The Context: Journal of English Studies
Volume 12, Issue 6, September 2025
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

Article

Rewriting Empire: Historiographic Metafiction in Salman Rushdie's *Victory City*

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Accepted version published on 5th September 2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17059756

Abstract: This paper looks at Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* as a fictional account that reimagines history by blending fact, myth, and narrative manipulation. At the centre of the novel is Pampa Kampana, who not only shapes the empire of Bisnaga but also narrates its rise and fall. This narrative is particularly compelling because it challenges the way history is written and remembered. *Victory City* illustrates the connection between power, memory, and storytelling, particularly when the stories originate from those who are often excluded from historical records. The paper, through the lens of Linda Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafiction, examines Rushdie's use of metafiction, magical realism, and parody to challenge dominant historical narratives. Through Pampa's role as creator and chronicler, the novel highlights how history is not just recorded but invented, often shaped by ideology. The use of intertextual references to Indian epics, colonial travelogues, and religious symbolism adds further complexity to the narrative. Rushdie critiques patriarchal and religious authority while also portraying the resilience of narrative itself. By tracing themes of exile, identity, and cultural erasure, the paper argues that *Victory City* is not just a story about a fictional kingdom but a commentary on real-world histories that are constantly rewritten. Ultimately, it suggests the timelessness of fiction, where monuments and empires perish.

Keywords: historiographic metafiction; storytelling; memory; gender; magical realism; rewriting history

ISSN 2349-4948

"But in the end, stories are about one person saying to another: This is the way it feels to me. Can you understand what I am saying? Does it also feel this way to you?" (Ishiguro)

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* explores the rise and fall of the Vijayanagara Empire through the fictional epic *Jayaparajaya*, written by the protagonist Pampa Kampana. The novel fits within the framework of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to describe fictional texts that self-consciously reflect on the writing of history while blurring the lines between historical fact and literary invention. By incorporating fantastical elements, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, *Victory City* interrogates dominant historical narratives and the very nature of how history is constructed. This paper examines *Victory City* as a work of historiographic metafiction. It analyses how Rushdie draws from historical sources, mythology, political allegory, and literary parody to create a multi-layered narrative that challenges conventional historiography. The novel employs magical realism not merely as an aesthetic flourish, but as a tool to subvert linear, patriarchal, and monolithic histories.

Methodology

The present research aims at analysing Salman Rushdie's novel, Victory City, as a work of historical metafiction. Although several critical studies have been done on Rushdie's literary compositions, none have analysed the most recent composition of Rushdie through the lens of Hutcheon's theory of history. Many literary articles discuss Rushdie as a pioneer of magical realism and postcolonial writing. Michiko Kakutani in, *Critic's Notebook; Telling Truth through Fantasy: Rushdie's Magic Realism*, while tracing the increased use of magical realism writes that magical realism has flourished in the troubled parts of the world, the use of this goes beyond magical realism as a literary technique, it serves as a mirror of reality in which the surreal elements have become part of everyday life. Taking the example of Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, he writes of the hallucinatory aspect of magical realism as an attempt to capture the chaos that is contemporary reality and its resemblance to a nightmare or a dream. Magical realism combines mythical elements with realistic settings and circumstances. By fusing the everyday and unusual, it pushes the limits of reality and produces a distinctive, frequently bizarre narrative experience. Magical realism is a significant storytelling tool that Rushdie employs in his books, including Midnight's Children and The Satanic Verses, to explore complex subjects, challenge accepted narratives, and engage with historical and political contexts.

In his essay *"Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie addresses the need for rewriting history himself*. He states that the act of writing in itself is a political act, talking about Richard Wright, who said that black and white Americans are at a truce with each other over the nature of reality. To change the world, the first step is to redefine it. According to him, the need to redescribe becomes more prominent at a time when the state starts to distort reality, altering the past to fit the present needs of the state. Here arises the need

ISSN 2349-4948

to write and create alternate realities; through this, the author attempts to challenge the official, distorted political truth. He takes examples of how facts were distorted during the war in Bangladesh, and that no atrocities were committed by the Pakistani army, in order to suit the state's needs at the time. He hopes that literature might help shed light on the discrepancy between the official facts and the truth.

