Subtext and Allusion in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

As a story which claims from its very title to be about stories, it is unsurprising that Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* contains multiple allusions and references, both internal and external. What is surprising, however, is the sheer number of them. From Coleridge to Beatles songs, Haroun is brimming with textural references to the extent that it can be difficult to determine exactly where one reference ends and another begins. As the story progresses, moreover, they grow, not only in number but also in depth, shifting from simple echoes to multilayered allusions.

Right from the opening pages, with its sadness factories, child-like adults, and wonderfully, grotesque representations of the Senguptas as "sticky-thin and whiny-voiced" and "loud and wobbly-fat," (19) Rushdie's descriptions seem to echo the beginning of a Roald Dahl book in all of its dark humor and child/adult dichotomy. From there, the references only begin to become more distinct, moving from echoes of writing styles to direct comments on political stories, to introducing internal references which will be repeated throughout the text, including the question essential to the text's themes, "What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" (20). By the time Haroun and his father have stepped on to the Mail Coach and find themselves hurtling past mountains and through the "Tunnel of I (also known as J)" (34) — it, in itself, reminiscent of Alice's fall down the rabbit hole — the speed at which references appear in the text has increased to the point where single occurrences are no longer quick enough. Instead, common phrases or maxims from all different cultures begin to be fired off in rapid progressions of threes, such as with Mr. Butt's "but, but, but," (34) and Rashid's "done for, finito, khattam-shud" (39). The very number three, in turn, becomes a repeated theme as characters continue to use triple descriptions, get three tries or have the ground shake "once, twice, thrice" (188) beneath them. On yet another level, the constant use of three suggests an even further allusion to the number's importance in both Western Christian doctrines and Eastern Hindu and Buddhist religions.

The allusions within the text, therefore, constantly build on each other, multiplying, and expanding in possible meanings. Then, just as a reader gets accustomed to a particular reference or theme — such as the use of 'one thousand and one' referring to the One Thousand and One Nights — the references begin to shift, alter in form or take on variations. One thousand and one becomes one hundred and one or eleven. Broader themes, such as the fairy tale motifs, are similarly altered to varying effect. Frequently demonstrated through opposition, the allusions at times even begin to appear contradictory in nature. For instance, the Guppee's desire to save the Ocean of the Streams of Stories from corruption (thus preventing incorrect endings from happening in certain story streams) is coupled with their own Prince Bolo and Princess Batcheat who are themselves farces of the Princess Rescue Story.

All of these allusions become jumbled, mixing together just as the Story Streams are twisted together. Yet, rather than feeling schizophrenic, the story remains a coherent whole, pulling together all of the different allusions, echoes, and quotes harmoniously. Themes of East and

West, light and dark, child and adult, one versus many combine into a single seamless narrative. As readers, we stay anchored to the plot by Haroun, who borrows from others, but rarely allows himself to get mixed-up in the other character's 'stories.' Instead he makes his own 'story.' In his desire to first help his father and then to save the Ocean, his actions move the plot forward with his decisive choices. By building rich layers of allusion throughout the text in relation to Haroun's story, Rushdie is able to develop a pervasive subtext where the text itself becomes a representation of the Sea (or maybe the Sea is a representation of the text), with all its interconnected stories, be they maxims, political rallies or adventure stories. It is only at the end of the book when Rashid takes the stage and declares "Ladies and gentlemen, the name of the tale I am going to tell is Haroun and the Sea of Stories"(205) that we realize we have actually cycled back to the beginning, where Haroun himself declared "everything comes from somewhere" (17).

Source: Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Penguin, 1990