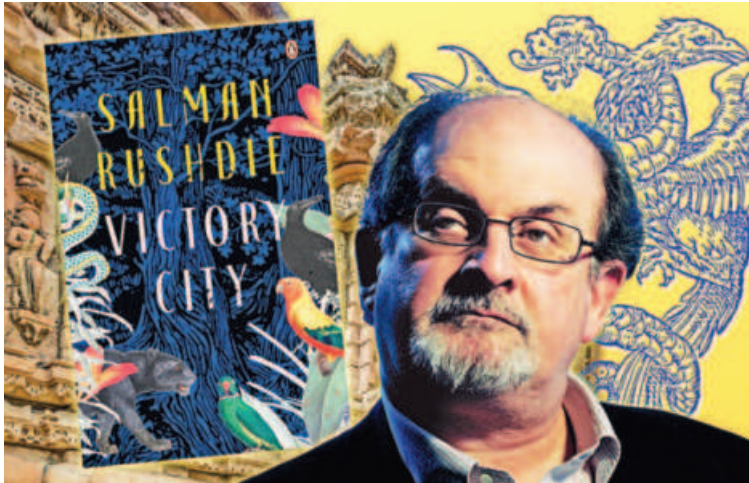


BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

RUSHDIE, and the victory of words

‘Victory City’ by Salman Rushdie (Penguin India, 2023)



DESIGN: HRISHIK ROY

In the grand canvas of Rushdie, Bisnaga has it all—patrons and connoisseurs of art and literature, fanatics and zealots, followers and rebels, victors and the vanquished, and it has Vidyasagar—if it is not much of a stretch to say it—the arch-enemy of Pampa Kampana.

NAJMUS SAKIB

When, on the Valentine’s Day of 1989, a BBC reporter asked him how he felt knowing that he had just been sentenced to death by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, all Salman Rushdie could feel was that the sunny Tuesday in London was not sunny for him anymore; it had become gloomy and his life would never be the same again. He was four months shy of 42, and almost two months older than India, his birthplace, where his book had already been banned by Rajiv Gandhi’s government because the general election was at hand and the party had people to placate and votes to pocket. The writer wasn’t sure anymore whether he would live to see himself, or India for that matter, turn 42.

Victory City is Salman Rushdie’s 15th novel and a virtuoso and victorious return to the literary stage of perhaps the most talked about, both vilified and defended, author of his generation. Purporting to be a retelling in plainer language of *Jayaparajaya* (meaning victory and defeat), a 16th century Sanskrit epic, an immortal masterpiece as long as the *Ramayana*, and made up of 24,000 verses, it is retold by the present author who claims to be neither a scholar nor a poet but merely a spinner of yarns—it is classic Rushdie, replete with tropes redolent of his previous works, a

Rushdie-fied history of the Bisnaga empire.

In this feminist fable, it is Pampa Kampana, the author of *Jayaparajaya* and the author of the *City of Bisnaga*, who is the matriarch and with whom the city and the empire rose to insurmountable heights. The story begins with an unnamed battle where all men of the tiny principality of Kampili die. Their wives commit mass suicide by lighting a massive bonfire on the coast of the river Pampa and immolating themselves in the pyre of a burning fire. Radha Kampana, mother of Pampa Kampana, also walked into the fire, but she realises that she would never immolate her body merely to follow dead men into the afterworld. All of this, though, scars Pampa Kampana for her inordinately long life. The pungent air of human flesh burning makes such deep cuts in her psyche that she would never again, in her 247 years-long life, eat meat.

She has a moment of epiphany in which Pampa the goddess—a localised version of the lover of the god Shiva—manifests through Pampa Kampana’s body, guiding her and gifting her with fantastical powers. With a sackful of seeds, she goes on to found a city and an empire. Like Rome, like Romulus and Remus, Bisnaga too had Hukka and Bukka, the Sangama brothers who would rule Bisnaga for a total of 41 years, making it the first golden age of Bisnaga. Pampa Kampana would be married to both Hukka Raya I and Bukka Raya I and would have many people to love throughout her long life.

