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An ecocritical reading of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, published in 1990, is often seen as a story about censorship and free speech. However, it also has an important ecological aspect that's not often discussed. The "Sea of Stories", which is Rushdie's main metaphor, represents more than just imagination; it is a delicate ecosystem, at risk from Khattam-Shud's pollutants. By looking at the novel through the lens of ecocriticism, this paper shows how Rushdie's tale connects to today's ecological concerns. It also illustrates how his imaginative, whimsical story reclaims the ocean as a symbol of renewal, diversity, and resistance to oppressive power. The Sea of Stories serves as an environmental symbol that reflects both ecological decline and cultural suppression during Rushdie's own historical period, particularly after *The Satanic Verses* controversy and the fatwa that silenced him. The novel presents storytelling as a regenerative process of ecology that defies silence, control, and monoculture.

Keywords: ecocriticism, censorship, stewardship, pollution, silence, fatwa

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* may seem like a lighthearted children's story at first, but beneath its playful surface, it holds a strong political and ecological message. Rushdie wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* for his son Zafar, who asked him to create a story for kids. The book was published in 1990, two years after *The Satanic Verses*. The backlash from that book forced Rushdie to spend a long time away from his son during the period of isolation following the 1989 fatwa. The focus on the father-son bond, along with themes of censorship and silencing, suggests a link between the environmental themes in the story and Rushdie's own experiences. Haroun

brings to life the struggle for creativity and expression in a world stifled by rigid ideologies. The novel's ecological images, such as the polluted Sea of Stories, the dying Wellspring, and the living Plentimaw fish, turn storytelling into an ecological act, mirroring the connections between natural systems. The setting of Haroun's city portrays a place filled with despair. This novel illustrates how human experiences intertwine with the natural world, emphasizing that both are dependent on each other.

Ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature and culture that looks at how humans relate to the natural world. It began in the 1990s in response to rising concerns about environmental damage and the effects of human actions on the planet. Ecocritics explore how literature and other cultural forms depict and engage with nature. They want to see how environmental issues appear in literary works and how literature can raise awareness of these concerns while promoting sustainability and ecological understanding. As Cheryll Glotfelty explains in her introduction to the 1996 book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ecocriticism studies the connection between literature and the physical environment. Through this lens, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* can be viewed as a text that reimagines narrative diversity as ecological diversity and censorship as ecological destruction. The novel suggests that the life of stories relies, like the earth, on the free exchange of diverse elements. The attempt to silence or control these elements is similar to environmental pollution. This theme resonates both politically and personally, given Rushdie's own experiences with silencing and exile.

In Greg Garrard's view, ecocriticism focuses on the environmental crisis. It considers the causes of the crisis, its effects on other organisms, and the measures humans take to address it. In his 2004 book, *Ecocriticism*, Garrard builds on Glotfelty's ideas. He calls ecological criticism a political mode of analysis, much like feminism and Marxism, because "ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda" (Gerrard 3). Pollution is a crucial issue since it harms essential elements needed for life on earth, like water and air. The novel vividly describes pollution in water and the streams of stories, affecting the entire narrative as it remains the primary source of all creative imagination.

The physical environment where a story unfolds can greatly impact the narrative. An ecocritical approach can examine how the natural setting affects the characters, plot, and themes. This includes not just the beauty or wildness of landscapes, but also places altered by human activity, urban areas, and even dystopian visions of future Earth. Even though ecocriticism focuses on nature and the environment, it can still fall into the trap of anthropocentrism. This means it often gives priority to human viewpoints and values over those of the non-human world. In the novel, the Chupwalas or the land of silence represent this anthropocentric approach as they attempt to silence the Sea of Stories and put a stop to all creative efforts. One can also compare this to Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." This type of violence happens gradually and out of sight; it involves delayed destruction that spreads over time and space. Khatam-shud's attempts to poison the Sea of Stories to slowly erase the presence of stories in the world reflect this notion of slow violence. Iff makes this clear when he says, "We have ignored it for too long, and now we pay the price" (Rushdie 87).

Discussion

At the heart of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is the bright image of the Ocean, a vast, swirling body of stories and life. "It was made up of a thousand thousand different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity" (Rushdie 72). This depicts the Sea not just as a metaphor for imagination but as a living ecosystem that supports the world's cultural and creative life. The Sea of Stories becomes a symbolic biosphere; each stream represents an individual story, adding to the diversity of the imaginative world. Just as ecosystems rely on the variety and interaction of species, the narrative world also depends on the weaving of stories. The "thousand thousand currents" highlight the ecological idea of interdependence, showing that no story, like no species, exists alone.

