

Intersecting Feminism, Power, History, and Myth: Unveiling Empires in Salman Rushdie's *Victory City*

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2025.4.09.1025>

Abstract

Empires are built and dismantled, and when you excavate a bit in history, you will find that these very forces upon which they are supposed to rest and upon which they should be, are strangely relied on to build and rule them. That is a plot device of the crashing and the coalescing of civilizations. The concept of a lasting empire has been a long time interest among the strong powers of the world. Another grand creation of Salman Rushdie is Bisnaga, fictional name and resemblance of Vijayanagara Empire, in his novel, Victory City. It is attributed to Pampa Kampana, a poet, prophetess, and perhaps architect of a whole world that no longer exists, as attributed with magical powers of varying divinity. The book creates a rich tapestry of ideas which influence commoners and kings with cultural and political influence. The multilayered narrative structure of Rushdie makes it possible to explore the magic realism in a dense way and the plot of the story is even more immersive. One of the main themes is the same due to the female navigations of patriarchal society, their survival among them and hard work to save their unique identities. That is a thread which continues to sound in the novel. I am trying to analyze the intersection of feminism, power, myth and history in the narrative of Rushdie, to reveal the intricate interconnection between the concepts in the context of his novel, Victory City.

Keywords: Feminism, magical realism, power, myth, empowerment, recalcitrance, identity crisis and renaissance.

1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie recreates the lost Vijayanagara empire of the 14th century using the mythical figure of Pampa Kampana who cuts across the ages by deftly intertwining myth, history and fantasy. Rushdie employs his epic style in the narration to relate the events of the past and the present issues that go on in the real world, such as power and politics, revolt, and stand up, renaissance, and complete destruction. He cogently brings out the role of women in society and more to the point, the close connection between the political arena and culture. This reconstruction of a lost world in general can assist us in understanding why the past remains relevant to us today as well as provide us with a glimpse into a bright future. Magical realism and historical episodes amalgamate to present the flip side of the widely accepted events, exploring the themes of cultural identity and feminism. The manifold meaning of human endeavours and the quest to control nature uncover the historical cycles with multiple meanings. The resilient perceptions of a nation and its history are subjected to deconstruction to reflect the transient nature of man-made ideas. The indomitable human spirit and its capacity to reinvigorate and reinvent from the dead ashes challenge the adversities speculated by any unimaginable odd forces and form the core of the novel.

Tracing Intersection among Feminism, Power, History and Myth

Pampa Kampana, a sobriquet for Goddess Parvathi, is an enigmatic 247-year-old legendary blind poet in the novel *Victory City* by Salman Rushdie. Rushdie, through Pampa Kampana,

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adeptly provides a multi-layered and exhilarating historical narrative by interlacing feminism, power and myth. He skilfully weaves the reimagined historical episodes to foreground an epic narrative of a relatively forgotten historical empire. As a work of historical fiction, the novel surpasses the vast temporal and spatial boundaries of literature. It provides a complex and metaphorical image of history by constructing a web of narratives resting squarely on the broad recurring power structure and chronicles the enduring human struggle for liberty and distinctiveness. He endeavours to reconnoitre the intersection connecting myth and history and explores, with a renewed vigour of magical realism, the contemporary universal issues of power, despotism and resistance. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris comment:

Magical realism... presents an alternative view of reality where the supernatural is not excluded but incorporated into the natural world. This fusion of real and magical elements challenges the dominance of ... rationalism, offering a hybrid vision of reality where the impossible becomes plausible. The result is a subversive genre that questions the authority of dominant worldviews, suggesting that reality is not monolithic but multivalent. (7)

As a key work in Rushdie's oeuvre, the novel mirrors the rise and fall of empires. It is set in a fictional kingdom, Bisnaga, probing the formation of history through omniscient power- a life changing, corrupting force. It unravels the intricate spirit of gender and identity that shapes societies with multiple cultures fused together through war, migration and other known and unknown reasons. He adroitly weaves a captivating narrative, crafting an arresting saga that reflects on power, myth, and resistance in ways that reverberate with both historically and contemporarily relevant subjects. Pampa Kampana, the protagonist of the novel, witnesses the massacre and mass suicide of women when an empire unleashes its reign of terror and tries to trample another empire during war. The nameless wars symbolise the insignificance of murderous actions by men with expansionist ambitions.

