Intertextual and Intercultural references in Haroun and the Sea of Stories

In 1990 Salman Rushdie published a children's book entitled *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The title alludes to two outstanding Eastern collections of stories: the *Indian Kathasaritsagara* ("Ocean of the Streams of Story"; e.g. Bechert 1993: 65), and the *Arabian Nights* who feature the famous caliph Haroun al Rashid.

The story is characterized by a vast range of intertextual and intercultural references. The names of the characters as well as the settings are obviously Indian; some of the names are explained in a glossary appended to the book. Other elements of the plot, however, resemble Michael Ende's *Unendliche Geschichte* ('Neverending Story', published in 1979): The city where the Khalifas live is "so ruinously sad that it has forgotten its name" (15). As with the Infantine Empress in Ende's book, this lack of a name is obviously due to a collective lack of imagination. The name of the city is later revealed to be Kahani, "story". Like Bastian/Atréju in *The Neverending Story*, Haroun engages in a sort of chivalrous quest to recover lost areas of the imagination. The use of the quest motif as a narrative frame obviously goes back to the English tradition of children's books which originates in Charles Kingsley's *Water-Babies* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books. In these books, children, like knights in medieval and Renaissance romances, embark on perilous journeys and undergo exciting adventures to fulfill a certain mission (Kullmann 1995: 120f.). Another motif current in this tradition is dreaming. When Alice awakes at the end of the book, she finds out that her adventures in wonderland have taken place in a dream. Like Alice, Haroun finds out that he has been asleep while engaged in his adventures. As in dreams, the experiences of his quest refer back to what happened in real life on the previous days and weeks. The motif of dream vision, like the quest motif, can be traced back to older European literary traditions; they are the basis upon which many famous works of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages are built (See, e.g., Clemen 1963: 68-70; Edwards 1989: 23-32).

These elements of European story-telling mix with allusions to the East and to Eastern mythology. As Rashid explains to Haroun, the spirits of dead kings live on in the guise of hoopoe birds (25), who are also said to be helpful companions on quests (64). A kind of mechanical hoopoe bird will carry Haroun to the Ocean of the Streams of Story and to Gup City, which is the first stage in his quest. Haroun is accompanied by a Water Genie, who seems to have sprung directly from the *Arabian Nights*. The various colours of the ocean recall the vividness which is certainly one of the most striking features of the stories of this famous collection, with their countless references to precious gems of various colours. Haroun and the hoopoe are joined by two fish as companions, Bagha and Goopy, whose names, as Rushdie points out in the glossary, are derived from a film by Satyajit Ray, the well-known Indian film director. The 'pages' whom Haroun meets at Gup City owe their names to a pun on pages in both the senses of servants and of pages in books. As pages in books they share many particulars with the game of cards in *Alice in Wonderland.* Another reference to Eastern culture occurs when, later on, part of the army of Gup City meet a "shadow warrior" who has difficulties with speaking but can communicate in Abhinaya, a classical Indian dance which he uses as a language.

Many of the intertextual elements refer to texts which are part of traditional children's reading, e.g. fairy tales or Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books. There is even an allusion to Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (209). Although no child reader will grasp all of the allusions to other works of fiction or to other cultural traditions which Rushdie's book contains, his or her curiosity will certainly be aroused. The Western child reader becomes aware of the existence of Eastern, particularly Indian, history and mythology, as well as of traditions of Eastern story telling. The book will certainly motivate further enquiry and provide food for the imagination.

In Rushdie's book, however, intertextual allusions are not just heaped up for their own sakes. They rather serve to convey a 'metafictional' statement. In the beginning Haroun asks his father: "What is the use of stories that aren't even true?" (22). The answer to this question is what Haroun will find out on his quest. There is first of all the beauty of the stories, as indicated by the beautiful colours on the Ocean of the Streams of Story. The stories are called, for example, "Princess Rescue Story G/1001/RIM/777/M(w)i, better known as 'Rapunzel'" (73). Both Grimm's fairy-tales and the thousand and one *Arabian Nights* are alluded to. When Haroun takes a drink from the Ocean, however, the "princess-rescue" story turns out wrong: The hero who climbs the tower where the princess is imprisoned is transformed into a spider. The princess does not like being rescued by a spider and pushes him off. When Haroun regains his senses, his companion the Water Genie explains to him how the story should have ended: "'You saved the princess and walked off into the sunset as specified, I presume?'" (74). The obvious point is that even conventional stories can be enjoyable.

