

# UNFORGIVABLE WORDS: THE SOCIAL PLACE OF WRITERS AND OF LITERARY TEXTS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE SATANIC VERSES* AND *HAROUN AND THE SEA OF STORIES*<sup>1</sup>

Sebastião Alves Teixeira Lopes, PhD.  
Federal University of Piauí, Department of Languages  
Teresina, Province of Piauí, Brazil  
slopes10@uol.com.br

## Abstract

*In this paper I examine the social place of writers and of literary texts in two of Salman Rushdie's novels: The satanic verses (1988) and Haroun and the sea of stories (1990). The publication of Rushdie's most polemical novel, The satanic verses, provokes a huge controversy which culminates in the fatwa issued by the then Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from Iran, sentencing to death author and publishers. Haroun and the sea of stories, published one year after the fatwa and widely influenced by the so-called The satanic verses Case, is a marvelous fairy tale allegedly for children but also metafictionally too complex for children to understand. The satanic verses presents a satirist, Baal, who writes defamatory odes and is ultimate condemned to death because of them. Haroun and the sea of stories portrays a young adventurer attempting to restore the powers of his father who has lost the ability to tell stories. In order to explore the social place of writers and of literary texts in these two novels I make a brief review of the bibliography about the theme, examining important conceptions of metafiction as elaborated by Robert Scholes (1979), Linda Hutcheon (1984), and Patricia Waugh (1984). I propose, however, a broader sense for the conception of metafiction, in order to encompass any metafictional commentary about the world of fiction, such as the social place of writers and of literary texts.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial literature. Salman Rushdie, *The satanic verses*, *Haroun and the sea of stories*, Metafiction.

## Introduction

The publication of Salman Rushdie's most polemical novel, *The satanic verses* (1988), provokes a huge controversy which culminates in the *fatwa* issued in February 1989 by the then Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from Iran, sentencing to death author and publishers. *Haroun and the sea of stories* (1990), published one year after the *fatwa*, is a marvelous fairy tale dedicated to his son, Zafar, then with ten years, in which Rushdie portrays a dull city in the country of Alifbay, which has turned so sad to the point of forgetting its name. *Haroun and the sea of stories* is also widely influenced by the huge controversy surrounding the publication of *The satanic verses*, the so-called Rushdie Affair or *The Satanic Verses Case*.

Rushdie metafictionally reflects about topics related to the world of fiction in the two novels. *The satanic verses* presents the satirist Baal, who writes defamatory odes against Mahound, who is to be understood as a caricature of Prophet Muhammad, and his early followers, thus defying the political and religious *status quo*. *Haroun and the sea of stories* portrays the adventures of the young Haroun Khalifa in his quest for restoring his father's capacity to tell stories. In the two novels Rushdie metafictionally speculates about the relationship between literature and society.

The objective of the paper is to examine the social place of writers and of literary texts in Rushdie's *The satanic verses* and *Haroun and the sea of stories*. I use the two novels to illustrate that metafiction is not necessarily self-reflexive or narcissistic. Metafictional writers also direct their commentaries to the socio-political context, demanding an expansion of the conception of metafiction.

## Body of paper

Metafiction has become a key concept for literary criticism after the late 1970s with the publication of Robert Scholes's *Fabulation and metafiction* (1979). Widely influenced By Jorge Luis Borges, Scholes (1979) defends that since the 1960s "the sense that the positivistic basis for traditional realism had been eroded, and that

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a bigger research project entitled "Salman Rushdie's Metafiction". Fellow of the CAPES Foundation, Ministry of Education of Brazil, Brasília/DF – Brazil, File # BEX 4169/13-1.

reality, if it could be caught at all, would require a whole new set of fictional skills” (p. 4). Fabulation is then a kind of fiction which emphasizes its own incapacity of conveying reality, what Scholes (1979) labels ‘fallibilism’. It becomes a kind of ontological novel, commenting on the very nature of novels and stressing the gap between the world of words and the concrete world out there.

Scholes (1979) also stresses a certain delight in design from the part of the so-called fabulators. According to him, “[d]elight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer, will serve in part to distinguish the art of the fabulator from the work of the novelist or the satirist. Of all narrative forms, fabulation puts the highest premium on art and joy (Scholes, 1979, p. 3). Fabulators would tend to try out different literary designs, devoting special attention to framed narratives which presented stories within stories, as exemplified by William Caxton’s 1484 translation to English of the eighth fable of Alphonse. Following William Gass’s terminology suggestion, Scholes (1979) gives ‘experimental fabulation’ the name of ‘metafiction’.

