

**TRANSCENDENT IMAGINATION
IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *VICTORY CITY*: A CONFRONTATION
OF MYTH, RELIGION, HISTORY AND TRADITION**

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***Abstract:** The article focuses on Victory City (2023), the latest novel by Salman Rushdie, to discuss how transcendent reality is experienced and conceived in human life. The book explores the epistemological problems of religious tradition fictionalising the history of the Indian Vijayanagara Empire and proposing thus a new mythology. In his novel, framed as a fictional translation of an epic from Sanskrit, Rushdie confronts the real world through transcendent imagination to appeal to harmonious ideals and reconcile them with imperfect humanity. The author's vision of that confrontation is interwoven with a biting critique of our world.*

***Keywords:** (dis)harmony, magic realism, mythologem, sacredness, transcendence*

1. Introduction

The transcendent function is the most significant factor in the psychological process (Angelo 2003: 119). Transcendent imagination drawing on (post-)Kantian transcendentalism appears as a specific phenomenon exhibits the mind's activity on sensibility, as a result of which figurative categories carry out a synthesis of a variety of representations. As a function, an aspect of consciousness and its application to the objects of representation, thus fulfilling a fixed role in its synthetic activity, transcendent imagination, "a higher dimension than [...] faith or spirituality" (Chirico 2001: 526), it acquires at the same time significantly greater independence and the ability to unite other options of cognition. The mind joins that ability and interacts in such a way that the latter helps it reduce the variety of views to a single, generalised representation, combining them with the concept of experience.

Fiction touches all the spheres of life and reflects reality by transforming it into images. The work of Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) appears as a kind of attempt to delve philosophically into the foundations of human life at all its levels, including self-knowledge, understanding of human nature, realist and mythological creation. Rushdie's perceptive knowledge of politics, history, culture, community, race and religion constitutes the thrust of his novels (Swain 2016) and helps him actualise the ways of transcending reality, associated with the belief that there is more to existence than what we can perceive through our senses. In this respect, the analysis of the category of transcendence as an experience that goes beyond normal limits, or the ability to know the essence of being beyond its visible edges is

relevant. In his latest novel *Victory City* (2023), Rushdie verbalises subconscious impulses to explore one's identity on the verge of the interpenetration of the profane and sacred entity. In *Victory City*, Rushdie's first book published since a failed assassination attempt in August 2022, the writer continues to dissect the issues of religious tradition put in the fictionalised historical context, proposing a new mythology. A wide range of myths and mythologies, drawn from Islamic traditions, especially Sufism, but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Greek mythology and Christianity, link Rushdie "to ideas of 'unity in diversity' and a distinctively Indian form of secularism that produces equal respect for the range of religious communities that inhabit this geopolitical entity" (Ratti 2023: 147).

The relationship between history and fiction, text and context in a work of fiction is studied within new historicism, drawn on the Derridean notion of reality as being textualised (Lyngdoh 2017: 111) and the Foucauldian idea of social structures as determined by dominant discursive practices (Phillips 2023: 12). Within this methodological approach, the task of establishing the connections between verbal and social phenomena – the nature of the relationship between the text and the world – becomes particularly important. The link between the text and the historical events is characterised by "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 1997: 242). This refers to the inherent social content and cultural specificity of all types of writing and the limitation of definitive and unmediated access to past events through texts. By exploring *Victory City* "on the move, across space and time" (Asdal and Jordheim 2018: 74), the article represents alternative history as a source of transcendent imagination.

