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## Literature for the Right to Imagination

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## Abstract

Salman Rushdie and Vladimir Nabokov were born and brought up in different political climates but produced art based on their experience of migration, along with their familiarity with modern Eastern societies and its various forms of censorship. However, Rushdie and Nabokov found themselves writing about a political climate that denied the right to tell stories as a prerequisite right to freedom, due to its forms of governmentality. As a result, these authors reworked the traditional genre of allegory and presented stories in its most topically engaging form. The agenda of this paper is to understand how allegory becomes a weapon for freedom of imagination and literature in the hands of these authors. For this purpose, it aims to read Rushdie's "*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", together with Nabokov's, "*Invitation to a Beheading*". Nevertheless, tries to understand how allegory gives way to both imagination and a critique of certain forms of imagination (that is to say stuck in someone else's imagination) while focusing on how these authors tell stories about a world that denies imagination and storytelling.

## Keywords

- Political Censorship
- Allegory
- Imagination
- Free Speech
- Literary Resistance
- Rushdie

## Introduction

“The attitude of faith... is not unlike the attitude of those who say, ‘If I cannot pronounce it, it is not my business to know it.’ This is the mentality of the censor, the inquisitor, the one who burns books or bans them” (Hitchens 232)

Unfortunately, there are times when the state, whether under its religious, linguistic, or ideological atavisms, suppresses creative thought. Any alternative that might possess

the germs to destabilize the official forms of state is targeted. As they provide a different way to imagine the state of affairs. Such events are normative in the life of literature. There, creative imagination tends to question anything, if not everything held as sacred by anyone. Naturally, as a result, literary scholars have been prone to be found at the end of some blasphemy trial or another. They hold onto dear life in the face of various adversaries that hold power to shape the reality. But, this persistence of blasphemy trials for literature through the ages might indicate something gnarly. It is something that the state recognizes. Yet denies admitting it in its full force. That is the power of literature to change or shape the imagination of the world, a world that is to be. As it waits for its cue to emerge out of the dark cellars of state and its doublespeak.

Moreover, this tendency to put on trial has been an aspect of Western state machinery.. This includes the trial of Socrates, Jesus (Hitchens 256), or Galileo. As questioning time-honored "truths" raises the eyebrows of the authorities that tend to preserve the monopoly over truth itself. The modern Anglo-American world witnessed its most challenging reaction (Robertson 14-17) to literary censorship in two trials. The first concerned D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The second concerned Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Both concerned literature and its social import. But as it goes, one of them succumbed to censorship. The other revitalized the discourse of the right to free speech. In doing so, presented literature's credentials for becoming an instrument in the fight for free speech.

Moreover, for putting this view into perspective, this paper aims to read the conditions that prevailed after the *Satanic Verses* affair. That is to say, an environment of censorship. It aims to connect it with similar conditions of censorship that emerged in the early years of the Soviet Union. In doing so, charts a way in which mature writers such as Rushdie and Nabokov, used certain strategies within political allegory to subvert the monologic world picture.

For doing so, it selectively reads sections of their work, especially *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. The aim is to show how in the struggle against censorship, literature enables readers to preserve free speech.

## Rushdie, Nabokov and Political Censorship

"Salman had disappeared into the world of block caps...He had vanished into the front page." (Amis, qtd. in Husain 11)

If we take that as a point of departure, it would not be far from the mark to understand that in some cases censorship makes and unmakes certain authors. Such was the case with Nabokov. He was perhaps one of great literary émigrés from Russia. But when his

work *Lolita* was presented in the broad public arena, it soon garnered a reputation. This was for being one of the most controversial works of postwar and contemporary classical literature (Waddell 1). From the Boomers to the Millennials, for many it was smut. But the plot of the book revolves around the fate of a child. As she regrettably adapts to the condition that she has been presented with. She is utterly vulnerable at the mercy of her kidnapper Humbert. He, in his infantile frenzy, exploits Lolita beyond the reaches of human decency.

However, that is not the central problem of the book. When asked about the amorous retreat, unethical use of a child, and portrayal of her as a seducer in this fantastic escapade, he flatly denied that *Lolita* had anything to do with these topics (314). Even though we do not have a full confession of the intention of the author, it can be well observed from his life and his dealing with censorship. This is especially evident in his early years as an author. Therefore, for him the question of public controversy surrounding *Lolita* harked back to his past life. To be specific, the episode of a tussle with the Soviet literary establishment, especially revolving around his publication of *The Gift*.