Gavriel Rosenfeld, in his essay, discusses "allohistorical narratives," which are tales of alternate history, a genre of speculative narrative representation. He argues that history, though rooted in the past, affects the present not only at the societal or political level but also at a personal level. By questioning and speculating about "what if?" certain past events might not have occurred or might have occurred differently, we are projecting our feelings about the present times. The same aspects are involved in the narratives of alternate history; they are not just explorations of the past, but can also be utilised to comment upon the present. It reflects the author's fears and hopes, as seen in Rushdie's confessions in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands." The tales of alternate history also shed light on the evolution of historical memory. Rushdie, in his essay, mentions that remembering one's history is similar to collecting broken mirrors; this challenges the linear narratives of history.

Discussion

Historiographic metafiction is characterised by its engagement with the past while simultaneously questioning the reliability of historical representation. According to Hutcheon, such texts foreground their fictional status and expose the ideologies underlying historical discourse. In *Victory City,* Rushdie fictionalises historical events surrounding the Vijayanagara Empire, blending them with myth and fantasy. The character Pampa Kampana, who lives for 247 years, becomes both the creator and chronicler of the empire. Her epic is later "translated" by an unnamed narrator, raising questions about narrative authority. Intertextuality is central to this genre. The novel draws heavily from Indian epics such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana.* Pampa's exile mirrors that of Draupadi and Sita, reinforcing the cyclic nature of exile and return as a feminine rite of passage. Pampa and her daughters retreat to the enchanted forest of women, paralleling the Pandavas' vanavas and agyatvas. This forest functions not only as a refuge but also as a site of spiritual and emotional regeneration, subverting traditional representations of exile as punishment. Additionally, Rushdie weaves in elements from *The Jungle Book.* The pink monkeys that disrupt the forest's harmony represent colonial forces, echoing Kipling's monkey people. Pampa's own sons turn against her, and their fanatical zeal is supported by the rewriting of history, through which they write about Pampa as a witch. Like Mowgli in Kipling's story, Pampa is ousted through narrative manipulation.

The novel explores the intersection of politics and historiography. Rushdie critiques the role of state power in shaping historical memory. In the narrative, the renaming of Vijayanagara to Bisnaga by the Portuguese traveller Domingo Nunes and its acceptance by Pampa allegorise colonial renaming and erasure. Bukka's reaction, that "the day will come when we will no longer allow foreigners to tell us who we are (36), reflects a resistance to imposed identities. Rushdie also comments on religious

intolerance and political fanaticism. When Pampa is exiled, her city is ruled by her son Bhagwat Sangama, a bigot and puppet of the religious zealot Vidyasagar. Under their reign, religious pluralism collapses, echoing post-partition communal tensions. The enforced homogeneity and destruction of cultural diversity under this regime critique modern religious nationalism. Historical parallels are evident. The pink monkeys arrive first as traders, much like the British East India Company. Rushdie allegorises their eventual dominance through trade, cultural disruption, and political manipulation. His portrayal of divide-and-rule strategies, where monkeys of different colours are turned against one another, mirrors the communal tensions seeded by British colonial policies.

Rushdie's engagement with visual culture is another layer of metafiction. Pampa, entrusted with overseeing the empire's arts, promotes erotic sculpture as sacred, drawing from *the Kamasutra and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.* This visual representation of union and desire challenges the puritanical view of sexuality as shameful. Public erotic art becomes a symbol of liberated femininity and holistic cosmology, subverting both Western and patriarchal moral frameworks. Later, Pampa is honoured with a statue. However, she rejects the idea that her legacy be carved in stone, emphasising the permanence of narrative over monument. The novel affirms that stories endure where empires fall, underscoring the ephemeral nature of political power in contrast to the enduring power of words. Rushdie subverts traditional gender roles through Pampa, who occupies both maternal and sovereign roles. She marries Hukka for political strategy but maintains her love for the Portuguese explorer Domingo Nunes. Her decision to have multiple partners and bear children without concern for patriarchal lineage is portrayed not as a moral failure but as autonomy. Pampa challenges the notion that a woman's sexual behaviour must conform to societal expectations. Rushdie satirises the deification of women by showing how Pampa's sons and others attempt to turn her into a divine, untouchable figure, thereby removing her agency. Pampa resists this by affirming her humanity and imperfection. Her candid acknowledgement of her pregnancy without knowing the father mocks patriarchal anxiety over bloodline and inheritance. Rushdie also includes queer subtexts. Yuktasri, one of Pampa's daughters, rejects heteronormativity and chooses to live with the jungle women. Though never explicitly labelled, her story challenges the compulsory heterosexuality of traditional epics.