Rushdie drew inspiration from the history of a once-flourishing medieval Hindu Kingdom, Vijayanagara, in South India with its eponymous capital, whose ruins UNESCO declared a World Heritage Site in Hampi. Representing the epic tale of a demigoddess who breathes into existence fantastical Victory City, or Bisnaga, a city within a city, Rushdie implies that the narratives of some modern postcolonial societies correspond little to historical reality. The writer exposes their overzealousness in fostering their postcolonial identity drawn actually on the idea of the hybridity of identities (Kardum Goleš 2019: 92-93). Rushdie's novel is a chronicle of the fictional Indian empire that arose around that city, narrated by Pampa Kampana, inspired by the historical, fourteenth-century princess-poet Gangadevi. Thus, the genre features of *Victory City* enable us to consider the novel a kind of what Hutcheon (1988: 105) calls 'historiographic metafiction', or even a historical novel which casts doubt on the very production of historical knowledge. Historiographic metafiction "turn[s] to the intertexts of history as well as literature" (Hutcheon 1989: 15) to rewrite history in postmodern fiction. Thus, Rushdie's metafictional historiography is distinctive in its vision of not only the writing of history as a starting point but also the scripts of literature, religion, myth and fairy tale, posed as doubles of or alternatives to history (Mukherjee 2023). A confrontation of those scripts creates a unique space in the novel to be modelled by the author's deliberate manipulation of the represented narratives. The article discusses the ways Rushdie in *Victory City* confronts the real world through transcendent imagination to appeal to harmonious ideals and reconcile them with imperfect humanity.

Victory City celebrates Rushdie's triumphant 'return' to India as he grew up in Mumbai, a geographical and cultural gateway between the north and south of the country. The diversity of cultural codes affected his work based on "the celebration of crossings, hybridity, mixings, decompartmentalization, impurity, [and] grafting"

(Guignery 2009: 311), especially traced in *Victory City* as a kind of ‘cross-pollination’ (Rushdie 1991: 20). Rushdie allegorically explains that the formation of a new global, cosmopolitan identity is impossible without respect for one’s historical past, although “a rigid determinism between class position, cosmopolitan identity, and politics very much describes the ways in which postmodernism’s euphoric embrace of contemporary postcolonial writing has been critiqued” (Jani 2010: 27). It is significant that the writer labels the Indian part of the novel’s literary reality as rational, empirical and logically organised whilst rethinking it in the context of the connections and disruptions between Eastern and Western civilisations. In Rushdie’s postsecular imagination, the secular comes to be ‘internationalised’, “a concept and a politics that is doubly informed by its inflections in South Asia (religion’s importance and massive reach in India) and the west (religion as part of the private sphere)” (Ratti 2013: 25), since, as Rushdie (2005) states in his article “In Bad Faith”, “I never thought of myself as a writer about religion until a religion came after me.” This vision has shaped Rushdie as a fierce critic of religion across the spectrum, including the scourges of religious orthodoxy and sanctimony in *Victory City*, presented as a fictional translation of a Sanskrit epic that tells the aftermath of a battle between two kingdoms in southern India.

2. Through magic realism: on the edge of fact and fiction

Rushdie’s novel is a quintessence of the author’s struggle against sectarian hatred and ignorance within magic realism, where magical elements and the realistic view of the world are woven into the storyline mixed with historical facts. As Ajeesh (2023) asserts, Rushdie in *Victory City* employs magic realism “to explore the nature of truth and the ways in which it can be manipulated and distorted. The novel’s convoluted histories and fantastical elements serve to highlight the subjective nature of truth and the power dynamics at play in society” (4). This idea is both clear and confusing: “[...] the laws of life that govern physics and feeling, thought and thrust, are other-worldly. That to belong to this world does not require you to belong to its shackled, rote-learned, non-negotiable laws – gravity, time, constitution, both of the body and the land” (Parasuraman 2023).

The story of *Victory City* takes place in the vast Vijayanagara Empire, known as Bisnaga that “began in the fourteenth century of the Common Era, in the south of what we now call India, Bharat, Hindustan” (Rushdie 2023: 4). That city was destroyed after the battle of Talikota in 1565. The story of the birth, glory and fall of the fictional empire is narrated by an unnamed translator who raises the curtain on the legendary kingdom, retelling the found manuscripts left by the prophetess Pampa Kampana – the character thanks to whom Rushdie’s readers learn about the depicted events; researchers have labelled the novel “a feminist historical magical realism narrative” (Amirthavarshini and Bhuvanewari 2023: 1). The author outlines his main idea and it is perceived as a signpost to guide the readers from the beginning to the end of the story: “Four and a half centuries later we found that pot and read for the first time the immortal masterpiece named the *Jayaparajaya*, [...] and we learned the secrets of the empire she had concealed from history for more than one hundred and sixty thousand days” (Rushdie 2023: 3).