But her blessed life is a double-edged sword, a curse in which she sees the people she loves grow old before her very eyes and die while she barely ages. Anathematised by eternal youth and burdened with life, Pampa Kampana bears it all. She is to Bisnaga what Athena was to Athens.

In the grand canvas of Rushdie, Bisnaga has it all—patrons and connoisseurs of art and literature, fanatics and zealots, followers and rebels, victors and the vanquished, and it has Vidyasagar—if it is not much of a stretch to say it—the arch-enemy of Pampa Kampana. Her fortune fluctuates with that of Bisnaga or, perhaps Bisnaga with that of hers. She makes a city, an empire, alive by whispering words, by playing with words, just as Rushdie does

it—spinning magic worlds with words. Just as Pampa Kampana, Rushdie also relishes in the ecstasy of the act of creation, the creation of stories.

Rushdie is no novice to blending facts with fiction and fantasy. *Victory City* reads more like historical fiction than a pure fantasy novel. Rushdie doesn’t just write a scene, he portrays them as vividly as humanly possible, making all the characters come alive in a reader’s imagination.

How does one tell the dance from the dancer, the art from the artist and the writing from the writer? One cannot, for they are the two sides of the same coin. Rushdie’s books have always been littered with historical and literary allusions, alliterations, allegories and metaphors, and *Victory City* is no aberration from the Rushdian norm. It is a victory for the writer, and his immaculate prose is once again the victor.

Being the Cassandra of his own fate is not something completely new to Salman Rushdie but the prescience in *Victory City* is striking and terrifyingly palpable. Pampa Kampana, at the end of her life, is blinded, and so was Rushdie just a few months ago. He lost his ability to see in the right eye among other severe injuries. Pampa Kampana was also unable to write herself, needing to have a scribe. All these simulacra might just be ludicrous, but what is not ludicrous is that he was almost killed for his writings. The literary world should stand by him now more than ever.

Rushdie himself will have to eventually bid adieu to life, as will all humans, but his stories are anything but perishable; they will outlast the fatwa, the Ayatollahs, the fanatics and all those who wanted and still want to take away the inalienable right of a writer to write. They will outlast those who were not merely offended but deemed it an obligation to take the life of a writer for the grave sin of writing a book.

Najmus Sakib is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A fellowship of humanity and the wild

‘Flowers for Elephants’ by Peter Martell (Hurst, 2021).

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

The start of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy was rocky. In African countries with colonial pasts, it was all too common for indigenous peoples to view with suspicion conservation projects. After all, they feared these projects—engineered by white people from Europe—were another set of ploys to dispossess them of their land and capitalise on flourishing tourism businesses. After a long spell of persuasion and dialogue between the advocates of the conservancy and the native tribes, the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy sprang up to shelter endangered rhinos. However, the project’s success did not only lie in slashing the number of rhino poaching from the Kenyan region. The conservancy created mass employment for the natives, thereby dispelling the doubts they had of neo-colonialism.

In *Flowers for Elephants*, Peter Martell uncovers the story of one Ian and Kinyanjui and their efforts to mobilise a conservation movement in the late 20th century Kenya via the establishment of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. This is not just another story about conservation, though—saviours come from distant lands and lift wild animals out of the mist of violence of a postcolonial country. What sets Martell’s angle apart is his focus on how the conservation movement benefited both humans and nonhumans in a symbiotic and ethical manner.

Ian and Kinyanjui’s friendship—between a white Kenyan and a black Kenyan—serves as a foreshadowing of things that would follow. Whereas their grandfathers fostered bitterness against one another over land, they were just two simple individuals united by their passion to explore the wild, beyond the shadows of the country’s colonial past. Similarly, after the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy began its operations, the warring Borana and Samburu tribes

reached the grounds of reconciliation. Previously divided by hatred and violent clashes over land and cattle, now they worked alongside one another as rangers and prevented wildlife poaching.

