we recognize impossible structures—they do not make sense.

Well-formedness, then, is not a stylistic value judgment along the lines of "avoid double negatives." Rather, it is our intuitive knowledge that a structure can be generated by the rules of our language. In Chomskyan theory, it is irrelevant whether these are rules of a regional or social dialect or of a language variety considered "proper" by those watching over correct usage. The only

requirement for well-formedness is systematicity, i.e. that the rules operate predictably and systematically within the dialect or language system. In *Haroun*, we find exemplified this value-free notion of well-formedness. There are many instances in which Rushdie uses Hindi- or Urdu-influenced sentence patterns.⁷ These contact-induced structures of language reflect the speech patterns of India, for example in progressive structures such as: “How I have arrived in Gup, you will be wondering” (99). In this context, most British or American English speakers would prefer “you will wonder.” However, all Englishes are equal according to Chomsky’s system-based definition of well-formedness, and Rushdie has chosen contact-induced rules of English to “recreate the flavor of English conversations heard throughout India.”⁸

Intuitions about well-formedness are crucial to the storytelling theme of *Haroun* as well. One of the greatest concerns of the citizens of Gup is that Khatam-Shud will cause the end of storytelling (humanity) by polluting the Ocean of Stories: Iff explains that “obviously if filth gets into the stories, they go wrong” (75). This, too, is not a stylistic value judgment but one of violation of well-formedness within a balanced system. Much like a mental grammar of a given language, the Ocean of Stories and the Story Waters in *Haroun* form a constrained, self-contained system that generates stories in the same dialectic of the finite and the infinite as do human-language grammars. Through the Plentimaw Fishes as catalysts, new stories come into being in a process that joins a limited number of already existing stories (lexical items in Chomsky’s syntax) to an unlimited number of novel combinations (sentences in Chomsky’s syntax). Again, Iff explains the process: “no stories come from nowhere; new stories are born from old—it is the new combinations that make them new” (86). When the story source becomes polluted, the new stories come out wrong, i.e., the generative system cannot ensure well-formedness any longer because it has become unbalanced.

We see, then, that the narrative act in *Haroun* is a generative act like syntactic production in Chomskyan linguistics. Story generation reminds us of the principle of linguistic creativity because it creates something new from something we already have. But is linguistic creativity the same thing as narrative creativity? Certainly, linguistic creativity is an ingredient in the generation of any sentence. But the narrative act goes beyond the universality of linguistic creativity. While all human beings have language and produce sentences employing linguistic creativity, not all human beings engage in composing fictional texts such as *Haroun*. So while we all have language, how we use it

varies considerably. Although creative writing, then, is essentially linked to our language faculty, differences emerge which complete the picture of our humanity. To put it in Chomsky's words, "Human talents vary considerably within a fixed framework that is characteristic of the species and that permits ample scope for creative work."⁹ *Haroun*, as a fictional text, thus constitutes an application of linguistic creativity, but it does so as a reflection of Rushdie's individual talent. Rushdie has chosen to tell a story by making unique linguistic choices within the scope of his talent and motivation but based on the universality of language in our species.

Interestingly, according to Chomsky, the very concept of making choices within the constraints of our biological constitution defines us as "full human beings."¹⁰ To live according to our nature entails a need for freedom, especially freedom of expression, for which language is an important tool. Chomsky comments: "My own feeling is that the fundamental human capacity is the capacity and the need for creative self-expression, for free control of all aspects of one's life and thought. One particularly crucial realization of this capacity is the creative use of language as a free instrument of thought and expression."¹¹ *Haroun*, clearly, is an example of the creative use of language. But in addition, it is also a plea for freedom of thought and expression, a story in which the powers of language defeat the evil of being silenced. Rushdie contends that generating well-formed, unpolluted stories is at the core of a rich, nonsilenced, truly human existence. He has adopted a story format for his contention that we could summarize as a moral.