Rushdie’s writing is driven by philosophical aspirations, an aesthetic concept of life and a desire to create a society that lives according to the laws of justice, as opposed to that where one must “[e]at or be eaten” (125). The writer does not shy away from the hot topics: the creation of myths, the power of language, faith that

undermines freedom, gender equality, the role of women in a patriarchal society, the race for power, the transformation of a secular state into a religious one, the change of society from humanist to puritanical. Rushdie uses a magical narrative as backdrop against which real events and stories stand out: “Fictions could be as powerful as histories, revealing the new people to themselves, allowing them to understand their own natures and the natures of those around them, and making them real” (47).

The narrator directs the readers to understand the events that took place so long ago that in some places even reality is perceived as a phantasmagoria. Bisnaga becomes the central topos, the mythologeme of sacred space, which contributes to perceiving life through the prism of whispering. Pampa Kampana’s life is interwoven with Bisnaga, from its foundation to the tragic destruction of the city by the folly of its rulers. By creating the city from seeds and whispering memories to its inhabitants, Pampa Kampana ‘writes’ the history of the empire. Behind the magic background, Rushdie seems to imply that real history can be created, invented and rewritten if it suits the rulers and is accepted by the inhabitants: “They [people] just needed someone to whisper their dreams into their ears” (25).

The study of the novel suggests that it is based on the edge of fact and fiction since Rushdie “creates a surreal and dreamlike setting that is both alluring and terrifying, capturing the essence of the miraculous and the everyday as two halves of the same whole” (Ajeesh 2023: 1). *Victory City* contains a significant number of similarities to the ancient Hindu epic, Roman mythology, Greek epic writing and the elements of a Latin narrative poem, exemplified below.

The author points out the similarity of the found manuscript to the ancient Hindu epic, whose legends, myths, and stories are devoted to the life of one of the great Hindu deities Rama, his brother Lakshman and his wife Sita: “Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman joined forces with the mighty Lord Hanuman of Kishkindha and went forth to battle many-headed Ravana of Lanka, who had abducted the lady Sita” (12). When Pampa Kampana flees the city after the death of her second husband, she and her daughters hide in the forest, just like the characters in the epic:

In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the lady Sita and the brothers Ram and Lakshman are exiled, mostly in forests, for fourteen years. In Pampa Kampana’s *Jayaparajaya*, [...] her time in exile, [...] added up to a total of one hundred and thirty-two years. (119)

Both stories reflect the customs and views of Ancient India, both are religious, political and social. Their titles contain an interpretation of the main events: the *Ramayana* means “the journey of Lord Ram”, and the *Jayaparajaya* – “Victory and Defeat”. Similarities can also be identified in the images of the main characters – Pampa Kampana and Rama. They combine realistic features with those of demigods.

Pampa Kampana creates humans by magic which contradicts the religious belief that people are descended from Adam and Eve, as “magic is superior to faith” (Ajeesh 2023: 3): “Then life began, and hundreds – no, thousands – of men and women were born full-grown from the brown earth, shaking the dirt off their garments, and thronging the streets in the evening breeze” (Rushdie 2023: 16). These people are devoid of memories, feelings and emotions resembling zombies who “have no souls, they don’t know who they are, because the truth is they are nothing” (31). Despite a magical context, Rushdie makes it clear that the maturation of society depends on the will of people to develop and develop an

awareness of responsibility to the past, present and future: “After that initial period the time comes when they must learn to stand on their own feet, achieve their own achievements, and win their own battles” (59).

Hindu mythology, which refers to deities and magic events, permeates everyday life, which is set against the backdrop of the history of medieval southern India. The important moment in the actualisation of the transition to the transreal is the initiation of light scattering. We see a kind of apotheosis of light:

[...] when the miraculous crosses the frontier from the world of gods and enters the everyday, revealing to women and men that that frontier is not impenetrable, that the miraculous and the everyday are two halves of a single whole, and that we ourselves are the gods we seek to worship, and capable of mighty deeds. (Rushdie 2023: 238)

The glare of the sun and moon is dominated by their mythological interpretation, which correlates with the concept of the beginning and end of the life cycle. In this aspect, transcendence is correlated with the dynamics of life, which the author creates through the semantic content of the text with the description of the light of the celestial bodies: “The full moon burst out of the sky like a descending angel and bathed the new world in milky light” (23); “A small high window allowed a single ray of sunlight to descend at a steep angle toward the young woman below, like a shaft of angelic grace” (29). One of the significant results of the individual’s desire for transcendence is the focus on sacred time and space: “But she had no sense of the moon as a place. To her it was just a shining god in the sky” (8).