The turbulent history of India has abundant instances of so many unnamed wars where the north tries to subjugate the south. Several of them are christened, but the majority don't have a name. Fought ferociously on the battlefield by opposing forces, they nevertheless fade into oblivion, eluding the hawk-eyed historians of the period. Some of them are considered so irrelevant that they remain obscure from the pages of historical texts. Pampa Kampana witnesses so many minor skirmishes in her early life that later become too dreadful to her. The trauma and angst of the horrific incidents ignite in her the eternal flame to live. She is destined to become the sole creator of a formidable empire which she hopes will endure for at least a millennium. As a child she imbibes the craft of pottery from her mother and later becomes the author and creator of an allegorical kingdom of Bisnaga, a historical recreation of the erstwhile Vijayanagara empire (14 CE-16 CE) through magical power. She becomes the chronicler of the history of an empire by compiling the epic Jayaparajaya. She creates a vast empire through the seeds of wisdom given to her by the all-knowing celestial deity. Pampa, or lord Parvati, forecasts:

From blood and fire... life and power will be born. In this exact place a great city will rise, the wonder of the world, and its empire will last for more than two centuries. And you... will fight to make sure that no more women are ever burned in this fashion, and that men start considering women in new ways, and you will live just long enough to witness both your success and your failure, to see it all and tell its story, even though once you have finished telling it you will die immediately and nobody will remember you for four hundred and fifty years. (12)

Bisnaga, the fictionalised version of the historical Vijayanagara Empire, transcends its status as a historical setting highlighting the frailties inherent in human endeavours related to the creation of a society, a community, a culture and an empire. The five Raya brothers claiming lunar lineage and their inevitability in siring fictionalised metropolises with the help of Pampa invoke the notion of 'Shakti'- the power of creation. The admirable strength with which the feminine power uses the generosity of nature to create an empire is a testimony to the 'Nari Shakti' envisioned in the legendary Indian epics. The grand portrayal and development of Bisnaga through unorthodox manners generate a sense of curiosity and fear among the readers regarding the impending doom. It asserts the fact that the reason for the decline of empires lies within itself, though history, almost every time, accords this credit to external invasions.

The peculiar case of five remonstrances in the novel states the cardinal policies of resistance in a society and is a typical reference to the political and cultural revolution that lies at the heart of an empire. There is incessant action between the repulsive forces in a society. The friction is necessary for the continuous revamping of the administrative system that tends to decay if no radical change is initiated by the visionary administrators. Rushdie tries to uncover the hidden chapter in the history by exploring the conceit of rulers who, in vain, try to challenge the potential forces of history, only to be ruined by their own greed, dishonesty and hubris. Several instances of treachery, political conspiracies and moral decay, along with indispensable human flaws, contribute to the eventual disgraceful collapse of an empire. As Arnold J. Toynbee states:

Great civilizations are not murdered; instead, they take their own lives. The breakdown of a civilization is not caused by external forces, but by internal decay. As the leadership becomes complacent and loses the creative vision that made the civilization great, the empire falls into disrepair, and then collapse becomes inevitable. The role of external pressures is merely to accelerate the process of decline that has already set in from within. (321)

Pampa Kampana, with a feminist undercurrent, is the most noteworthy character of *Victory City*. She participates in shaping the history of her created empire and vehemently declines to be relegated as a passive observer standing alone at the periphery of history. Her magical abilities make her a formidable woman of Bisnaga, guiding its rulers and she becomes both the literal and metaphorical mother of the empire. Her indomitable spirit makes her powerful enough to control every narrative of the city. She wilfully ignores and even surpasses the red lines of the male chauvinistic moral codes meant to govern and subjugate a thriving society. Her complex character wields immense power, enabling her to singlehandedly design the destiny of an empire through her determined demeanour. She constantly struggles to defy the masculine forces trying to marginalise the women. Pampa, in the novel, asserts her feministic authority, advocating vast roles for the women in a patriarchal society. She states:

You see around you the formidable women of the palace guard. And you must know that we have women medicos, women accountants, women judges, and women bailiffs too. We believe in our women...Why then should we not allow a woman to rule over us? To deny this possibility is an untenable position. It must be rethought. (93-94)

Pampa Kampana adorns several roles in the novel and is a dominating figure manipulating the life of her own creations. She advocates prominent roles for all the women who are complacently expunged from history and are deprived of their fair place in the narrative of the empire. She becomes a form of resistance, as she fights to make sure that her voice is heard and her contributions are remembered. The novel's feminist tides are further reinforced by

the portrayal of other female characters, who constantly struggle against the constraints of patriarchy and societal expectations. The subtle nuances of feminist streams present a simple but refined narrative of female empowerment.

The novel, with its intrigue, wrestles with the complexities of power and gender. Pampa's power turns out to be both a boon and a bane, as it impedes her from engaging others and forces her to bear the weight of an entire empire's destiny. Her forced exile from Bisnaga for 132 years underscores the fact that power wielders had, have and will execute their policies despite ages. Power acts as morphine, adorning at the same time both medicinal and narcotic attributes according to the state in which it is administered. Pampa's story throws light upon the customs in which the women's contributions are often erased by those in power, even as they remain quintessential to the functioning of society. As Gloria Steinem promptly states:

For centuries, women have been either invisible to history, or their roles distorted by patriarchal structures of power. We are now beginning to reclaim that history, not just as victims but as agents of change. This means not only questioning traditional narratives but also creating new ones—new stories, new ideas, new possibilities for what it means to be a woman. The personal is political, and by understanding the ways our private lives are shaped by broader systems of oppression, we begin to dismantle those systems. (216)

Pampa's influential role earnestly enables her to challenge and subvert the traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society, with her enigmatic magical powers empowering her to become a force that shapes the course of the empire's history. Through her divine intervention, she becomes the representative of women in a society struggling to earn and establish a distinct identity of their own. The mythical empire has her in its heart, a rare role for a female character in the genre of historical fiction. The creator herself is challenged by her own creation, heightening the mercurial anticipation of an impending and inevitable doom. She comes to terms with a fundamental truth of creation that every creator must bear: the necessity of acknowledging the free will of the created, which emerges from life's inherent uncertainty. Nature, after creation, arguably grants the created the essential freedom for self-determination and the ability to chart its own course.

The multiple realms of freedom enable beings to make independent decisions they believe will alter the course of their lives. Once the initial act of creation is realised, the creator can scarcely impose his or her indomitable will upon the creations. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms rarely permit feminist voices to be heard and, almost invariably, suppress their acknowledgement. Pampa's feminist ideals directly confront the dominating male conservatism resisting radical change in the social fabric of Bisnaga. Thus, it becomes apparent that the struggle of Pampa for gender equality is not a personal battle but one that is symbolic of broader societal conflicts.

The mythical recreation of a fictionalised kingdom and its captivating historical events through a woman's vision justifies a feminist reinterpretation of the past. The novel's mesmerising narrative positions women at the centre of the creation and sustenance of an empire. This counters traditional historical narratives in which women are often marginalised and relegated to the periphery of society. The intrepid voice of Pampa, with adept use of magical realism, empowers her to become the dominant character wielding immense power to shape both the past and the future. She is abandoned by her mother and becomes the mother of all Bisnagans. The novelist, by blending myth with fiction, creates Pampa Kampana. His creation successfully conceptualises a feminist metaphor to reclaim and reshape the

historical narratives that are predominantly shaped by men. Her trysts with male characters, both natives and foreigners, are mesmerising tales that subvert the existing patriarchal norms. As Judith Butler comments:

If one is a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific attributes of gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts. [...] Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given point in time. An open coalition for an open contestation of the term must be preferred to the totalizing goal of rendering coherent or fixed the identity of 'women.' (16)

Pampa creates Bisnaga with a specific vision that includes gender equality, where women can live with dignity and have distinctive individuality as men. Bisnaga flourishes under these ideals. She advocates a woman ruler for Bisnaga. If a woman can create an empire, then undoubtedly, she can be an able administrator also. Pampa Kampana frequently challenges the belief that men are destined to rule and women to be ruled. She asserts that a woman can be a compassionate and bold ruler possessing the calibre and insight to refine the system and protect it by efficiently tackling the shortcomings, if any. Women, she contends, can take decisions that favour their subjects and seldom succumb to the hubris that so often distorts the decisions of men. In her view, the empathetic disposition of women rulers, despite inevitable flaws, can fortify the very foundations of society, enabling it to withstand threatening forces both external and internal. As Pampa says in the novel:

All over the city women were doing what, elsewhere in the country, was thought of as work unsuitable for them. Here was a lawyer's office staffed by women advocates and women clerks, there you could see strong women laborers unloading goods from barges tethered at the dock on the riverbank. There were women policing the streets, and working as scribes, and pulling teeth, and beating mridangam drums while men danced to the rhythm in a square. (39)

The utopia of Pampa begins to fracture along the fault lines, reflecting the complications in maintaining feminist ideals in a world still predominated by conventional and patriarchal structures. The eventual decline of Bisnaga highlights the difficulty in sustaining feminist ideals in a resistant society. Pampa's struggle is against chauvinistic men and against a whole system of thought that limits the potential of women. The conventional patriarchal ideology with its fault lines predominates the society. Any instance to challenge the dominance shatters the social fabric, resulting in chaos and anarchy. She tries to change the orthodox temperament and shows the rich and productive mode for a society where women are seen as equals and liberty prevails. Her ideology has few disciples, and eventually she loses the individual battle. However, the broad feminist ideals that sprout from her resonate as history to the progeny, ensuring her enduring legacy.

Rushdie dextrously uses historical events as the backdrop for his fiction, thus blending fact with imagination to develop an imaginary world that resembles both the real and the surreal. In *Victory City*, the fictional city of Bisnaga surrealistically resembles the Vijayanagara Empire, one of the most powerful and culturally influential Hindu kingdoms in South India that flourished between the 14th and 16th centuries. Rushdie appropriates selected historical moments to interrogate the fluidity of power and legacy. In the novel, Pampa Kampana conjures the city of Bisnaga through her magical abilities and this act of genesis expands into an empire. The trajectory foregrounds the text's central proposition: history operates as a narrative discourse produced and continually reshaped by those who exercise authority. In

this sense, what passes as history often represents a strategic manipulation of facts serving the vested interests of the powerful. As Pampa states:

The death of the first king is also the birth of a dynasty, she said, “and another word for the evolution of a dynasty is history. On this day Bisnaga moves out of the realm of the fantastic into that of the historical, and the great river of its story flows into the ocean of stories which is the history of the world. (79)

The history, thus compiled, shows the inclination to exclude various perspectives of recorded events. Almost all the time it obscures the voice of the marginalized and obviously, the defeated. The women in the novel, including Pampa, struggle to make sure that their voice is heard. Their words fall flat on deaf ears. The other oppressed group of people also struggle to claim their rightful place in history. The personal female bodyguards of her brothers-in-law, who later become their respective wives, do not stand for a common purpose. The beings Pampa brings into existence perform their assigned roles with impeccable precision yet never contemplate the necessity to fortify the empire’s boundaries in order to render it impervious to destruction. The novel frames history not as a fixed truth but as an ongoing process of narrativisation, continually reconstructed and instrumentalised by those intent on preserving their own hegemonic version of events. Rushdie’s portrayal of history as fiction sparks a controversial ruckus regarding the authenticity of the history. He foregrounds the notion that collective memory is in itself an assembled collection of stories whose selective recall actively shapes the past, conditions the present, and eventually projects the future. As David Cowart comments:

Historical fiction, like historiography, is a form of interpretation. While the historian is bound to the factual record, the historical novelist has the freedom to invent, to embellish, to imagine what might have been. But the two practices are not as far apart as they might seem: both are engaged in the process of making sense of the past, of imposing a narrative structure on the chaos of events. (27)

History then becomes an instrument of power to Rushdie. He vividly captures the facts and the individuals in this particular dynamism that leaves us believing that those who dictate the story, are the very ones who influence the way in which history is understood by the generations to come and in fact revision the history. As Jerome de Groot points out:

Historical novels attempt to reconstruct the past, but they are also deeply embedded in the present, negotiating contemporary concerns through the lens of history. The genre is concerned not only with recreating a specific period but with drawing parallels between that period and the present day, often using historical events as a way of interrogating modern ideologies, values, and social structures. The tension between historical fidelity and creative license is one of the defining characteristics of the historical novel, and it is this tension that allows the genre to function as both historical commentary and entertainment. (5)

It is not only a fictional world of Bisnaga, but it is also a critique that extends directly into our reality. It is clear that Rushdie is aimed at leading us to the *Victory City* as the reflection of contemporary politics, namely, the emergence of the aura of totalitarianism and the weakness of democratic procedures. The novel continues to recirculate the notion of what we read and why. The history of the empire is made by those who desire to enjoy the glamour of authority and even the mere narration could be turned into a means of control, creating a meta-narrative. In this perspective, history is simply an imaginary system upon which leaders play with to impose their truth on the upcoming generations. The book excavates the power corrupts in such a variety of manners and how simple it is to slip into oppression by society. It is a megaphone of the continuous political nonsense of the 21st century that has us hooked

on the tensions that make our world. It reverberates and amplifies the persisting political cauldron of the 21st century. As Louis O. Mink comments:

We must acknowledge that the creation of historical narrative involves not just a recounting of events but a patterning of them into a structure that makes them intelligible and meaningful. The same process is at work in historical fiction, where the writer chooses, arranges, and interprets historical events within the framework of a fictional narrative... The idea that history and fiction are fundamentally different is based on a misunderstanding of how both work: both are forms of narrative construction, and both are, in different ways, efforts to make sense of the past through the act of storytelling. (557)

Rushdie skilfully uses mythology as a crafty tool to explore the critical themes of annihilation, recreation and the recurring character of power. The genesis and obliteration of people, dynasties and empires are important thematical sources for Rushdie that enable him to recreate the deliberately forgotten events and bridge the missing links to connect myth, history and magical realism. It also engages in a literary scrutiny of the complex nexus among power, history and myth, along with gender. Pampa Kampana germinates from the fertile soil of history with mythical features to supplement her existence and justify her longevity. She imbibes and embodies the power of words to shape a world of her conviction. She becomes the omniscient creator, mirroring the acts of Gods, bringing a whole new world of existence and providing the created with a narrated story which, by the passage of time, becomes their official history. Magical realism, with the help of history and myth, seeks meaning in the chaos of life. As Jean-Pierre Durix comments:

Magic realism functions as a bridge between different conceptions of reality. In the postcolonial context, it allows writers to challenge the colonizer's imposition of a single, 'rational' reality and instead present a hybrid world where the real and the supernatural coexist. This fusion enables the expression of subjugated voices, those who have been silenced by the dominant discourses of colonialism. Thus, magic realism becomes not only a literary device but a political statement that resists the binaries of colonizer/colonized, real/unreal, and Western/non-Western. (54)

The fictional city of Bisnaga is infused with allegorical significance, with its many characters, both women and men, donning the roles of monarchs, partisans, and anti-heroes. They all possess larger-than-life personas, enhancing their status at par with that of epic legends. This is the sanitising and filtering process with which historical figures of the erstwhile and contemporary real-world empires redraft their own histories to deify their powerful authorities and justify their actions. The absolute power that corrupts finds its way into the fine fault lines and crevices of an empire, resulting in its downfall and destruction. The internal decay and moral corruption gradually gnaw and grind the seemingly strong edifices and social customs, though epidermically they may seem impervious. The totalitarian regimes relying on power to terrorise the population for an everlasting rule fail to acknowledge the ephemerality of power.