*The Gift* as a book was centered around the character of Fyodor Cherdyntsev's life. He was an émigré in Berlin, and a literary and historical figure of the twentieth century. The aim of the book was more or less, as Boyd notes, "to make a practical handbook; how to be happy" (Boyd 450). Yet this seemingly innocuous pursuit of personal fulfillment through art exposed the imaginative freedom under authoritarian scrutiny. In a certain section of the story, Fyodor encounters an article on Nikolay. He goes on to ruminate about his influence on literature, transforming what begins as a biographical reflection into a sharp critique of how Soviet Ideology stifles creative vitality:

"Young Soviet composers were not so much "problems" as "tasks": cumbrously they treated of this or that mechanical theme without a hint of poetry...jostling pieces did their clumsy work with proletarian seriousness, reconciling themselves to the presence of double solutions in the flat variants and to the agglomeration of police pawns. . . . Suddenly he felt a bitter pang—why did everything in Russia become so shoddy, so crabbed and gray, how could she have been so befooled and befuddled?" (456).

Moreover, Fyodor's ruminations on the idea of a literary biography turns out to be a challenge to Russian censors. As it shows a caustic irreverence towards this literary figure who was much respected in the 19th century and later canonised as a socialist icon in the Soviet era. By lampooning Chernyshevsky's utilitarian aesthetics (once a symbol of revolutionary zeal) as drab and mechanistic. Nabokov underscores the regime's suppression of poetry and ambiguity in favour of monologic "truth" that leaves no room for the playful, subversive imagination. Thus, linking the plot of the

story with the reality of post-Tsarist society. Ironically, when *The Gift* was set to be published, that one chapter concerning this intellectual buffoonery was omitted out of decency. Thereby, justified the satire and the orthodoxy of the Russian literary establishment, preemptively censoring the very imaginative dissent that the work sought to defend (Boyd 458). In this way, his early encounter with excision prefigures the broader struggles against censorship.

Therefore, for Nabokov the reception of *Lolita* in the Anglo-American world was no less of an insipid reminder of the episode that took place in Russia all those years past. But a basic reading of *Lolita* reveals that under certain circumstances literature has to be read differently. This is perhaps not in the traditional way western realism has accustomed its readers. Because, if *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reveals anything, it is that the language of *Lolita* is the language of the dispossessed (Nafisi 25).

Works like that have to be understood in the particular context. That is to say for Nafisi the central theme of *Lolita* is about censorship and how despite censorship authors express meaning. Because *Lolita* channelises meaning that is coded as a means of resistance. *Lolita's* structure as a novel reflects that condition. Because, despite all the appearances *Lolita* has a name. That name has to be repeated as an expression of freedom.

Perhaps another literary émigré would be Salman Rushdie. As his cult of personality far exceeded his literary fame. This was due to the creative freedom that he took with the treatment of Islam in the context of the *Satanic Verses* and the controversy that ensued thereafter. As Rushdie became the victim of a clerical verdict, laid as far back as 1989. It forced him into a life of absolute seclusion for the coming decades (Husain 11). But for him as well the question is the same - why does censorship weigh so heavily upon creative artists that question the authority over meaning.

Moreover, the ethical fallout of that controversy was a disaster. As a number of scholars sided with the clerical verdict (Husain 11). This therefore put the question, that is, what had happened to a culture that once boasted of liberal values?

Therefore, for Rushdie the dilemma was of the same nature as of Nabokov. That is how to deal with the world where censorship seems to be a major leading vice. This could be the Soviet Union or the multicultural states of the Anglophone world. For Rushdie the answer seemed to be much simpler. That is, regain the means of expression. In *Is Nothing Sacred?* Rushdie deals with the question, answers in the negative. That nothing is sacred therefore authors have the right to challenge and speak about anything (Rushdie 6).

But in a world where the forces of power and censorship hold the means of

communication, this is the key. If ideologies foster reality that delves deeper than truth. Truth itself has to be uttered somewhat differently. Rushdie's answer to the tyranny of rationalistic history was his enchanted realism. But faced with the world of clerical orders and illegal arrests, he following Nabokov revitalized allegory. This was to undermine the monologic nature of censorship.

Therefore, when Rushdie's first chapter of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* addresses it to the Shah of Blah, it becomes a poignant reminder. As he turns the decorum of language to present his palimpsest of reality. This reality is flexible and not in the least the clerical reality of the Shah of Blah and his acolytes.

## Allegory as an Apparatus for Political Reform

Haroun at the basest level is a children's story. But at a mature level it is a political satire of Swiftian aptitude. The narrative is simple. Haroun Khalifa, son of a great storyteller Rashid, embarks on a journey. As he aims to rediscover the magical storytelling capability of his father. But Haroun's narrative poses one serious question at the heart of the book. That is, "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?" (Rushdie 22). A question he asks Rashid Khalifa, his father the storyteller. This question had an extrinsic value as historically speaking the book was published after the clerical verdict was placed upon. Therefore, when Rushdie decided to pick on a story about telling a story about someone who has lost his ability to tell stories, he was making a political statement.