In addition to the Hindu epic, there are references to Roman mythology, namely the brothers Romulus and Remus, the founders of the Roman Kingdom. In *Victory City*, Kampana chooses two shepherd brothers for the same mission: “Their names, they said, were Hukka and Bukka Sangama” (11). It is noteworthy that the pairs of names of the founding brothers were created using phonetic stylistic devices: Romulus and Remus, Hukka and Bukka – a combination of alliteration and epiphora. The depictions of wars, the almost idyllic lives of the heroes in peacetime, the actions of monarchs and conspiracies of assassins, colonial conquests and failed coup d’états are in a style reminiscent of the traditions of Greek epic writing.

The references to Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses* are also evident in the novel. Both works deal with the creation of the world, eternal changes and magic transformations that occur in the surrounding nature, especially in the episodes that depict the reincarnation of humans into representatives of the animal world. In *Victory City*, characters are magically transformed into birds: “It’s sensible for you two to be commonplace birds that nobody will look at twice [...]” (142). Rushdie mentions the title of Ovid’s poem in his novel: “It only succeeds if it’s not whimsical or frivolous, but arises out of your deepest need” (142). Similarities can also be found even in small details – Ovid calls for not eating the flesh of living creatures, and Rushdie depicts the founder of the city refusing to eat meat: “Pampa Kampana never ate meat again [...]. All such dishes exuded the memory of her mother and when other people ate dead animals Pampa Kampana had to avert her gaze” (6). It is the highest level of transcendence that is the perceptual comprehension of the sacredness of all life. Rushdie’s realisation of the ritual of crossing the boundary between the here and the other world is expressed in the image-symbol of the pyre, which has the connotative semantics of the path to the

afterlife that an individual goes through before leaving this world and gaining initial freedom (initiation by death), preceded by falls and rises that symbolise life itself: “In death do triumph and failure humbly meet. We learn far less from victory than from defeat” (329). The glimmer of the funeral fire where her mother immolated herself corresponds to the ancient Hindu practice of suttee and appears to be a clairvoyance in *Faust*: “There was a fire blazing in her eyes, which would not be extinguished for more than two hundred years” (25).

Magic and reality are intricately intertwined in the novel as “the miraculous and the everyday are two halves of a single whole” (238). The image of Pampa Kampana vividly reflects the combination of the real and the magic. Having been given by the goddess an extremely long life, Pampa Kampana is deprived of the gift of true love: “It’s hard for me to love anyone with my whole heart, because I know that they are going to die” (65). Although emotions are associated with a wide range of physiological changes (Levenson 2003), the prophetess also changes her attitude towards loved ones. She sees changes in her lover’s appearance and, knowing about his imminent death, she does not want to stay with him at the last moment: “You will die the day after tomorrow, [...] I don’t want to watch the finale” (Rushdie 2003: 65). Due to her fears and childhood memories of her mother, “[m]otherhood never came easily to Pampa Kampana. [...] Whatever kind of mother she might be, she would still have to watch her children die” (95).

Rushdie’s Bisnaga seems to be a metaphor for many empires in human history: the formation and consolidation of an imperial centre, the conquest of internal territories and the beginning of active expansion, a period of prosperity followed by periods of destabilisation, competition with other empires and its collapse. The kingdom created by Pampa Kampana goes through all these stages, where parts of the empire can remain democratic even if the whole empire remains “undemocratic by definition” (Tilly 2018: 7).