Scholes has the merit of being an early bird in the study of this new trend in fiction which would become pervasive in future decades, but the term ‘fabulation’ seems to have suggested more a return to the world of medieval fables, rather than a simple recognition that framed narratives were not a recent phenomenon. Scholes’s distinction between ‘fabulation’ and ‘experimental fabulation’ is also problematic, since contemporary critics tend to label as metafiction any novel which brings in itself a commentary about fiction, many times (but not only) reflecting about the novel’s incapacity to convey concrete reality as suggested by Scholes (1979).

According to Linda Hutcheon (1984), “[m]etafiction’ (...) is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (p. 01). According to her, metafiction is a narrative with two levels. It is narration and commentary on narration. Hutcheon’s conception, however, seems to be misleading. It is at the same time fiction and fiction + commentary. I would argue that metafiction is not fiction about fiction, but fiction about something else (whatever this something else might be) in which it is included a commentary about fiction itself. Metafiction is a kind of doubled fiction, which presupposes the action of writing, of producing fiction, and reflection about, for the lack of better words, the world of fiction.

Perceive that I am using the term ‘world of fiction’ in a much broader sense than that suggested by Hutcheon (1984), including reflections on the ‘narrative and/or linguistic identity’ of fictions, but not restricted to them. Metafictions can be self-reflexive, or narcissistic, narratives, as suggested by Hutcheon, but not only. I would argue that much of the effort presented in metafictions go beyond laying bare their writing techniques and/or discussing about their linguistic nature; e. g., metafictional writers also speculate about very different topics related to the world of fiction<sup>2</sup>.

Hutcheon’s conception of metafiction raises still another important question: Are there fictions (or metafictions) which are not about something else, but only about fiction itself? This is a huge and labyrinthic debate specially in relation to experimental metafictions, whose primary objective is precisely to explore the limits of conventional, realistic novels. Hutcheon (1984) herself develops this idea, as following:

Narcissistic narrative, then, is process made visible. In this sense, metafiction is "production" but not in the current French ideological use of the word. The generic terms of reference in metafiction are still novelistic; auto-representation is still representation. These narratives are only *about* "production," perhaps. (p. 06; emphasis in the original)

In the face of such complex theoretical issue, Hutcheon does not seem confident to take a position, ending the quotation with an ambiguous ‘perhaps’. Her attitude is basically right. These are so deep theoretical waters that one must be careful before going a centimeter further.

For the moment I will argue against the notion of a plotless novel, a novel concerned only with its construction process, its form, or only making a reflection about fiction itself. I insist on the double nature of metafictions, in the sense that they present a story at the same time that they include a speculation about the world of fiction. A typical strategy used by metafictional writers, for example, is to create novels in which are presented writers as characters, but in these novels, as well as in other experimental novels which explore the limits of realistic writing, one is still capable of perceiving a plot, a plot about writers, about writing itself, but still a plot. I would agree, however, that in many metafictions the plot is only an excuse, but still a necessary one, to present the author’s own reflections about the world of fiction.

Patricia Waugh (1984) presents still another definition of metafiction. According to her:

*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship

<sup>2</sup> In this essay I will be discussing about Rushdie’s novels *The Satanic Verses* and *Haroun and the sea of stories*, presenting them as examples of metafictions which are not, or at least not only, self-reflexive, or narcissistic, as suggested by Hutcheon.

between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh, 1984, p. 2; emphasis in the original)

Waugh (1984) also perceives the double nature of metafiction. She sees metafiction as a kind of fiction with a systematical reflection about its nature as well as about the possible fictiveness of reality. Waugh (1984) also does not see metafiction only narcissistically commenting about their narrative and/or linguistic identity. She admits the possibility of reflections directed to the world beyond the fictional dimension.

In relation to the double nature of metafiction it is necessary to say that it does not imply that authors present two different kinds of 'truths', a non reliable one valid only in the illusion provided by the novel and another one to be trusted, critical of that illusion and valid outside the world of fiction. The two levels of narration of metafiction come together and both of them result from a writer's imaginative power. In their possibility of conveying (or not) truth they have the same *status*.

A little bit ahead, when discussing the relationship between metafiction and the novel tradition, Waugh (1984), however, seems to contradict herself, as following:

metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels. This form of fiction is worth studying not only because of its contemporary emergence but also because of the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as genre. By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity. (p. 5; emphasis in the original)

Waugh is basically right in what she says: fictions are indeed representational and one is supposed to learn about the history of the fictional genre through the study of metafiction. These are not, however, the key issues which distinguish metafiction from others more traditional, realistic novels. I insist that what characterizes metafiction is its double nature, i. e., it is a kind of fiction which includes in itself a commentary about the world of fiction. Although it may be possible to find metafiction throughout the history of the novel (even before the novel itself, some would say) or one may point out that they are pervasive in the contemporary literary scene, I will continue to argue that not all novels are metafictional, i. e., not all novels include a metafictional commentary on the world of fiction.

