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# Books

Life&Arts

Essay | After a brutal attack

last year, Salman Rushdie

conjures up a fantasy world

where India's great religions

converge. By *Tanjil Rashid*

Salman Rushdie may write novels about people, in his words, “handcuffed to history”, but the author is history itself. Since blowing open the doors of English literature in 1981 with his second novel *Midnight’s Children*, a magical realist autobiography that narrated the story of a whole sub-continent through an enchanted version of his own life, Rushdie has seemed to represent something much bigger than himself.

With his subsequent career as a novelist, essayist and free speech icon, Rushdie has established himself as a living embodiment of our age of migration and fanaticism, of culture wars and conflicting narratives.

When his assassination was attempted in a brutal attack at a literary event in the US last summer – leaving him blinded in one eye – we were taken back three decades.

In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence on Rushdie, and his publishers, for *The Satanic Verses* – his 1988 novel about Indian immigrants in Thatcher’s Britain – for its allegedly blasphemous depiction of a Muhammad-like figure.

The controversy around *The Satanic Verses* was a landmark in the encounter between Islam and the west, and in the fight over free speech, as if by writing about these themes he unleashed them across the globe for decades to come. Those who demonise him, those who deify him, agree on this: Rushdie proved the power of a book.

And so it makes perfect sense that *Victory City* – his 15th novel, which he completed just before the attack – is a deeply fascinating, richly symbolic tale that testifies to this power of words to conjure reality. “Fictions could be as powerful as histories,” Rushdie writes about the novel’s protagonist, a fictitious 14th-century celestial bard called Pampa Kampana, who receives, then fulfils, a prophecy that her words will someday magically constitute an empire: Vijayanagar (Sanskrit for victory city).

*Victory City* purports to be a translation of a manuscript retelling “in plainer language” the Jayaparajaya (Sanskrit for victory and defeat), a verse epic authored by Pampa.

The child of artisan potters, Pampa is tragically orphaned. Soon after she becomes a conduit for the goddess Parvati, and spends years apprenticed in a cave to the Hindu sage Vidyasagar (Sanskrit for ocean of knowledge), who instructs her in wisdom and the arts, while exploiting her sexually. Eventually, Pampa composes her poem, simultaneously creating and chronicling



## Magical power of words

### Victory City

by Salman Rushdie  
Jonathan Cape £22, 352 pages

Above: an image from the book *Ganga Ma* that features a collection of photographs by Giulio Di Sturco, who spent 10 years documenting the effects of pollution, industrialisation and climate change along the Ganges

Vijayanagar’s chequered history.

Vijayanagar was a real empire in southern India, largely forgotten until a book by Rushdie’s literary nemesis revived interest in it. In *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1976), the second volume of his non-fiction “India trilogy”, VS Naipaul surveys “the ruins of a long-superseded civilisation” and reflects on Vijayanagar’s reduction to a wilderness not far from the boomtown of Bangalore. Its destruction by Muslim invaders 500 years ago was, in Naipaul’s eyes, a symbol of the “mortal wound” inflicted on India by Islam.

This narrative has since been appropriated by the Hindutva movement of rightwing Hindu nationalists, now in power under Narendra Modi. For them

all India is a version of Vijayanagar, and the nation’s Muslim minority must now pay the price for its desecration.

In also drawing its inspiration from Vijayanagar, *Victory City* is a riposte to Naipaul’s aestheticised, proto-Hindutva incitements. Having spent their careers looking into the same mirror of the Indian past, two of the most gifted writers of South Asian origin in the postcolonial era have each somehow seen a different picture reflected back.

In Vijayanagar, where Naipaul saw only discord, Rushdie now conjures up a fantasy world whose strength lies in India’s great religions coming together, “flow[ing] into each other like the rivers Ganga and Yamuna”.

Yet Pampa – mistress of Vijayanagar’s fate – allows it to betray her harmonious ideals. In *Victory City*, India is beset by communal violence and migrations between Vijayanagar and its Muslim neighbour Zafarabad, echoing real-world developments, while Pampa’s old adversary Vidyasagar, guru to the imperial establishment, has the city’s historic streets renamed to commemorate Hindu saints.

From Rushdie’s point of view, no doubt, this is to teach readers a lesson about the India of today, where a war on cultural memory is being waged. Only this week, Modi renamed Delhi’s Mughal Gardens as Amrit Udyan, part of the Hindutva plan to erase all allusions to the city’s Islamic inheritance.

The Rushdie novels that are

acclaimed in the west, such as *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), have been richly allusive post-modern discourses on history and politics. But there’s a more innocent Rushdie, still enchanted by the Indian and Islamic epics and fables of his childhood, such as the Panchatantra and the Ramayana, where Gods are real and animals speak.

Under their spell, Rushdie has written numerous fantasy novels, from his debut *Grimus* (1975) to the more recent *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015). Baffling most critics, this side of Rushdie had lately been seen as something of an irrelevance. But it has found a receptive audience, especially in younger readers.

*Victory City* is accessibly situated between these two Rushdies. By posing as an Indian epic teeming with Sanskrit words and mythological characters and events, the novel explicitly places itself in that Indian narrative tradition. But *Victory City* is also interspersed with a nameless editor’s ironic, self-referential commentary, characteristic of Rushdie’s postmodern tricks. This hybridity, an ancient eastern wonder-tale wrapped inside a modern western novel, is one way in which the book propagates its vision of cross-cultural unity, giving form to fusion.

Pampa dies aged 247, corresponding

He has been transforming this dark lead of historical reality into the brilliant gold of great stories

to Vijayanagar’s documented existence between 1318 and 1565. But what’s described as her “city of words” is, in a sense, not Vijayanagar, or any physical locale, but the great empire of literature itself. The entire novel is underwritten by this metaphor of the written word constituting a real world, a utopia, a metaphor that has shaped Rushdie’s life-long understanding of himself as an inhabitant of an “imaginary homeland”.

“Words are the only victors,” the novel proclaims at the end. This child-like faith in the transcendence of the word pervades *Victory City*, and is curiously akin to the notion of a sacred text, which he challenged at great personal cost in *The Satanic Verses*.

Pampa’s narrative superpowers come from the divine Parvati, and the novel reprises throughout the trope of storytelling as a sacred vocation, intrinsic to the Indian epics, whose authors, by tradition, were Gods.

What of Rushdie’s powers? We cannot know if they are god-given, but on the evidence of this profoundly entertaining tale – perhaps the rousing finale to the story of his monumental life – Rushdie certainly still has the gift of alchemy.

“Bad times,” he once wrote, “traditionally produce good books.” In the 1980s it was the rise of dictatorship across South Asia and racism in the post-imperial west; since then there has been his own death-threatened years in isolation and the ascent of headline populists around the world. All along, Rushdie has been transforming this dark lead of historical reality into the brilliant gold of great stories.