In *Victory City*, a confrontation between fiction and fact is seen in the depiction of the Muslim sultanates: “To give the new sultanate the same name as the empire was a clear announcement of intent. The Ghost Sultan meant to erase Bisnaga and take its place” (101). Thus, the novel explores the complexities of identity, power, and the struggle between tradition and change (Ajeesh 2023: 1). Traditions can shape the creative orientation of an individual but they can also become a burden preventing adequate perception and making one dogmatic: “[...] just for the sake of tradition, of what is conventional, it might be advisable, from time to time, to cut off a few heads [...]. Hangings, tortures, beheadings, heads on sticks... people enjoy the spectacle of victory” (Rushdie 2023: 264). Traditions can be progressive or regressive and therefore have different meanings in social processes. It is clear to Rushdie that transmitting a cultural tradition is not in itself positive.

Being on the edge of fact and fiction, the author gradually outlines the topics that are crucial to him and to a modern human being who cannot remain indifferent to the way events unfold, and who tirelessly searches for answers to the questions that arise at every stage of their growth.

3. Everything and everywhere: the (dis)harmony and (im)perfection of the world

Rushdie’s work tends towards reflection and self-reflection. In the context of finding one’s self, the problem of inner and outer freedom, which is the most

important component of the transcendence of every personality, becomes paramount. It is through freedom that the writer's inner harmony is formed, which manifests itself in creating a perfect society with equal rights for all: "[...] the diversity of cultures, faiths, and races to be found in those streets, not only Hindu, Muslim, and Jain but also the Portuguese and Arab horse-traders, and Romans [...] and the Chinese were there too" (98). But desire is not enough, because it is a complex matter in which one thing involves another, and "each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object and in fact *is* everything else" (qtd. in Hanegraaff 1996: 140).

People think of their lives as a constant quest for self-improvement and reduce the main criteria for evaluating their lives to freedom and happiness. By creating an ideal kingdom, the author adds realistic features to the depicted world, where humanity wins and the ideal world undergoes a transformation: "[...] the world is a cynical and suspicious place and, being full of liars, thinks of everything as a lie" (Rushdie 2023: 9). Pampa has created a world where men and women have equal rights, where it is allowed to practise any religion, but this ideal is thwarted by radicalised inhabitants who do not share the same views on gender equality: "When I'm a man, must I stay home and cook? And wear women's clothes, and learn to sew, and have babies? It's...stupid" (96). The prophet's wish to control people's thoughts by whispering no longer works because, having given people complete freedom, she has lost the ability to influence them: "This was 'free will.' She could not change them if they did not want to be changed" (100). As a result of intrigues and a coup d'état in the kingdom, the ideal world collapses leading to the rule of radicals who deny any manifestation of freedom: "[...] Bisnaga will now be ruled by a religious fanatic, who will be advised by another extremist" (129).

The notion of the transcendent as a subject of religious cognition has a wide interpretive paradigm, up to and including a focus on the perceptual non-verbal comprehension of this phenomenon. Transcendent norms, namely the independent will, the immortal soul, and God, who can take on different forms depending on one's beliefs and convictions, dictate one's behaviour and perception of the world and oneself in it, where, according to Heidegger, "the God is not the Being, but the God is at home in the transcendence of Being" (qtd. in Babor 2008: 200). According to metaphysical existentialism, one of the manifestations of the transcendent is God, and thus, the divine becomes for the main character: "To her it [the moon] was just a shining god in the sky" (Rushdie 2023: 8). Rushdie creates an unreal reality in which all gods are acknowledged and religions exist alongside entertainment in a tolerant society: "Gods would be worshipped in the temples and there would be dancing in the streets" (37). However, there are those who believe they have the right to determine someone's religious and other preferences and to consider their thoughts, aspirations and beliefs the only correct ones. Such actions lead to a division in society. *Victory City* describes the activities of "an extremist underground sect known as the Remonstrance" (62), which stirs up people's minds by publishing Five Remonstrances denouncing the 'structural elements' of their religion. The leader of this sect accused the structural elements of their religion of corruption and demanded reforms. He proposed that priests should not hold positions in the city's ruling body, true believers should refrain from all acts of war, and the focus of the people should be redirected from the arts, beauty in architecture, poetry, and music towards the worship of the gods. However, the people of Bisnaga appreciated beauty, and the Remonstrance failed to gain more

followers than a small cult, “initially quite radical and puritanical”, but which ended “by becoming the voice of secularism, liberty and free speech” (Chaudhuri 2023: 9).