Haroun thus implements linguistic creativity for the benefit of an overall message defining humanity in terms of freedom from censorship and thought control. Rushdie portrays the central role of language quite directly in opposition to silence, but he also does so indirectly, by way of what might be termed linguistic initiation. The playful use of language throughout the book often requires a context-dependent reading. Where else do we encounter Hoopoes named Butt? Toying with meaning and challenging typical reader expectations, Rushdie guides our insight into ambiguity, a property of human language that Chomsky has discussed extensively in his theory of language acquisition. Explicit awareness of this property allows a storyteller to play with the constraints of ordinary language.

What role does ambiguity have in a theory of language acquisition? Chomsky argues that a theory of acquisition must account for the subtleties of our knowledge of language. Consider the utterance "They painted the furniture

in the office.” Adult native speakers of English know that there are two possible structures for this sentence, one where “the furniture in the office” forms a phrase and one where “the furniture” and “in the office” are structurally separate. Each of these structures has a specific meaning: structural separation means that the office was the locale of the painting, whereas structural togetherness means that it was the furniture in the office which was painted, unbeknownst to the locale of the painting. Since all adult native speakers of English can identify the two meanings, Chomsky contends, they must have structural knowledge that allows them to identify the ambiguity. After all, the sentence is pronounced identically for either meaning.

An adequate linguistic theory of acquisition, then, must explain how we acquire such knowledge. Clearly, there is nothing in what we hear others say that identifies the different structures—the linear sequence of sounds is the same for both meanings. Since most learners of English do not receive explicit instruction on structural ambiguity, Chomsky argues that knowledge of ambiguity must be with us through what is stored in the innate language faculty. In other words, we can assign different structures to the same sequence of sounds because we know about the options language provides for structural organization.

Our language faculty, while guiding our processing of the language we hear spoken in our environment, cannot operate without experience. Language acquisition thus must take place over time and unfold in developmental stages. So although we have innate knowledge, it takes practice to put this knowledge to use. Ambiguity is a case in point, especially since it is not restricted to sentence structure but also operates on the lexical level. During language acquisition, children have to learn that the same word can appear in several different positions, e.g., “I wish you were here” versus “I have a wish.” Linguists concerned with language acquisition argue that we notice ambiguous word-category membership (*wish* as a noun or as a verb) through contextual support. In addition to structural knowledge, we seem to follow operating principles that lead us to assign the meaning that makes the most sense in a given situation.¹²

The process of making sense is what Rushdie plays with in the lexical, syntactic, and discursive devices in *Haroun*. On the lexical level, he frequently uses words outside the ordinary context in which we have come to expect them, and the central device employed to achieve this effect is ambiguity. Iff and Butt are characters in the story, but they are also conjunctions that have shifted word category and become nouns, and it is through the narrative context that we are able to make sense of this shift engineered by Rushdie. The names in general

illustrate ambiguity in terms of intertextual references, some of which Rushdie points to explicitly: *Khattam-Shud*, for example, has an entry in the book's appendix as meaning "completely finished," (218) a term one would not know without this listing. In numerous other instances, Rushdie does not make explicit the intertextual layers of word meaning but leaves it to the reader's knowledge of the world to notice them.¹³

Making the familiar strange by means of playing with expectations permeates the book also on the syntactic and textual, i.e., narrative, levels. The characters in the novel each come to life in their idiosyncrasies, which illustrate the richness of the structural options offered by language. In Miss Oneeta's syntax, for example, after her husband has run off with Haroun's mother, we find a recursive rule application: "And no need to worry about me, sitting sitting all by myself" (25). The modeling of syntactic principles in terms of rich syntactic organization goes hand in hand with another strategy of linguistic initiation employed by Rushdie, that of explicit commentary. Snooty Mr. Buttoo's invitation to the houseboat comes with Haroun's perception of him: "He sounded polite, but he was really being insulting, Haroun understood" (42).