Moreover, the Sea of Stories illustrates the processes of recycling and renewal, which are crucial for ecological sustainability. The Plentimaw Fish, described as "always speaking in rhyme," swallow stories, and "when they spew the stories out they are not old tales but new ones" (Rushdie 86). Their role is similar to that of decomposers in an ecosystem; they break down, change, and renew organic material. As Cheryll Glotfelty points out,

ecocriticism highlights that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). The Plentimaw Fish embody this mutual influence: human storytelling supports the Sea, and the Sea, in turn, feeds imagination. Rushdie’s symbolic ecology merges narrative, creativity, and natural process into one cohesive system.

Rushdie’s strongest ecological warning appears in his portrayal of pollution. At the start of the novel, he establishes the setting and the idea of pollution. He writes about Alifbay as “a sad city.” He states, “In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I’m told) sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news” (Rushdie 15). The images of “black smoke” and “factories” convey a sense of pollution in the city. The antagonist, Khattam-Shud, whose name means “completely finished,” is described as “the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself” (Rushdie 39). His goal to poison the Ocean so that every story ever told will be ruined turns censorship into an environmental disaster. Through this image, Rushdie connects political repression with ecological decline. He equates the stifling of creative freedom with the poisoning of natural systems. Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism*, identifies pollution as a central theme in environmental literature, describing it as “both a material and a symbolic form of contamination” (Garrard 16). In Rushdie’s story, the poisoning of the Sea is both literal and deeply symbolic; it represents the corruption of public discourse, imagination, and cultural diversity under authoritarian control. The Wellspring, the source of all stories, is described as both blocked and poisoned. This image of blockage evokes environmental and linguistic suffocation, a halt to flow and renewal. This suffocation parallels Rushdie’s own experience under the fatwa, during which his voice was silenced. In many of his writings, he recalls this period as a form of ‘asphyxiation.’ The connection between pollution and censorship is not just metaphorical but also personal; Rushdie’s environment was made toxic by political intolerance. The poisoned Sea reflects his own situation, a world where communication, exchange, and creativity are threatened. Rushdie highlights his struggle as a storyteller, where non-conformist voices are dismissed. He also uses the concept of pollution to critique the literary world of his time. He subtly addresses the politicization of stories and language.

Khattam-Shud's tactics, such as sealing the Wellspring, creating toxins, and forbidding stories, align with the imagery of industrial destruction. Rushdie describes the black shadow factories where poisons are created, evoking pollution from industrialization. As a result, "nature is no longer a central presence, no longer the life-sustaining air" (Glotfelty and Fromm 201). Garrard's observation that industrial modernity often makes pollution invisible until it is too late applies to Khattam-Shud's quiet poisoning of the Sea. The antagonist's attack on the environment mirrors how oppressive systems erode language and thought until all vitality is lost. Khattam-Shud's dialogue reflects the ongoing totalitarianism in language: "The world, however, is not for fun. The world is for controlling" (Rushdie 161). Thus, the ecological metaphor reaches beyond the natural world. It includes the politics of narrative control, positioning Rushdie's art as resistance to both environmental and ideological decline. The novel suggests that the cure for pollution lies in reviving the flow of stories, much like restoring a polluted river.

If Khattam-Shud represents pollution and domination, the characters who care for the Sea represent ecological stewardship. Mali, the Floating Gardener, symbolizes this ethic, and his earthly counterpart is the Floating Garden that Haroun sees on the Dull Lake (Rushdie 43). His body is made of plants, showing the harmony between human and nonhuman life. Mali's job is to untangle the Streams of Story, "Untwisting twisted Story Streams. Also unlooping same. Weeding. In short: Gardening" (Rushdie 83). Mali's quiet, ongoing work contrasts with Khattam-Shud's violent mechanization. His care for the Sea reflects a form of ecological action that values renewal, patience, and connection. Following the pattern set by Butt and Mali, Bagha and Goopy also cross the line between human and nonhuman. They are monogamous, "faithful partners for life" (Rushdie 85). They are very talkative and communicate only in rhyming couplets. Their Earthly equivalent is more complex than Mali's. Bagha and Goopy's symbolic role and environmental message are clearer. They depend on the Sea of Stories for survival. This talkative pair of fish represents real creatures living in the Earth's oceans. Through their portrayal, Rushdie illustrates the impact that ocean pollution can have on sea life. On first meeting Haroun, they tell him of the bad taste caused by all the "dirt" in the Sea, exclaiming,

“All this bad taste! Too much diet!
Swimming in the Ocean starts to hurt!
Call me Bagha! This is Goopy!
Excuse our rudeness! We feel droopy!
Eyes feel rheumy! Throat feels sore!

When we’re better, we’ll talk more “(Rushdie 85).