Because, through the clerical verdict Rushdie's mobility as a writer was curtailed, therefore it was imagined that the threat would silence him for good. But Rushdie answered back with a book about how to tell stories in a world where stories are denied.

But this mode of writing a satire against clerical orthodoxy had its own tradition in the West. That tradition was known as the allegory. Although popularized in the premodern world, allegory as a style was a result as Gomel notes, "a collocation of the ways of reading and writing that are born out of external socio-political pressures exerted upon literature" (Gomel 90). Nevertheless, allegory became a potent way of retelling history and political culture of the worlds where censorship was a daily affair. As it also provided for new ways of reading that enriched the experience. This was as it was, "predicated on its being akin to a code. In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another" (Gomel 91). Thus, for the informed readers it had an aspect of political intervention. Since, clerical and state orthodoxy prescribe monopoly over meaning before everything else, allegory creates the stylistics of imagination to confront censorship.

For that purpose, when Rushdie did indulge in this mode of writing he blurred the lines between fantasy, allegory with the political conditions of his world. Thus, Rushdie's story with real life imports also had a way of doing politically biased life writing. As a result when Khatam Shud appears in the story he becomes a prototype for Ayatollah with the clerical verdict, one that is out there to silence the world.

Having said so, a simple question rises to the fore: what is the endgame of allegory? For the purposes of these authors it serves a double function. Firstly, allegory with the aim of political intervention and social change accomplishes the task of narrating the stories that are prohibited. In doing so it functions as what Nayar argues as a cultural apparatus of human rights (Nayar 25). It does so through its advocacy of folklorising history in a magical garb full of master codes to be deciphered by an informed audience.

Secondly, it recognizes the gap between informed and misinformed citizenry. The form constitutes another layer of meaning. That layer demands a particular reading protocol. Which is not automatically available to all interpretative communities (Gomel 90). Thus, for preparing such grounds of recognition allegory trains the critical faculties of the readers. For that task these authors take literature to prepare such grounds upon which the ability to resist could breed.

To prepare the grounds for different mode of thinking it is essential to have a popular knowledge about resistance. Therefore it is stories that do the unthinkable that end up revitalizing our sense of freedom to question and to differ. And in doing so imagination as a fundamental right becomes a matter of life and death. It also becomes a ground for fostering healthy imagination. In such conditions literature becomes the essential right to train the cultures for expression.

However, if there's anything constant in Haroun then that is the rapidity of change. Thus, when Haroun enters the valley of K, he discovers that the climate of the place changes with the shift of the mood of the characters. As he says "the citizens... were so miserable that their sighs and groans condensed into a perpetual fog" (Rushdie 15). As this episode presents Haroun's world as a world of magical transformation, later in the book when he meets with Khatam Shud the nemesis of storytellers, Khatam ends up admitting a crucial truth,

"The world, however, is not for Fun.... The world is for Controlling."

"Which world?" Haroun made himself ask.

"Your world, my world, all worlds," came the reply. "They are all 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...." (Rushdie 161)

Thus, through this segment Rushdie does not merely reveal Khatam's character. He also reveals his inability to be the totalitarian that he projects himself to be. As with his cynical gesture he ends up claiming that he can not capture the inner world of imagination.

Moreover, this brings us to Nabokov and the question of erasure of imagination. As Nafisi once argued that *Invitation to a Beheading* shows us how we are implicated in the functioning of totalitarian forces (Nafisi 27). The ways in which we dance to their beat. Nabokov's story presents a different picture to Rushdie's world. He presents the reality of his world in far graver terms, for him, this world is a Kafkaesque dystopia.

Moreover, in the first chapter of this book the central character Cincinnatus is engaged in everyday life. But this everyday has a twist to it. As Cincinnatus is shown leaving prison, walking through the town, coming home, reaching the door of his room, and then entering his prison cell through this door. As Toker notes "it likewise does not matter whether he is supposed to be awake or asleep and dreaming of the adventure" (Toker 137).

Thus, within a minute we are presented with the ambiguity of the novel. But within ambiguity one question appears. That is how do we locate resistance in the world, where the characters are stuck in somebody else's imagination? Nabokov presents this vision both in *Lolita* and in this work. There, the imagination of the authoritative other dominates the world. Therefore, we interpret acts with the alignment of the authoritarian's vision. In this world the means of communication are owned and abused by figures. These figures are hardly present but always felt through the forces they exert upon the scenario. This is as in the Beheading nature of reality. It is also in *Lolita* interpretation of sexuality. Therefore, Nabokov's world poses the necessity to reclaim imagination both at a personal and social level.