As said before I am using the term 'world of fiction' in a much broader sense, trying to encompass any possible type of metafictional commentary about the complexity which involves the process of producing, distributing and consuming fiction. Commentary on the world of fiction here is an umbrella expression meant to cover a huge variety of reflections about fiction, such as theorization, criticism, personal report on the process of writing, explanations about the process of writing, alerts to the reader etc etc etc. The list of possible commentaries is practically innumerable.

I am broadening the possibilities of metafictional commentaries, going beyond Hutcheon's (1984) suggestion of narcissistic commentaries about the "narrative and/or linguistic identity" (p. 01) of fictions and even going beyond Waugh's (1984) suggestion of commentaries about "the fundamental structures of narrative fiction" (p. 2) or about "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (p. 2). I recognize that Waugh goes in what I consider to be the right direction. She perceives that metafiction is not only narcissistic narratives. The possibilities of metafictional commentaries about 'the world', however, go beyond laying bare the discursive construction of our beliefs or even of reality, as suggested by Waugh (1984).

Fiction is such a complex social phenomenon that I consider metafictional any commentary included in novels which reflect about this phenomenon. Not all metafictional commentaries are introspective or auto-reflexive. Some of them are indeed narcissistic, to use Hutcheon's (1984) suggested term, but not all of them. Commentaries are auto-reflexive when they are directed to the psychological process of writing or to the writing process techniques, laying bare an author's strategies for creating a novelistic world. They are also auto-reflexive when they discuss the nature of fiction, specially its linguistic *status*. Hutcheon (1984), however, concentrates only on these so-called narcissistic commentaries. She forgets a whole bunch of metafictional commentaries directed outward to the world, speculating about the social and political implications of writing novels. Some authors direct their commentaries to the world outside the novel, denouncing our beliefs as linguistic constructs, and by doing so bringing them closer to the status of the novelistic illusion they have created, as suggested by Waugh (1984). The possibilities of metafictional commentaries directed to society, or to the 'real world', however, go beyond demonstrating its fictiveness.

I will use Rushdie's *The satanic verses* and *Haroun and sea of stories* to illustrate what I am trying to discuss theoretically. In both novels it is possible to perceive metafictional characteristics. In both narratives, the author uses the artifice of creating characters related to the literary world. In *The satanic verses* he presents Baal, a

satirist feared for his ferocious writing, and in *Haroun and the sea of stories* he presents the young Haroun, in his adventures to restore his father's ability to tell stories. Written after the 1989 *fatwa* against Rushdie's life, *Haroun and the sea of stories* can also be understood as a metafictional commentary on *The satanic verses* Case itself. In both novels Rushdie uses metafiction to discuss about the social place of writers and of literary texts.

In *The satanic verses* and *Haroun and the sea of stories* Rushdie metafictionally speculates about the social function of literature. "What's the use of stories that aren't even true?" (Rushdie, 1990, p. 22), asks the young character of *Haroun and the sea of stories*, assimilating the down-to-earth logic of Mr. Sengupta's, the Khalifas' upstairs neighbor. Haroun verbalizes the sentence in a moment of fury, when he discovers that his mother has left home under the influence of the sterile Mr. Sengupta. His father then loses the capacity to tell stories, making Haroun to feel responsible for that as well as making him to feel that it is his duty to recover his father's lost skill.

In the novel Rushdie answers Haroun's question by reaffirming that literature has the function of provoking pleasure and delight. Rushdie recovers a long tradition of storytelling for amusement, which goes back to *The Arabian nights* and *The kathasaritsagara*. In *The Arabian nights* King Shahryar, convinced of women's infidelity, kills his wives after the wedding night. For staying alive, Scheherazade amuses the King with tales, leaving the endings suspended for the next night. *The kathasaritsagara* is compiled for the entertainment of Queen Suryamati, wife of King Anantadeva.

In the very title, *Haroun and the sea of stories*, Rushdie makes reference to these two *compendia* of stories, true oceans of stories, which have influenced writers ever since and delighted generations of readers. For some, *The Arabian nights* would be inspired by Haroun al-Rashid's court or even by the Caliph himself. *The kathasaritsagara*, famous collection of Indian tales, can be translated as 'ocean of streams of stories'. In *Haroun and the sea of stories*, the Khalifas live in a so sad city that it has forgotten its name. At the end of the novel, however, with the free flow of the ocean of stories, the city recovers its name: Kahani, story in Hindustani. Rushdie reaffirms once again this basic social function of writers and of literary texts: to delight and to amuse.