The strategies of linguistic initiation employed in *Haroun* support a reading of the novel as an in-depth introduction to language. Explicit guidance is offered in the wordplay on Kashmir and nightmare: "'Kache-Mer' can be translated as 'the place that hides a Sea.' But 'Kosh-Mar' . . . was the word for 'nightmare'" (40). This constitutes metalinguistic commentary. Given that *Haroun* is a children's book with a dedication to Rushdie's son, this type of pedagogical stance would appear an appropriate and skillfully crafted parallel to the moral lessons the book offers. As we have seen, both on the moral and linguistic plane, language takes center stage.

Without a doubt, the element of linguistic initiation in *Haroun* connects with Chomsky's idea of innateness. What requires explicit commentary in the novel invariably involves a contextual component, i.e., commentary referring to word meaning or discourse implications. Strikingly absent are metalinguistic statements about sentence structure. No commentary seems necessary about that which is innate—the grammar in the language faculty.

One can find support for a reading of *Haroun* as a book on language acquisition and the nature of language in general in the thematic organization of the novel, in its dichotomy between silence/absence of language and language/storytelling. Recall that *Khattam-Shud* has enforced silence, and, in order for a dramatic turn for the better to occur, information about the land of Chup

becomes essential. This information arrives in the encounter with Mudra, the Shadow Warrior. Mudra speaks the Language of Gesture, and as Haroun watches him, “the dance of the Shadow Warrior showed him that silence had its own grace and beauty” (125). This assessment, another instance of explicit metalinguistic commentary, highlights the importance of a linguistic encounter where the signs are not accoustic but gestural.

With this move, Rushdie illustrates another tenet of Chomskyan theory: “All languages are equal.” Whether signed or spoken, human languages share a basic building plan which is part of our language faculty. We acquire individual languages by adjusting the “blueprint” from the language faculty to the languages we hear in our environment. Principles such as linguistic creativity and system character are common to all languages, so that American Sign Language, Navajo, or English show variation only within the range of constraints specified in the language faculty. Hence, when we judge language stylistically, we are making a value judgment about how language is put to use but not one about the general nature of language.¹⁴ The subjectivity of such judgments constitutes another lesson in *Haroun*: Silence serves the same communicative ends as spoken language and has “its own grace and beauty, (just as speech could be graceless and ugly)” (125). Evil in the novel resides in the denial of freedom of expression, not silence itself. Language figures prominently as a resource, and it is contextualized language use and our subjective choices that bring about humane or inhumane effects.

Subjectivity on the level of linguistic choices has a parallel in another general organizing principle of human language systems—the arbitrariness of the relationship between sound and meaning in a linguistic sign (word).¹⁵ Arbitrariness means that there is no necessary motivated relationship between how a word sounds and the meaning it encodes. A table, for example, is a *mesa* in Spanish and a *Tisch* in German. If the nature of the object were to motivate the way its spoken form sounded, then there should be no such cross-linguistic variation in naming—it would not sound differently in different languages.

Haroun has many illustrations of arbitrariness that complete this initiation into the nature of language. Place names are really only letters of the alphabet and hence not really names at all in ordinary contexts: “The beauty of the road from the Town of G to the Valley of K, a road that climbed like a serpent through the Pass of H towards the Tunnel of I (which was also known as J)” (33). Confusion ensues when the same letter is assigned to various places, an

apt illustration of homophony: “This meant that people’s letters were always going to the wrong address” (24).

To put it differently: arbitrariness causes ambiguity. If different places have the same name, only context can clarify to which specific place we are referring. A case in point is the name *kahani*, located at the very core of the narrative organization of *Haroun*. *Kahani* is the city where the Eggheads work on the proper functioning of the P2C2E, essential to well-formed stories. As the plot draws to its happy ending, Rushdie reveals the other meaning of *kahani*, which the inhabitants of the city recall as a consequence of the salvation of language and of storytelling: “‘Kahani,’ said the policeman brightly as he floated off down the flooded street. ‘Isn’t it a beautiful name for a city? It means “story,” you know’” (209). In naming the city “Story,” Rushdie has exploited the arbitrary nature of the sound-meaning relationship in words to the effect of creating convergence between the story plot (place name *kahani*) and the morale of the story (*kahani* = story). This is one of the linguistic strategies the author obviously does not want us to miss: the story meaning of *kahani* also has an entry in the appendix (218).