Lewa functioned on the idea of ‘rewilding’. It began as a protected patch of land (Ian’s farm) to give shelter to rhinos. The area stretched farther in the coming years and started sheltering elephants as well given how rampant ivory poaching had become. As a result, the wildlife-human conflicts reduced. Moreover, ecological balance was restored. For example, elephants trampled down trees and cleared thick forested areas. Cattle herders were able to graze their cows on those portions of land. After the cattle left, having depleted the grass, the trees grew again and the elephants returned, eating and clearing the vegetation like before. One scientist described the phenomenon as “phantom dancers in a languid ecological minuet”.

On the non-wildlife side, having the backing of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, Lewa facilitated education for the native children, clean water, economic growth, environment degradation, and the reduction of poverty. The “people-focused” approach was a model that benefited and complemented both: those who loved the wildlife and those who wanted better lives.

The conservancy’s success was not limited to itself. It resonated across other regions as new people-centred projects started blossoming such as the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary.

Martell’s narrative journalism is a lesson for those in the field as to how a writer can inspire empathy. The reader can taste affection for both the animals and humans in his storytelling. Consider this: He shows that rhinos, too, are intelligent beings. Elvis, an orphaned rhino that had returned to the wild after recovery in Lewa, often peeked into Ian’s home as if pulled by nostalgia. As for the humans, Martell provides a concise history of Kenya’s tryst with colonialism and how the structures carried over from that period subjugated the indigenous peoples by fanning the smokes of racism. After making the reader contextualise the setting, he puts flesh on the lives of those involved with the conservation movement. Humans and animals, then, jump out of the tents of statistics and newspaper reports.

Photos sprinkle the book at considerable intervals. From Maasai rituals, family compounds, scorched forests, poached elephants languishing under the sun to ranger missions and community meetings, the photos supplement the reading experience by helping to picture what the communities we are reading about look like in their moments of joy and agony.

By illuminating the importance of people-centred environmental projects, *Flowers for Elephants* offers a loud lesson; environmental policy-making cannot be effective if it precludes the people. Then it becomes just another neo-colonial drive where native human bodies are seen as inferior to those of the wild.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

An intimate history of BANGLADESH CRICKET

‘Eye on the Ball’ by Yousuf Rahman (Creative Minds Inc, 2022.)