Myth transcending time and culture fosters the historical fiction of Rushdie. In the novel, too, the creation of Bisnaga, its history, customs and social norms prove the intersection of the celestial and the corporeal, blending myth with history. Pampa uses her magical powers, exploiting all the available resources, educating the feminist ideals that form the basic foundation of its social edifice. In the novel, the supernatural elements flawlessly merge with the historical events of the story. The gods actively partake, much like in ancient mythologies, in shaping the destiny of the mythical Bisnaga. Pampa, like the mythical Methuselah, has a life where divine intervention seldom falters to directly influence human affairs. Her extended life for centuries creates a sense of timelessness, reflecting the immortality often granted to

mythological figures. Her mesmerisingly long life suffused with divine power metamorphoses her from an ordinary human to the creator of Bisnaga's history. It undoubtedly reinforces the idea and use of myth as a narrative tool spanning ages and civilisations. Thus, it is determined that the distinguishing borders between reality and myth distort in the fictional world of *Victory City*. As Salman Rushdie states:

Magical realism is not simply a literary style but a way of seeing the world. For writers from formerly colonized nations, it becomes a way to reclaim histories that were erased or distorted by colonial powers. By combining the real and the magical, we are able to represent the complexity of our histories, our societies, and our identities. Magical realism refuses to privilege the 'rational' over the 'irrational,' and in doing so, it resists the very structures of power that seek to marginalize alternative ways of knowing. (301)

The novel contemplates on the evanescent nature of human power and focusses the historical lens onto the timeless exploration of civilizations. *Victory City* ascertains that all humans and other creations of the world disintegrate over time only to resurrect later in different forms within the historical cycle, standing tall as a lighthouse to guide the future generations through the bleak eons of chaos with immortal stories embedded as history. As Pampa prophetically states at the end of her journey:

Nothing endures, but nothing is meaningless either. We rise, we fall, we rise again, and again we fall. We go on. I too have succeeded and I have also failed. Death is close now. In death do triumph and failure humbly meet. We learn far less from victory than from defeat. (314)

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's *Victory City*, offers a complex, multi-layered feminist critique that weaves power, history, myth and magical realism to narrate the rise and fall of a legendary empire. Through her divine visionary powers, Pampa Kampana, the central character, shapes the evolution and history of Bisnaga over centuries, placing gender equality at the core of the narrative and persistently subverts the patriarchal norms to liberate the oppressed. The novel challenges authoritarian versions of history by manipulating and reconstructing events, dextrously utilising the concepts of myth. The friction between the real and the imagined exposes the porous boundary between history and fiction. Even as Bisnaga sinks into oblivion, the narrative emphasizes how patriarchal power and human vulnerability combine to corrode empires from within, highlighting the transience of grandeur civilisations. The epic deployment of myth thus operates as a feminist counter-narrative, stitching together fragmented memories and stories to reclaim a suppressed past.

Rushdie creates a macrocosmic fictional world that challenges and restructures the conventional patriarchal systems. The novel offers a subtle portrayal of the creation, sustenance and growth of empires while exposing the deep power dynamics that are embedded in myths and histories which are crafted by the survivors of conflict. *Victory City*, by placing feminism at its centre, explores the possibilities of resistance and reimagines the historical and cultural perspectives to foreground a more inclusive truth. Rushdie shows that patriarchal norms are not merely social but also narrative structures that shape collective memory. His narrative highlights how female voices which were repressed and marginalised, can become decisive forces in reshaping and retelling the influential stories of power, culture and identity. Through this intersection of personal and political histories, the novel eventually becomes a seminal work in contemporary debates on gender, power and myth, revealing how storytelling determines both the rise and the fragility of empires.

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