The example of *kahani*, again, illustrates the parallel strands of linguistic initiation and ethical instruction in *Haroun*. Rushdie knows how to use ordinary language with a little twist, all within the system of English and its given constraints, to play with reader expectations and generate new meaning. In this sense, Rushdie’s writing both exemplifies and illustrates the Chomskyan view of language as a psychological fact. Chomsky offers us a description and an explanation of the knowledge involved in processing language. Rushdie uses language in novel ways within the boundaries of this knowledge. In addition, he also guides us toward a more explicit understanding of the phenomenon of language.

Interestingly, Rushdie’s portrayal of story generation mirrors Chomsky’s definition of syntactic structures. Just as each sentence is rooted in our language faculty and is thus an example of the species-defining element language, “each individual story stream not only constitutes a part of the whole but also contains the whole Ocean, by virtue of sharing a prime origin” (123). If the language system is part of our living organism (as Chomsky argues), then stories, too, can have a biological reality: Rushdie has Haroun observe that “the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive” (72).

Language defines us as human beings, and Chomsky's theory explains how we know what we know. Rushdie's *Haroun* does the same in its fictional depiction of story generation. Stories, language, and humanity are inextricably linked, both in the plot and in the moral of *Haroun*. And the universality of language, central in Chomskyan linguistics, parallels the universality of story, supporting a reading of the book as an attempt "to articulate a universalist aesthetics firmly anchored in the inalienable human desire for self-expression."¹⁶

The moment when linguistic competence turns into literary play occurs as a chess game.¹⁷ We have already discussed this moment in the novel as an act of metalinguistic commentary, and we now return to it because it gestures toward the game of the novel itself:

"Do those names mean anything?" Haroun asked.

"All names mean something," Rashid replied. "Let me think. Yes, that was it. 'Kache-Mer' can be translated as 'the place that hides a Sea.' But 'Kosh-Mar' is a ruder name."

"Come on," urged Haroun. "You can't stop there."

"In the old tongue," Rashid admitted, "it was the word for 'nightmare'" (40).

When Haroun and his friends Iff and Butt first arrive in Kahani, Haroun has his first nightmare, one beginning on a chessboard. This nightmare has its double when Haroun returns to the Old Zone of Kahani to confront Khatam-Shud directly and discovers his ship to have "gigantic black tanks or cauldrons . . . arranged in a sort of chequerboard pattern on the deck" (151). Chess, which originated in India, is employed in each case to represent the contest between light and darkness, story and its obliteration. Significantly, chess was banned in Iran from 1980–1990, its suppression overlapping with Rushdie's own silencing. Perhaps because George Gossip (an Englishman) codified the rules of chess in a series of books on the subject, Rushdie humorously assigns his name to the people of Gup, the realm of Gossip, fibs, and talk. Mastery and control are too important to the archenemy of talk, Khatam-Shud, to remain entirely unspoken, however, and Haroun prods him into language to uncover his secrets, cleverly undoing his plans through perfectly orchestrated counter-moves that amount to checkmate. In this novel, the rules of language and the strands of story become infinitely generative and useful when they are no longer identified with "processes too complicated to explain."

One critic aptly notes: “The creative imagination must express itself by storytelling, a process explicitly privileged, as well as allegorically enacted in *Haroun*.”¹⁸ The contest between Gup and Chup, the speakers who can argue their position (in book, pamphlet, and narrative form), and the oppressed speakers who cannot, are here represented in terms of white and black moves, reminding us, even in their interplay, of the materiality of print and of the page we are reading. In Rushdie’s description, however, they are reversed and inverted like film: the black is not print but negative space, while the white of the page is, quite literally, light.

