

# Myth and Reality: A Comparative Analysis of Magical Realism in Contemporary Fiction

Anushka Rajkumar Salve<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Avneet Kaur<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*MA in English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce*

**Abstract**—This research paper examines the relationship between Myth and Reality in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* through the lens of magical realism. Magical realism is a narrative mode in which magical elements appear naturally within a realistic framework and are accepted as normal by the characters. Rushdie's novel, though written for children, engages deeply with themes of censorship, imagination and the power of storytelling. Written in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the Satanic Verses, the novel uses mythic symbolism and magical realism to defend freedom of expression and the necessity of stories in human life. This paper analyses how mythic functions as a form of reality rather than escapist fantasy, focusing on the symbolic significance of the sea of stories, the figure of Khattamshud, and the role of storytelling as resistance. Drawing on theories of magical realism by Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora, the paper argues that *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* transforms myth into a living, political and emotional reality.

**Index Terms**—Magical Realism, Myth and Reality, Storytelling, Salman Rushdie, Censorship, Children's literature, Allegory.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Magical realism is a literary form that blends the magical with the real in such a way that supernatural events are presented as ordinary aspects of everyday life. Unlike fantasy, magical realism does not construct an entirely separate world; instead, it embeds magic within a recognisable reality. This narrative mode has been widely used to explore cultural, political and psychological truths that cannot be fully expressed through realism alone.

The term magical realism is often attributed to German Art Critic, who coined it in 1925 to describe a new style of painting that emerged in the aftermath of World War I. The genre's can be traced back to Latin American literature where writers drawing upon their

rich cultural heritage and oral traditions began to experiment with blending the fantastical and the real in their narratives. magical realism was first coined out by Angel Flores in a critical essay published in 1955 that analysed the work of Jorge Luis Borges, An Argentine writer. However, the genre took some years to fully develop. It was not until the 1960s that magical realism as a distinct literary style began to emerge.

Magical Realism has produced some of the most influential popular works in contemporary literature, one of the most iconic works of magical realism is "One Hundred years of Solitude" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez which was published in 1967. The novel has been translated over 20 languages and is considered one of the greatest works of Latin American Literature. Another notable work of magical realism is "The house of the Spirits" by Isabelle Allende published in 1982. The novel was an international bestseller and has been translated into over 30 languages. More recently the magical realism style has expanded beyond Latin American literature to the works of authors from all around the world. Japanese author Haruki Murakami has incorporated magical realism into many of his novels, including "Kafka on the shore" and "Norwegian Wood". However, the genre has also faced criticism for its ambiguity, lack of clear definition and as a western commercialisation of indigenous cultures. Furthermore, critics have deemed the genre as a westernisation where western publishers commercialize aspects of magical realism by packaging the books as part of a tourism industry.

Another challenge to magical realism is the perceived lack of clear definition. Some critics have argued that magical realism is an ambiguous and subjective term that is overused. These critics argue that any fiction with elements of the supernatural could be called magical realism, leading to a oversaturation and dilution of the genre. Some of the criticisms of magical

realism, such as appropriation of indigenous cultures and a lack of clear definition, are challenges that the genre must confront. Nevertheless, magical realism remains a powerful and popular form of storytelling that captures the complexities of the human experience by blending the fantastic and the ordinary. Its unique fusion of magical and realistic elements inspires writers and readers alike to explore new ways of understanding the world around them. As the genre evolves and adapts, it will continue to offer new insights and ideas that challenge our perceptions of reality and push the boundaries of what is possible in literature. But its rich history and contemporary relevance, magical realism is that genre that will likely continue to captivate readers for many generations to come.

In addition to its growing global reach, magical realism is also impacting new generations of readers and writers. Young adult literature in particular has seen a rise in magical realism themes with books like “The Night Circus” by Erin Morgenstern and “The Hazelwood” by Melissa Albert becoming best sellers. These works capture the timeless appeal of magical realism while also providing fresh and modern perspectives that speak to contemporary audiences.

Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) is a significant example of magical realism in contemporary fiction. Although it is often categorised as children’s literature, the novel addresses serious themes such as censorship, silence and the power of imagination. The story follows Haroun Khalifa, a young boy who embarks on a magical journey to restore his father’s lost gift of storytelling. Beneath this seemingly simple narrative lies a complex allegory about freedom of speech and creative expression.

This paper focuses on Myth and storytelling as reality in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. It argues that Rushdie uses magical realism to show that myth is not opposed to reality but is an essential way of understanding and shaping it. Through symbolic characters and mythic spaces, the novel presents storytelling as a vital force that sustains individual identity and collective freedom.

## II. MAGICAL REALISM AND MYTH

Scholars such as Wendy B. Faris describe magical realism as a mode characterised by irreducible magical

elements, a realistic setting and a matter-of-fact narrative tone. In such texts, magical events are not questioned or explained; they are accepted as part of reality. Lois Parkinson Zamora further notes that magical realism often draws upon myth, folklore and collective memory to represent deeper truths.

Myth, within magical realism, does not function as an ancient or distant belief system. Instead, it becomes a symbolic language through which writers explore contemporary concerns. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, myth is reshaped into a modern narrative that addresses real world issues such as censorship, loss of voice and the suppression of imagination.