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

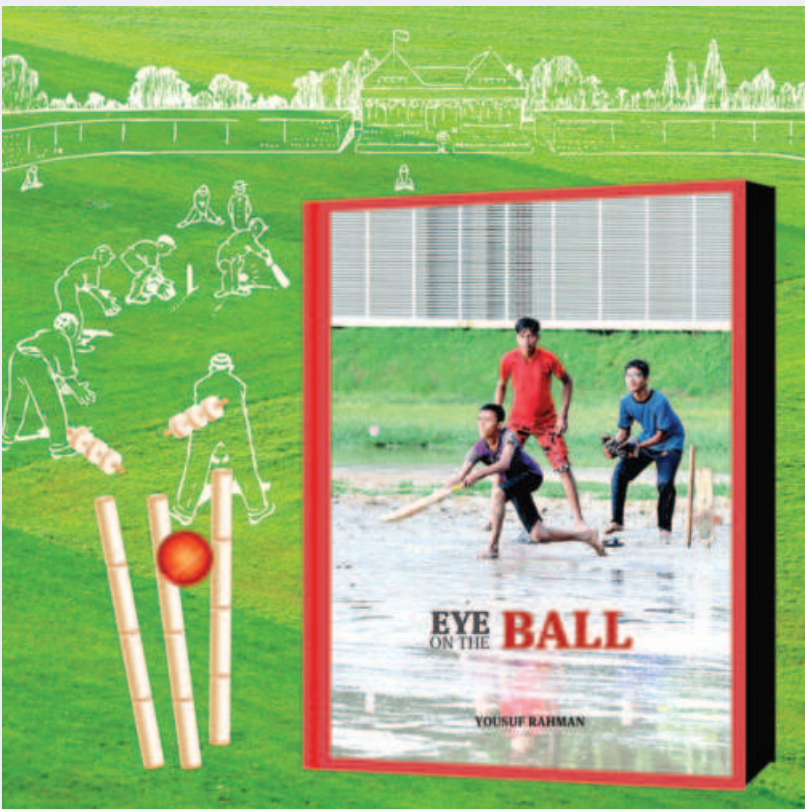
I: The Toss

The launch of *Eye on the Ball* on January 7, 2023, coincided with the anniversary of the MCC match at Bangabandhu National Stadium during 1977. This was the first match where Bangladesh got a taste of international cricket. The author, Yousuf Rahman, top scored in that match. This book is the author’s personal reflection and that of others who have been associated with Bangladesh cricket and for whom “cricket is life”, as the first sentence of the foreword states.

There is no shortage of anecdotes in the coffee-table book. These anecdotes will start discussions between friends, or Google searches to dig more if you are going to have coffee on your own. The book’s subtitle that reads, “a picture is worth a thousand words”, keeps the reader visually delighted with generous anecdotes.

II: The First Innings

The Table of Contents is organised in the spirit of the three sessions of a day’s play of a Test match. The match starts with how cricket came to British



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

book then delves into the role of private sponsorship including Nirman and others. The reader learns of Faisal Khan and Mohammad Mohasin and how the Bangladesh Cricket Association for the Physically Challenged (BCAPC) and the Wheelchair Cricket Welfare Association of Bangladesh (WCWAB) have promoted the game. BCAPC in a three-match series defeated India 2-1 in Agra in 2014. These are one of the many stories that sadly elude the media.

‘Pride of Performance’ inserts short introductions to players of the past and the present. The book includes the personal stories of luminaries and their association with Bangladesh cricket. The author and the team did a wonderful job in assembling all these personalities into one edition.

Keeping in spirit with the title, *Eye on the Ball*, the book does not lose focus on some “dirty beamers” of Bangladesh cricket. This includes match-fixing scandals, umpire scandals, players’ strike, a rebel tour, and personal challenges ruining careers.

IV: Stumps

The information in the book was either in the public domain scattered everywhere, maturing in secret cellars or in somebody’s heart never discussed in public. It needed a Herculean teamwork of coordination and passion to present the game of “cricket, lovely cricket” that expresses the heart of Bangladesh and transcends all boundaries.

The book is pricey, but it is worth its weight in passion from the beginning right to the end. At stumps, the reader will want to go back and revisit the day’s play to check if they missed out any detail.

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India. And thus starts one anecdote after another. A cricket match was first held on March 3, 1845, in today’s Balisera Tea Garden in Sreemangal in Bangladesh. This predates the Parsi Oriental Club of Bombay, and the birth of WG Grace.

The reader finds out that Bangabandhu National Stadium is the only venue to have hosted Test matches of two countries. The first in the Pakistan period was in Jan 1955. The next was the first Test in independent Bangladesh (November 2000). On both occasions, India was the opponent.

The role of Dhaka University in the development and popularisation of

cricket in the Pakistan era and early Bangladesh era is well documented, as has been the role of clubs, the first-class structure and BKSP after the birth of Bangladesh. The book presents the many hurdles Bangladesh cricket crossed till the victory in the 1997 ICC Tournament, the 1999 World Cup victory against Pakistan and the ultimate prize, gaining Test status in 2000.

During the lunch break, the reader is taken on a pictorial trip through Bangladesh.

III: The Second Innings

The second session starts with the development of ladies’ cricket. The

‘Pride of Performance’ inserts short introductions to players of the past and the present. The book includes the personal stories of luminaries and their association with Bangladesh cricket. The author and the team did a wonderful job in assembling all these personalities into one edition.