In the novel, every piece, every name, is doubled, establishing a multilayered chessboard of possibilities between the moon, Kahani, and Earth. The two places represent the imaginative and the actual, the fictive story and real-life experience, the process of dreaming and the moment of waking up. Sometimes these doubles are bound to one another as substance is bound to shadow. This is true of Mudra, the Shadow Warrior on the moon, Kahani, and the cult master’s followers generally. Sometimes, substance and shadow are separated, as is Khattum-Shud, who can both divide himself on Kahani, and double for Mr. Sengupta on earth. Sometimes names split as well into mirrored identities in each world. Butt appears as the friendly Mail Coach Driver on earth who feels the needs of others and intuitively tries to meet those needs, even as Butt, the technologically adept Hoopoe bird, moves between Kahani and earth, between what is thought (in language) and what is spoken (in words), to become infinitely responsive. Intuition in one place becomes the ability to hear the unspoken in another. Even Rashid has two names. He is both The Shah of Blah and the Ocean of Notions. In entitling his opening chapter, “The Shah of Blah,” however, Rushdie overrides the positive identity of Rashid, naming him the Shah of Blah in nearly every other instance in the novel, except, of course, when Rashid refers to himself. Rushdie thus suggests that Rashid has already lost most of his connection to the Ocean of Story and its notions from the moment the novel begins. Fortunately, Rashid is bound just as surely to his son Haroun, and their paired identity in the index of names and in the doubled plot where each stands in for the other ensures their eventual triumph and salvation.

Haroun, from the very beginning, wants to understand the rules of the literary game in order to play, his repeated “buts” and “ifs” indicating that his intellectual passion cannot be thwarted. But Rashid, at least in the interaction we see, resists this interchange. He won’t answer any of his son’s questions truthfully and seems incapable of articulating the uses of story. Both of these deficiencies

place him at a severe disadvantage, perhaps best indicated in his inarticulate croak, “Ark,” when he comes to a sputtering end of words. His “processes too complicated to explain” are a storyteller’s means of concealing his art, but the phrase shuts down both conversation and thought, becoming a means of asserting control and enforcing silence in a move worthy of his enemy.¹⁹ One can too easily hide behind such a phrase. Having no real passion for the usefulness of narrative, moreover, allows Rashid to be appropriated to the uses of others and corrupted by the money he takes, serving political purposes with stories that are little short of propaganda when thus employed. In storytelling he unthinkingly both supports the status quo and is supported by it.

But if Rashid is split between two identities, so too is Haroun, both as a storyteller and as a son. Given the opportunity to wish a happy ending near the beginning of the story and thus to participate in narrating its conclusion, he cannot do so because he cannot make up his mind between two deeply ambivalent desires, two opposed and less-than-happy endings. The separation of his mother and his father divides him, making his lack of concentration one with his narrative frustration: “If he tried to concentrate on his father’s lost storytelling powers and his cancelled Story Water subscription, then the image of his mother insisted on taking over, and he began to wish for her return instead, for everything to be as it had been before . . . and then his father’s face returned, . . .” (70). Narrative must be suspended here, quite literally, because its two potential resolutions operate at cross-purposes, creating ambivalence in Haroun and disallowing any possibility that the story can be resolved—yet.

Butt and Iff seek to cheer Haroun up by providing him with a story. This has always been Rashid’s solution to sadness—to suspend it by providing escapist fantasies—and it is theirs too. It is a reason to tell stories, but it is not Rushdie’s answer, not even in this fairy tale for his son. If it were, the story could end here, a sad story neatly resolved by a happy story. But what we are given is a story as chess match, a story in which all the moves turn an unexpected way, a story where standard narrative rules no longer apply. Rushdie’s actual solution—his real sense of why stories are useful—takes place in this game of fantasy chess that is also a nightmare. This is the precise moment in which Rushdie’s central linguistic ambition becomes one with his literary concerns.²⁰

The narrator tells us that this is “Princess Rescue Story Number S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r) xi”—one different from Grimm’s version known as “Rapunzel”; the coded number suggests that, like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, it is a spin-off of the *1001 Nights*, one of the many stories framed by Scherherazade’s

recognition that storytelling creatively suspends death as a chess match of the highest order.²¹

The story begins:

He found himself standing in a landscape that looked exactly like a giant chessboard. On every black square there was a monster: there were two-tongued snakes and lions with three rows of teeth, and four-headed dogs and five-headed demon kings and so on. He was, so to speak, looking out through the eyes of the young hero of the story. It was like being in the passenger seat of an automobile; all he had to do was watch, while the hero dispatched one monster after another and advanced up the chessboard towards the white stone tower at the end. At the top of the tower was (what else but) a single window, out of which there gazed (who else but) a captive princess. . . . Haroun as the hero was required to climb up the outside of the tower by clinging to the cracks between the stones with his bare feet (73).