Rushdie’s use of magical realism allows myth to operate as lived experience. The magical world Haroun enters is not separate from reality but reflects it symbolically. Through this blending, the novel demonstrates how myth continues to inform human understanding of reality.

Critics read *Haroun* as an allegory about storytelling; Rushdie mixes everyday life with openly fantastical elements, so that the act of telling stories itself becomes political and ethical. Scholars show how Rushdie’s sees machines and personified stories blur the boundary between myth and ordinary reality, arguing that the novel differentiates storytelling as a way to resist censorship and to reshape social truth. This makes *Haroun* a textbook example of how magical realism can use mythic imagery to expose and challenge real world power and fear.

## III. STORYTELLING AS MYTHIC REALITY IN HAROUN AND THE SEA OF STORIES

At the centre of the novel is the idea that stories are powerful and necessary. Rashid Khalifa, Haroun’s father, is a storyteller whose identity and livelihood depend on his ability to tell stories. When he loses this ability, it symbolises more than personal loss; it represents the silencing of creativity and imagination. The sea of stories is the most important mythic symbol in the novel. It is described as an ocean containing all the stories ever told. Each stream of the sea represents a different narrative, suggesting that storytelling is a shared human heritage. This mythic space reflects the idea that stories shape reality by preserving memory, culture and meaning.

The magical realism of the novel lies in how this extraordinary sea is treated as real functional Haroun

does not question its existence; instead, he interacts with it as naturally as with his everyday world. This acceptance reinforces the idea that myth and reality are interconnected.

Haroun Khalifa is the son of Rashid Khalifa, a famous and beloved storyteller known as the Shah of Blah". Rashid stories bring joy and wonder to the city where they live. One day, however Rashid loses his storytelling ability suddenly after his wife leaves him, which shocks Haroun and the whole city.

Determined to help his father. Haroun embarks on magical adventure to restore Rashed's gift. His journey takes him to mysterious place called the Sea of Stories. An endless ocean filled with all the stories in the world. The sea is the source of every tale told by storytellers like Rashid. But the sea is in danger. A villain named Khattam-Shud, who hate stories and wants to silence them forever, is trying to poison the sea of stories. Khattam-Shud represent censorship, evil and destruction of creativity.

#### IV. KHATTAM-SHUD AND THE MYTH OF SILENCE

The character of Khattam-Shud represents the forces that seek to destroy stories. His name, which means "completely finished", symbolises censorship and the desire to end all narratives. Khattam-Shud's attempt to poison the sea of stories reflects real world efforts to suppress free expression.

Rather than portraying censorship through realistic political scenes. Rushdie uses mythic imagery to communicate its dangers. Khattam-Shud's shadow warriors and polluted stories transform an abstract concept into a visible threat. This mythic representation makes the consequences of silence emotionally and imaginatively real.

The defeat of Khattam-Shud affirms the novel's belief in storytelling as resistance. By restoring the sea of stories, the narrative suggests that imagination cannot be permanently silenced. Myth here becomes a way of asserting hope and freedom.

#### V. CHILDHOOD, IMAGINATION AND REALITY

Haroun's role as a child protagonist is significant childhood in the novel represents a space where imagination and reality coexist without conflict.

Haroun's willingness to accept magical events reflects a worldview that values creativity and belief.

This perspective aligns with the principles of magical realism, which challenge rigid distinctions between the real and the unreal. Through Haroun, Rushdie suggests that adults lose access to myth not because it disappears, but because they stop believing in its importance.

The novel thus presents imagination as a necessary part of reality. Storytelling becomes a way to understand the world emotionally and ethically, especially in times of fear and uncertainty.

Haroun learns that stories are alive and powerful. They connect people, spread ideas and resist darkness and ignorance. He joins forces with the Guppies to battle Khattam-Shud and his shadow warriors.

In the final confrontation, Haroun uses cleverness and courage to defeat Khattam-Shud. This victory restores the seas purity, allowing stories to flow freely again, Haroun's father regains his storytelling ability and peace returns to their world.

#### VI. MYTH AS RESISTANCE IN REALITY

In Haroun and the Sea of Stories, myth functions as a form of resistance. The magical elements of the narrative do not distract from reality; instead, they reveal its deeper truths. By presenting censorship as a mythic battle, Rushdie highlights its destructive impact on human creativity and freedom.

Magical realism allows the novel to address serious political issues in an accessible and symbolic manner. Myth becomes a living reality that shapes actions, beliefs and identities. Through storytelling, the novel argues that reality itself depends on the freedom to imagine and narrate.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how Salman Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories uses magical realism to blend myth and reality. Through symbolic storytelling, mythic characters and imaginative spaces. The novel demonstrates that myth is not separate from reality but deeply embedded within it.

Rushdie's narrative presents storytelling as an essential human activity that sustains freedom, identity and hope. By transforming myth into a contemporary reality, Haroun and the Sea of Stories affirms the

enduring relevance of magical realism in modern literature. The novel ultimately suggests that without stories, reality itself becomes incomplete.

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