In *The satanic verses* Rushdie presents a more political answer to the question regarding the social function of writers and of literary texts. The satirist Baal defends that poets have a function: "[a] poet's work," he answers. "To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" (Rushdie, 1997, p. 100). In this passage the satirist is very political. He is a deconstructionist who lays bare the dominant ideologies. He is also a social reformist. He defies the socio-political *status quo*, presenting alternative ways of perceiving reality. In *The satanic verses*, Baal criticizes specially the notion of theocracy as well as the subjugation of women.

Although he is not that emphatic as Baal, Haroun also presents a questioning and deconstructionist facet. In *Haroun and the sea of stories*, the young character has the company of Butt, the bus driver, of Iff, the water genie, and of the homonym Butt, the mechanic hoopoe. According to Cundy (1994):

the standard parental response to child's questioning of authority becomes incorporated into the story in the forms of Iff, the Water Genie, and Butt, the Hoopoe. That "ifs" and "buts" do therefore have a place in the child's perception of reality not only serves as a contestation of adult opinion on the primacy of their own view of the world, but (and here we change into one of the adult "gears" of the text) it also asserts the validity of questioning and dissent on a wider scale within society. (p. 337)

The parental repression, in the novel represented by the authoritarian sentence 'no ifs, no buts', is questioned precisely by Haroun's insistence in making questions, be them in relation to his father or to the sea of stories. As Cundy (1994) rightly points out, to insist in 'ifs' and 'buts' becomes the metaphor for a greater motivation to question the repressive forces of the world, including those of censorship.

Both Baal and Haroun are questioning characters. Baal defies the political/religious forces of Jahilia, reenacting the already old opposition between sacred and profane words, being considered blasphemous and then condemned to death. Haroun happens to defeat the forces of Khatam-Shud, the archenemy of stories, restoring his father's ability to tell stories and having his mother back home, in a perfect happy ending surrounded by doubts and skepticism.

## Conclusion

I used Rushdie's *The satanic verses* and *Haroun and the sea of stories* in this essay for some reasons. These literary narratives well illustrate the double nature of metafiction, which present a plot at the same time that they bring reflections about what I have been broadly calling the 'world of fiction'. They present what I consider indispensable for characterizing metafiction: they are at the same time narration and speculations about the socio-political complexities involving narration.

In both *The satanic verses* and *Haroun and the sea of stories*, important metafictional commentaries assess critically the socio-political world of the imagined communities of Jahilia and of Kahani. This is important because it shows the limitations of Hutcheon's conception of metafiction as narcissistic narratives, which implies only self-reflexive commentaries in relation to the production of literary narratives and/or to their linguistic status. Although moving beyond narcissistic narratives, perceiving the possibility of metafictional commentaries about the fictiveness of the world, and so bringing our stable beliefs closer to the notion of discursive fiction, I am still critical of the limitations of Waugh's conception of metafiction. The world of fiction is still a much broader phenomenon, allowing metafictional writers to speculate about innumerable issues related to this phenomenon, as illustrated by both of Rushdie's novels in their sharp critique of politics and of religion as controlling instruments as well as of social behaviors, giving special attention to the subjugation of women. *The satanic verses* and of *Haroun and the sea of stories* present an interesting evaluation of the social place of writers and of literary texts, emphasizing their questioning and deconstructing facet, capable of laying bare dominant ideologies and structures of power. These are not, or at least not only, narcissistic metafiction.

#### **Brief biography of author**

Sebastião Alves Teixeira Lopes is Associate Professor at the Federal University of Piauí (Brazil). In 2002 he earned his PhD degree in Anglo-American Literature from the University of São Paulo (Brazil). His current research interests are metafiction, postcolonial literatures, and Latin American identities.

#### **References**

- Cundy, C. (1994). Through childhood's window: *Haroun and the sea of stories*. In D. M. Fletcher (Ed.), *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the fiction of Salman Rushdie* (pp. 335-341). Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.
- Hutcheon, L. (1984). *Narcissistic narrative: The metafictional paradox*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York & London: Methuen.
- Rushdie, S. (1990). *Haroun and the sea of stories*. London: Granta Books.
- Rushdie, S. (1997). *The satanic verses*. New York: Owl Books.
- Scholes, R. (1979). *Fabulation and metafiction*. Urbana, Chicago & London: University of Illinois Press.
- Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. London & New York: Methuen.