Rushdie creates this Princess Rescue Story as a game of chess between the hero (headed for the white tower) and the black monsters who grow numerically more challenging as he continues; but the hero passively observes himself, split off from his own identity and his own activity, as if “in the passenger seat of an automobile.” As a passenger, the hero loses track of who he is and of the vehicle (as metaphor) too, noticing, just as passively that his hands are beginning to change: “When new limbs began to push themselves out from his sides, he understood that he was somehow turning into a monster just like those he had been killing; and above him the princess caught at her throat and cried out in a faint voice: ‘Eek, my dearest, you have into a large spider turned.’” (74)

The nightmare reveals that the young hero (as storyteller) cannot engage in rescue if, in his battle to rescue the princess, he has lost track of who he is and what he has become. He is now “a monster like those he had been killing.” Even as the princess calls him “my dearest,” then, her final word, “turned,” emphasizes through the inflections of dialect the active side of the hero’s transformation, the very agency he has denied himself. Coming immediately after Haroun’s inability to choose between his mother and his father, this nightmare narrative (with typical dream logic) points to the source of the problem; the love interest in the story sees, all too clearly, what has happened to the hero and rescues herself by bringing about his fall.

By breaking the rules of standard “Princess Rescue Stories,” Rushdie’s nightmare creation of checkmate in which the hero becomes a villain to awake as he falls reflects on the fact that the hero of this story has already lost his identity and agency—his ability to be useful. He is not dispatched by the forces of evil at all but rather by the princess. (We are reminded that Rashid loses his voice, not because of political oppression but because of Soraya’s departure and his empty heart). The “pollution,” this nightmare suggests, resides within the hero as storyteller as well as within the story waters. Good and Evil, White and Black, cannot be so easily separated, whether it involves individuals or cities or cultures. It is a much more complicated process, but perhaps not too complicated to explain.

In this novel, Haroun finds his way by going to “the place that hides the sea,” in the Old Zone of Kahani where he must come to terms with the reasons for his father’s lost voice. That place, is of course, a second chessboard, an enormous ship with a seemingly infinite deck (150–51). When Haroun sees it, he replicates his father’s moment of silence—but with a difference. “‘Ark,’ he croaked, pointing to the dark ship, ‘Ark, Ark.’” Haroun has filled his father’s inarticulate stuttering with meaning by naming the place that has brought about his silence and pointing to the thing itself, the place that hides the sea of stories. He can reverse that silence by confronting Khattam-Shud directly, by listening to his processes in order to reverse them.

Thus on Khattam-Shud’s ark, Haroun continues to spy, performing the role of a critic as well as a storyteller. He listens carefully to Khattam-Shud’s boring explanation of processes he calls far too complicated to describe, processes that have remained concealed and mystified by Rashid, Khattam-Shud, and the Eggheads (in the P2C2E house) because they have each resisted (in different ways) bringing the purpose of storytelling to light or affirming the uses of language. Now, Khattam-Shud tells Haroun, “you must see what you came to see. Though obviously you will not be able to make your report” (156). But Haroun (unlike his father) has no intention of returning to make a report. He will be more than a reporter, more than a critic, actively doing something about what he discovers—and immediately. Haroun thus listens in on Khattam-Shud’s determination to end both the words we speak and the stories we tell: “He went on with his terrifying explanations: ‘Now the fact is that I personally have discovered that for every story there is an anti-story. I mean that every story—and so every Stream of Story—has a shadow self, and if you pour this anti-story into the story, the two cancel each other out. And bingo! End of story’” (156).