Later, when they reach the source of the pollution, they find they cannot proceed because of the unbearable pain caused by the acidic contaminants. Because they can speak and describe how the pollution affects them, the reader can sympathize with them more easily than with the silent animals in reality. Similarly, Iff the Water Genie uses his “Disconnecting Tool” to control the flow of story-water between worlds. This comparison highlights Rushdie’s views on ecology- language, like water, sustains life but needs careful management to stay pure. Iff’s role is similar to that of environmental regulators who ensure that shared resources remain untainted. In the novel, stewardship involves both ecological and cultural aspects. It calls for protecting the Sea’s biodiversity and preserving freedom of language and imagination. Rushdie suggests that caring for stories is the same as caring for life itself, as both rely on interdependence, diversity, and renewal.

The most notable ecological aspect of Rushdie’s Sea is its variety of stories. The narrator notes, “Different parts of the ocean contained different sorts of stories, and 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 in the universe” (Rushdie 72). This description reflects biological evolution and celebrates cultural diversity, the blending of myths, languages, and traditions. Haroun brings this idea to life by showing the Sea as a living archive of global storytelling traditions, from the *Arabian Nights* to modern science fiction. The mixing of these currents creates new narrative forms, just as genetic variation leads to resilience in ecosystems. The Plentimaw Fishes’ ability to create new tales becomes a statement for pluralism. Their constant consumption and production of stories indicate that creativity is never fixed; it is a process of transformation.

Understanding the ecological allegory of the novel requires placing it within Rushdie's personal experience of exile and silencing. Written during his years of hiding after the fatwa from 1989 to 1998, the novel comes from a time when his own "sea of stories" faced severe challenges. In interviews, Rushdie called Haroun a 'gift to my son' and a way to reconnect with the art of storytelling. Writing became a way for him to heal, a cleansing of his poisoned imagination. The allegory of the poisoned Wellspring mirrors Rushdie's experience with censorship. Just as Khattam-Shud tries to "plug the Source of the Sea" (Rushdie 162), Rushdie's opponents aimed to cut him off from his creative roots. The "poison" in the Sea reflects the harmful rhetoric of censorship and extremism surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. However, the ending, where Haroun restores the Wellspring, shows the resilience of both ecological and artistic systems. Like nature, imagination heals through renewal. Rushdie's tale shows this, Haroun does not restore the Sea alone but with the help of various beings, symbolizing ecological symbiosis and collective resistance. The healing of the Sea parallels Rushdie's own recovery of voice through collaboration with readers, translators, and advocates for free expression. In this way, the novel can be seen as an autobiographical ecology. The Sea represents the author's imaginative space, polluted by persecution but ultimately healed by the power of storytelling. The final image, "It's just the rain, it's making everybody happy" (Rushdie 208), along with the memory of the city's name, "Kahani, isn't it a beautiful name for a city? It means 'story', you know" (Rushdie 209), suggests a renewal after disaster, similar to ecological rebirth after contamination. This theme carries a tragic yet hopeful tone, especially in light of later events in Rushdie's life, such as the 2022 stabbing attack, which highlighted the ongoing violence against the artist. Still, like his fictional Sea, Rushdie's imagination keeps flowing, showing that creative ecosystems, while vulnerable, are strong. The ecological metaphor thus becomes both personal and prophetic; the Sea survives by adapting and renewing, just like the storyteller.

Bringing these ideas together, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* can be seen as illustrating what Glotfelty describes as "the study of literature as a mode of environmental consciousness" (Glotfelty xxi). Rushdie's imaginative ecology connects environmental and linguistic survival. Both need diversity, movement, and care. The Sea acts as the biosphere of human creativity, and

its pollution reflects the human-caused crises on our planet. The structure of the novel also follows ecological cycles - pollution, collapse, restoration. Haroun's act of turning the "Story Tap" back on restores the Sea and his father Rashid's lost storytelling abilities, reinforcing the idea that personal, cultural, and environmental well-being are linked. Therefore, Rushdie and ecocritics emphasize the need for balance and "insists on the interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values" (Buell 639).

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* changes the political allegory of censorship into a story about the fragility of life and language. Through images of pollution and purification, the novel promotes an ethics of care that connects ecological and imaginative worlds. In the Sea of Stories, Rushdie imagines a living system that relies on diversity, stewardship, and freedom from control. These ideas reflect the environmental and ethical concerns of our time. The novel is not just a defence of artistic freedom, but also a work of environmental imagination that redefines creativity as ecological interdependence. The novel's tale of poisoned waters and restored wells captures Rushdie's journey from silenced exile to renewed expression. The novel shows the lasting power of stories to heal, regenerate, and remind us that to harm the imagination is to threaten the world itself. The novel's humor and childlike tone do not hide its deep ecological insight: creativity, like life, is a fragile resource that needs protection. To poison the Sea of Stories is to hurt the shared imagination of humanity. To cleanse it is to bring back the chance for coexistence. In this way, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* goes beyond its political message and becomes a story about ecological ethics. It encourages readers to be gardeners, not consumers, of their imaginative and environmental worlds.

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