The closest answer to enframe this world would be, it is a world of effacement and ambiguity. By effacement it simply means individuals within this world, are treated below the reaches of humanity. It is a world full of one-dimensional transparent figures. Those that can be easily read through. This is the result of selective means of suppression. Thus, when the authorities discover Cincinnatus, and his innate skill to be opaque in this world of enforced transparency, he is immediately incarcerated. This without any trial and cordially invited to confess the crimes he has unknowingly committed (Nabokov 25). Toker has argued that this world is the combination of the Russian and German elements in the setting. It suggests a caricature of Stalin's and Hitler's regimes (Toker 125) which seems elliptical at best. This is because of the nature of this book. Out of all his works this one in particular plays with meaning to such an extent. This book in a way becomes a metaphor for unreadability of effacement.

Moreover, with the ambiguity concerning the meaning of events, the usual strategy of allegorical reading fails. This is because from the text we are aware that the Cincinnatus is trapped in this fort (Nabokov 11). But we are very much uncertain about the status of the fort. Does the fort represent his physical detention or his spiritual prison? Therefore, the ambiguity of the book presents such a dilemma. It could be well argued that in the world of effacement the fort itself could be a figural emblem. For instance, in the final moments of the work, having already knelt by the block on the scaffold, Cincinnatus gets up and calmly walks away, wrecking the whole routine (Nabokov 223).

Nevertheless, the answer to reading such worlds and citing resistance in it becomes far more crucial for the complicated nature of the meaning over which a play is being staged. But unlike Toker who argued that, “Cincinnatus's ultimate achievement of freedom... clashes with the political interpretation of the novel: a dissenter in a totalitarian regime can attain neither liberty nor consolation through denying the reality of the regime” (Toker 125). Contrary to her the fact that in such a world of effacement that he could just walk out of the execution of his own will due to some political awakening. As at this point it does not matter whether it is his soul that leaves the execution or he loses the hold of his ideological captors. But it does indicate that in a world far suppressed below the reaches of action, mere agency to think, becomes a radical gesture of reclaiming meaning, and in the world of modern censorship the mere act of walking away shows subaltern means of resistance present at the level of ideology within the ambit of the work.

Because, at the foundational level even dystopian worlds of censorship, begin at the level of imagination. Thus as Khatam claimed even he cannot conquer the world of imagination. Therefore, by engaging in the ground work for recognizing and celebrating these feats of reclamation, allegorical fiction can enable a body of readers to fight for the right to imagination.

## Where It All Ends

Nussbaum reminds us that democracies survive not merely through institutions but through the cultivation of “narrative imagination” the capacity to see the world from perspectives other than one's own (89). This capacity is not an embellishment of culture but a civic necessity. In societies where censorship restricts expression, imagination becomes the last refuge of human freedom. It is the faculty through which individuals reclaim the dignity that regimes attempt to erode, and literature becomes the medium through which this right is exercised and defended. Rushdie and Nabokov, though writing from different political climates, reveal that imagination is not merely a creative resource but a political right. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Haroun's question about the usefulness of stories foregrounds what is at stake when

storytelling is suppressed. Rushdie's response suggests that without stories, individuals lose the ability to envision alternatives to coercive power. The world contracts into a narrow frame sanctioned by authority. By dramatising the struggle to preserve the Ocean of Stories, Rushdie positions imagination as a safeguard of civics dissent: the right to imagine is the right to challenge, revise, and reinvent.

Nabokov's *Cincinnatus* provides a complimentary picture of this struggle. Living in a world determined to render him completely transparent, he asserts his humanity through opacity. Through an inner imagination that cannot be mapped by totalitarian logic. His final act of calmly walking away from the scaffold is less an escape from the execution than a declaration that imagination creates a space of autonomy that no authority can occupy. If Rushdie dramatises the public stakes of imagination, Nabokov illuminates its existential stakes, thus imagination becomes the condition of inner freedom.

Moreover, Nayar's argument that literature operates as a cultural apparatus of human rights clarifies how both writers intervene in the politics of censorship. Through allegory, satire, and surrealism, they train the reader to perceive the subtle mechanisms by which authority seeks to control meaning itself. Literature thereby becomes the locus of ethical and political resistance, cultivating readers who can imagine alternatives to authoritarian forms of life.

Thus, the right to imagination emerges as the unifying thread between Rushdie and Nabokov. It is not peripheral to the debates on censorship, it is foundational to them. When states constrict imagination, they constrict the future itself. Rushdie's oceanic archive of stories and Nabokov's dissolving scaffold both assert that imagination is a realm of radical possibility: a space where new values may be conceived, oppressive realities contested, and human dignity protected against coercive control.

To defend imagination is to defend the full architecture of human freedom. It ensures that spaces of thought both private and public, remain open to reinvention, dissent, and wonder. Literature's lasting power lies in this capacity to reclaim meaning from the grasps of authority. The right to imagination is therefore the right to remake this world, to resist its imposed limits, and to imagine futures beyond the reach of censorship.

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