Khattam-Shud wins, Haroun now realizes, by stripping language and story of its real use—of its power to illuminate what cannot be spoken or explained in any other way, the shadow side of identity, the repressions and denials we cannot admit, the things we cannot see, the words we dare not say, that which is all too present in ourselves or in our culture. Interestingly, Khattam-Shud makes the destruction of stories about violations of aesthetics rather than about repression and psychological blindness, saying that one ruins a love story by making it a story of hate and an adventure story by making it boring. Perhaps even Khattam-Shud does not understand what he is really doing. The shadows that Rushdie highlights in the course of this novel are never so easily or clearly defined.

After prodding Khattam-Shud to explain the shadow-self in language and story, Haroun uses Iff's Bite-a-Lite to silently fill the dark ship with light. The ark, we are now told, "seemed to quiver for a moment, to become a little less solid, a little more shadowy," (166) and Haroun realizes, in a moment of fuller illumination: "If only the sun would come out, they'd all melt away, they'd become flat and shapeless, like the shadows they really are" (166). Moments later, he swims toward the Source beneath the shadow ark and receives more illumination still: "There were so many Streams of Story, of so many different colours, all pouring out of the Source at once, that it looked like a huge underwater fountain of shining white light. In that moment Haroun understood that if he could prevent the Source from being Plugged, everything would eventually be all right again. The renewed Streams of Story would cleanse the polluted waters, and Khattam-Shud's plan would fail" (170–71).

Beneath the shadow ark bent on destruction, Haroun finds a fountain of light that will never end if its springs are allowed to flow freely. Now his hand brushes his nightshirt pocket and encounters the Wishwater about which he has forgotten. He can affect change at this point because he can now will a difference. He understands the light borne of contesting the darkness directly, a light that is present in language and narrative both. He wishes for an end to the pre-established constraints on light and darkness through a turn of the moon, Kahani, a turn in language as well as Story that provides full access to the sun and so offers light to all:

"I wish this Moon, Kahani, to turn, so that it's no longer half in light and half in darkness . . . I wish it to turn, this very instant, in such a way that the sun shines down on the Dark Ship, the full, hot, noonday sun." (171)

Haroun's act of consciousness, given verbal form, is too powerful for the Eggheads who have preserved their security by establishing "walls" for light as well as language. We are accordingly told:

If Haroun had been in Gup City at that moment, he might have enjoyed witnessing the consternation of the Eggheads in P2C2E House. The immense super-computers and gigantic gyroscopes that had controlled the behaviour of the Moon, in order to preserve the Eternal Daylight and the Perpetual Darkness and the Twilight Strip in between, had simply gone crazy, and finally blown themselves apart. "Whatever is doing this," the Eggheads reported to the Walrus in consternation, "possesses a force beyond our power to imagine, let alone control." (172)

Haroun's will to see verbally releases those who have hoarded the light from the very security that has almost destroyed them. The Walrus does not seem to see what has caused all of the trouble, since he promises to secure language and story through mystification (yet again) if Haroun requests it. Haroun has "the right to ask of us whatever favour you desire, and we promise to grant it if we possibly can, even if it means inventing a brand-new Process too Complicated To Explain" (200). As Haroun and the Walrus quibble over the artificiality of happy endings, Haroun eventually does verbalize his wish: "You said it could be a big wish, and so it is. I come from a sad city, a city so sad that it has forgotten its name. I want you to provide a happy ending, not just for my adventure, but for the whole sad city as well" (202).

Haroun looks beyond himself to the city in which he lives, a city that has lost its memory and its identity because it has lost its way with words. He wills a happy ending for the sad city because he can now see. Having overcome the passivity of the nightmare chess match, he acts powerfully on the checkered ark to restore the processes he now understands and can thus put in play. Such processes are basic to linguistic and creative renewal as they uncover the infinite play of language as well as story. They thus make us more conscious of the interdependence of shadow and light at work in print and film, more attune to the silent beauty of gesture and to the rhythmical pleasure of silly songs. Ultimately, such processes allow us to recognize that we reach our fullest potential only when we are willing to share all goods equally, both within our families and in the wider world.

NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, ed. Michael R. Reder (2000), 192–93.
2. James Fenton, “Keeping up with Salman Rushdie,” *New York Review of Books* 38 (March 28, 1991), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/3312>
3. *Ibid.*
4. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), dedicatory page. All references to the Rushdie text cite this Penguin paperback edition, and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the article.
5. See Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use* (1986).
6. See Christiane Bongartz and Tony Jackson, “A Furious Sleep: Chomsky’s Linguistic Theory and Literary Criticism,” in *Literature and Linguistics: Approaches, Models, Applications: Studies in Honor of Jon Erickson*, ed. Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nunning, and Vera Nunning (2002), 37–46.
7. Suchismita Sen, “Memory, Language, and Society in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*,” *Contemporary Literature* 36 (1995): 654–75.
8. *Ibid.*, 668–69.
9. Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck (1987), 198–99.
10. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (1988), cited in Christiane M. Bongartz and Esther Richey, “‘Kahani Means Story and City’: Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and the Linguistics of Narrative in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*,” *Southern Journal of Linguistics* 25 (2003): 99.
11. *Ibid.*, 144.
12. William H. Calvin and Derek Bickerton, *Lingua ex Machina: Reconciling Darwin and Chomsky with the Human Brain* (2000), cited in Bongartz and Richey, “‘Kahani Means Story and City,’” *Southern Journal of Linguistics* 25 (2003): 101.
13. Aron A. Aji discusses naming throughout *Haroun*. See his “‘All Names Mean Something’: Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun* and the Legacy of Islam,” *Contemporary Literature* 36 (1995): 103–29.
14. Ajanta Dutt, *Syntax Variations in Anglophone Novels: Appropriation or Assimilation?* Summary Papers from the 29th International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language Conference, York, England, April 9–12, 1995.
15. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (1959).
16. Aji, “‘All Names Mean Something,’” 127.
17. Salman Rushdie develops the motif of chess more completely in his short story “The Courter,” found in his collection of short stories, *East, West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994). In this story, he writes an homage to a champion chess player from Poland who played chess on lunch breaks with Rushdie and others. Reduced to poverty, this man supported himself as a janitor in England. Notes Rushdie, “The only language he had left was chess.” http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre_2006/rushdiereaders.htm. In

the short story, "Mercir," a Grand Master who has suffered a stroke can barely speak, and chess becomes his new language; it is even how he makes love: "He taught her with great patience, showing-not-telling, repeating openings and combinations and endgame techniques over and over until she began to see the meaning in the patterns. When they played, he handicapped himself, he told her her best moves and demonstrated their consequences, drawing her, step by step, into the infinite possibilities of the game." See *East, West*, 195.

18. Patricia Merivale, "The Telling of Lies and 'the Sea of Stories': 'Haroun,' 'Pinocchio' and the Postcolonial Artist Parable," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 28 (1997): 199.

19. Critics have accused the novel of being naïve and idealistic when, in fact, the novel moves to a psychoanalytic level operating far beyond the simple binaries of "good" and "evil" assigned to the contest between the storyteller and his censors: corruption can operate within the storyteller, Rushdie suggests, if he does not fully understand his own moves.

20. Both Suchismita Sen and Andrew S. Teverson view this episode as a moment when Rushdie playfully acknowledges those folklorists who number tales and codify them. See Sen, "Memory, Language, and Society," 670, and Andrew S. Teverson, "Fairy Tale Politics: Free Speech and Multiculturalism in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 47 (2001): 455–57. Teverson highlights the way folktales blend and merge with other tales; they are not separated by "walls of force" but inextricably intertwined as tales from one culture merge and blend with tales from another. Teverson thus identifies an emphasis on multiculturalism within *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (455).

21. Teverson perceptively identifies in Rushdie's playful code the number 1001, the name Scherherazade, and the Brothers' Grimm, all of whom offer versions of "the princess rescue story" (456).