The novel's core lies in its reimagining of historical process. Pampa literally whispers identities into existence, crafting a fabricated origin for the people of Bisnaga. This dramatises the idea that all histories are constructed. The novel affirms that stories shape not only memory but identity and power. Pampa asserts, "fiction could be as powerful as history (48). Rushdie aligns this with real historical documents. The Portuguese traveller Domingo Paes visited Vijayanagara and recorded his impressions. Rushdie situates him within the fictional narrative, blurring the lines between historical fact and creative invention. By using real historical figures and invented ones interchangeably, Rushdie questions what constitutes legitimate history. The critique extends to the Partition. The novel's account of forced migration and communal conflict parallels the Radcliffe Line and its aftermath. When Pampa returns to Bisnaga, she finds

ISSN 2349-4948

her city ruled by religious extremism. Her longing to reclaim it reflects a more profound mourning for a pluralistic society lost to ideological violence.

The novel frequently draws attention to its own artifice. The unnamed narrator refers to himself as a "spinner of yarns"(9), acknowledging the constructed nature of his tale. At times, he interrupts the narrative to critique or skip parts of Pampa's original text, such as when he omits passages about horses. This editorial intervention foregrounds the selective and interpretive nature of storytelling. Pampa's contradictions are also exposed. For instance, she claims her son authored a work written before he was born. The narrator asks whether this was an honest mistake or a case of false modesty. The reader is left to speculate, highlighting the impossibility of knowing absolute truth in any historical account. Parody is a key tool in historiographic metafiction. Rushdie parodies the sage figure through Vidyasagar, whose name means "ocean of knowledge (13), but who abuses Pampa for years. He embodies the hypocrisy of patriarchal wisdom, preaching peace while practising violence. Rushdie uses humour to expose the hollowness of male authority, particularly when the populace mocks puppet kings like Bhagwat Sangama. The novel also parodies exile, a common trope in Indian epics. While the Pandavas and Rama emerge wiser from their time in the forest, Pampa's sons do not. Their exile fails to redeem them. Rushdie subverts the moral arc traditionally associated with exile, demonstrating that suffering does not always lead to wisdom.

Conclusion

Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe works of historical fiction that are conscious of their existence as fiction and simultaneously engage with the process of historical representation. In a work of historiographic metafiction, the author delves into the multiple narratives and perspectives surrounding historical events. No doubt the role of history is paramount, but historiographic metafiction does not negate it. Instead, it celebrates it by engaging with the historical context. Authors delve into the historical, cultural, and political factors surrounding the historical context and bring them to life through their storytelling. They prompt readers to develop a deeper and more critical understanding of the past. Historiographic metafiction is criticised for blurring the boundary between truth and fiction and potentially misrepresenting historical personalities and events. The works of historiographic metafiction are criticised for mixing truth with fiction, which can deceive readers and spread historical inaccuracies. On the other hand, historiographic metafiction is clearly marked as fiction, which encourages readers to engage critically and recognise that it presents an interpretation of history rather than a straightforward account. It encourages readers to consider other viewpoints and challenge the boundaries of historical truth.

Victory City celebrates artistic innovations and creative storytelling techniques, opening up new possibilities for engaging with history. The novel raises questions about the subjective nature of historical interpretation by making the reader aware of the construction of history, as well as the biases and limitations inherent in historical accounts. Criticism of Historical metafiction suggests that it fosters scepticism about

ISSN 2349-4948

history by highlighting and questioning the constructed nature of historical narratives, contributing to the decline of public trust in historical studies and the pursuit of historical truth. It becomes imperative to understand that historical metafiction is not the rejection of history but rather a critical engagement with the past. The novel, through its use of magical realism, engages with the past to subvert norms, raises questions through parody, challenges the linear telling of history, and counters the notion of a single, definitive truth of history. Its essence lies in the celebration of words. Towards the end of the book, when the city of Bisnaga is invaded, and the kingdom turns into blood and ash, one is reminded of P.B. Shelley's *Ozymandias*:

> *My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;*
> *Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*
> *Nothing beside remains.*

The works of *Ozymandias* were lost to time and nowhere to be seen in the desert wasteland. Nothing is left of the once-great empire of Bisnaga. In the novel, Pampa says, "Fiction could be as powerful as history (48). The book is a tale of the confluence of history, magical realism, and fiction, and stands to reveal the truth behind Pampa's words. All else perishes except Pampa's work of fiction, *Jayaparajya.*

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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