With the transformation of the hero into a spider, Rushdie certainly alludes to Kafka's famous short story, "Die Verwandlung" (Later on, Haroun will meet a "shadow warrior" who, living in a land of silence, can only produce gurgling and coughing sounds: "Gogogol" and "Kafkafka" [129]). But even if the reader does not realize this allusion, he or she will understand that the poisoning of the story refers to the modernist tendency of looking for problems and conflict in literature rather than for beauty and harmony. The same point is made by "Blabbermouth", one of the pages of Gup City, in answer to Haroun's question about the reality of his present experience: "'That's the trouble with you sad city types: you think a place has to be *miserable* and *dull* as ditchwater before you believe it's real'" (114).

Another statement concerning the techniques of fiction concerns the mixing up of different stories and different cultural traditions. A fairy-tale creature, the Water Genie, finds no difficulties in riding a mechanical, electronic and computerized vessel which has the shape of a hoopoe bird and can speak. This mixture of literary motifs becomes a topic of discussion when Haroun wonders if the various streams of story do not disturb one another. The answer he gets is: "Any story worth its salt can handle a little shaking up" (79). The multiplicity of streams in the "Ocean" indicates that there is an immense reservoir of stories which are allowed to mingle to produce new stories. This "shaking-up" corresponds to what happens in dreams. The mingling motifs from different traditions which characterizes Rushdie's books is both an attempt at an accurate rendering of the processes of consciousness in dreams and a literary technique. This technique may perhaps be called post-modernist.

Unlike the moderns who oppose traditions (such as fairy tales with happy endings), Rushdie as a post-modern author arranges an ironical survey of various and seemingly incompatible traditions. This ironical point of view corresponds to Umberto definition of post-modernism, given in his *Postille a 'Il nome della rosa'*, according to which post-modernism constitutes of an ironical review of traditions (Eco 1986: 80; Barth 1980). The resources of various cultures are brought together to give rise to a new imaginative and 'multi-cultural' consciousness. This attitude is of course based on the assumption that traditions should not be dismissed as irrelevant as they constitute what is called the cultural heritage. The reader, moreover, becomes aware of the fact that all stories are "mosaics of quotations", as Julia Kristeva put it in her famous essay on Mikhail Bakhtin (1980) With the help of post-modern elements of narration Rushdie thus provides an insight into the workings of language and texts, fictional and otherwise.
The final poetological message concerns the practical use of "stories which aren't even true." A reason which would be sufficient in itself is that stories provide pleasure. But why should a monster called the "Cultmaster" poison the Ocean of the Streams of Story? An answer is given in a conversation between Haroun and the cultmaster:
'Why do you hate stories so much? ... Stories are fun ...' 'The World, however, is not for Fun,' Khattam-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) The realm of the imagination can provide for alternative worlds. Any attempt at controlling the world can be frustrated by creating a new world in a story. Giving scope to imagination ensures freedom from oppression. The very fact that fictional stories do not necessarily represent reality constitute their strength: even if no happy ending is likely in real life, it is always possible to create one imaginatively.

The story of the monster who hates stories has an obvious autobiographical reference: The monster can easily be identified with the Ayatollah Khomeini who sentenced Rushdie to death for having written *The Satanic Verses*, the book Khomeini considered blasphemous. On one level, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* can be read as Rushdie's defence of his novel and as his answer to the Ayatollah: *The Satanic Verses* consists of a "shaking up" of old stories, including what Rushdie called the "grand narrative" of Islam (1992: 432). The aim of the book is not to fight religion but to look at it from an ironical point of view, hereby providing pleasure and enlarging the mind. In denouncing the book the Ayatollah revealed himself to be actuated by his wish to gain totalitarian power.