Individual freedom is realised in *Victory City* through the concept of universal freedom. Transcendence in the structure of the female characters’ subjectivities is explicated in the process of realising the creative essence of an individual – women have the right to do what they like, which is seen as a means of self-disclosure, reception and emotional comprehension of the fullness of being: “All over the city women were doing what, elsewhere in the country, was thought of as work unsuitable for them” (Rushdie 2023: 37). Creative freedom is not a mirage since women can fulfil themselves: “Many of our ladies are persons of high education and culture. [...] Also, women take part in every action of the state” (94). The writer’s position can rightly be defined as freedom in the context of transcendental discourse aimed at liberation from prejudices, cultural myths and everything that conceptualises the alienation of the individual from themselves.

The energy of creating a possible world in *Victory City* is explicated through certain elements. One of them is language. Rushdie “has built a city of words” (Chaudhuri 2023: 9) in which language determines the caste of the characters: “Some of the words were the everyday words the Sangama brothers could understand, like *food* and *sword* and *river* and *kill*. But there were many other words that were a complete mystery” (Rushdie 2023: 50). The word has its incredible power as Pampa Kampana’s direct speech shows: “Every time you used one of those unkind words, another one burst out of your skin” (55). Although the true value of words cannot be measured, they live on for centuries: “*Words are the only victors*” (331). The belief in the transcendence of the word pervades *Victory City* and is akin to the notion of sacred text.

Rushdie’s concept of freedom is based on the idea that the creative act is sacred. Creativity is seen as a breakthrough into the unconscious, providing access to the plane of transcendental insight. The limited understanding of beauty necessitates the prohibition of art which is justified by the lack of religiosity among the inhabitants of the empire: “[T]hey denounced the arts, stating that too much attention was being paid to beauty in architecture, poetry, and music, and that such attention should immediately and forever be diverted from frivolities toward the worship of the gods” (62). The pursuit of harmony guides people in their material and spiritual activities. This need for self-determination is sharpened by the separation of an individual from a natural connection with the world and the uncertainty of their meaning and value. This need can be satisfied by creating one’s spiritual world, a world of one’s values and significance: “A mighty empire such as ours [...] is precisely the entity that should set out to lead the people toward the future. Let it be the fourteenth century everywhere else. It’s going to be the fifteenth century here” (91). People create a culture of their own – a field of self-disclosure and self-generation – where they can find their place and derive meaning from their presence in the world.

4. Conclusion

Transcending, as an ontological and epistemological dimension of transcendence, is the ultimate human aspiration to the fullness of being. As a ‘project’ of themselves, individuals exist to the extent that they realise and manifest their essence. The transcendent can be seen as the ‘horizon’, the limit and the result

of one's being and cognition. The transcendent is a noumenon, a metaphysical 'demarcating' category with which, in *Victory City*, Rushdie attempts to grasp the ultimate grounds of being and knowing, as well as a special transcendent world that exists simultaneously outside and alongside the immanent world. In a sense, the transcendent can be defined as a sphere of absolute potentiality that is not actualised in human activity and is ineffable in human experience due to the fundamental inadequacy of this sphere to the available means of mastering the world.

Victory City is a kind of epic chronicle of a fictional empire that arose around a single city. In his novel, Rushdie remains true to his style of magic realism, humour and frankness. His narrative, inspired by the great epics, is full of eroticism, power struggles and conspiracies. *Victory City* is a modern epic that tackles some of the great questions of humanity: Who are we? Do we have free will? Why do we have to die? The novel does not provide definite answers to those questions but it does draw the non-evident conclusion that human intelligence and stupidity, the best and the worst of human nature, are constants in a rapidly changing world.

Rushdie confronts the real world through transcendent imagination to appeal to justice, respect and equality. The book represents not only a testament to Rushdie's resilience in the face of life-threatening criticism but also a masterfully plotted epic of historical fiction and magic realism. In his novel, framed as a fictional translation of a Sanskrit epic, the writer proposes a new mythology to explore the epistemological problems of religious tradition and to harmonise human ideals attempting to reconcile them with imperfect humanity. Transcendent reality is experienced and conceived in human life in order to move us into imagining new ways of being.

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