



## Women leaders as agents of social transformation in Salman Rushdie's Victory City and contemporary practice

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### Abstract

This research article examines women's leadership as a transformative force by synthesizing Salman Rushdie's literary representation of Pampa Kampana in Victory City with contemporary scholarship on women leaders' agency, institutional change, and grassroots mobilization. The study demonstrates that women leaders function as architects of social reality through narrative construction, institutional reform, and community mobilization, reshaping power structures and challenging systemic inequalities across economic, political, environmental, and cultural spheres. Drawing on Rushdie's portrayal of how Pampa literally "makes up" an entire civilization through whispered stories—"making up their lives, their castes, their faiths"—the article argues that narrative agency constitutes a fundamental mechanism of women's transformative power. The research reveals that women leaders synthesize lived experience with strategic advocacy to create outcomes extending beyond individual achievement to influence policy frameworks and cultural consciousness. Through collaborative leadership styles emphasizing inclusivity and long-term sustainability, women leaders bring distinctive epistemological perspectives rooted in their positioning within patriarchal structures. The article examines how storytelling functions as a tool for legitimizing marginalized voices, building solidarity, and inspiring collective action toward equitable societies, while simultaneously analyzing the structural barriers—gender stereotypes, institutional resistance, limited resources—that constrain women's transformative potential. By juxtaposing literary representation with empirical analysis of historical and contemporary women leaders, the article underscores that genuine social transformation requires not merely amplifying women's leadership but fundamentally restructuring institutions to embed gender-responsive approaches within organizational cultures and governance mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Women leadership, narrative agency, social transformation, salman rushdie, Victory City, posthumanism

### Introduction

Salman Rushdie's Victory City presents a compelling meditation on women's transformative power, beginning with Pampa Kampana's emergence as a figure whose authority stems from narrative rather than coercive force. Through whispered stories, she constructs memories, identities, and histories for an entire civilization. Rushdie describes her capacity for social creation: "She was making up their lives, their castes, their faiths... and sending the stories whispering through the streets into the ears that needed to hear them" (2023, p. 33). This narrative power becomes the foundation for Bisnaga's existence, where "make-believe... created the truth" (Rushdie, 2023, p. 47)<sup>[6]</sup>. Pampa's transformation occurs against the backdrop of childhood trauma and gendered social constraints. Her early realization that "there was no such thing as men's work" (Rushdie, 2023, p. 10)<sup>[6]</sup> and her refusal to succumb to widow-burning trauma—"She would refuse to die young... this was the moment when the goddess Pampa's voice... started coming out of her nine-year-old mouth" (p. 11)—illustrate how personal rupture generates new forms of agency. Her later declaration, "My mother abandoned me, but I will be the mother of them all" (p. 33), highlights her shift from dispossession to collective creation. This trajectory aligns with contemporary trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's conceptualization that "the traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them. Or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess and thus which

possesses them" (Caruth, 1996, p. 7)<sup>[1]</sup>. Pampa transforms her traumatic displacement into generative agency, transforming her wound into the foundation of social creation.

This literary framework mirrors contemporary women leaders' strategies in politics, activism, and institutional reform. Women leaders across contexts—from grassroots organizers to political representatives—frequently reshape social reality through narrative reconstruction, community building, and alternative models of governance that challenge entrenched patriarchal systems. Contemporary studies affirm that women's leadership correlates with improved public welfare, stronger environmental commitments, and more inclusive governance structures. India's history of women's leadership, from Savitribai Phule to Ela Bhatt, further underscores the transformative potential of women's interventions in both formal and informal sectors.

### Narrative Agency and the Reconstruction of Social Reality

Storytelling remains a central instrument of power. In Victory City, Pampa creates not only individuals but the very imagination of a society. Her narratives embed social coherence, spiritual identity, and collective memory. This theoretical investment in narrative resonates with posthumanist perspectives on agency, particularly as articulated by Luciano and Chen (2019)<sup>[3]</sup>, who propose that agency operates not as individual will but as "a network of

relation between humans and nonhumans" and that "a singular chronology of 'human,' asserting the solidity of a concept that has never, in truth, been stable" must be questioned (p. 113). In Pampa's case, agency emerges through the relationality between storyteller, listener, and story—between individual consciousness and collective imagination. She does not impose narrative; instead, her stories circulate through the streets, creating interconnected networks of meaning that reshape how an entire civilization understands itself.

This mirrors how real-world women leaders use storytelling to shift public consciousness, articulate collective grievances, and propose alternative visions. As Mohamed (2025)<sup>[4, 5]</sup> notes in his examination of queer ecologies and posthumanist reading, narrative construction creates spaces where "the interconnectedness between the artificially segregated categories such as 'natural' and 'unnatural'" becomes visible and contestable (p. 91). Women leaders similarly disrupt artificial binaries—public/private, rational/emotional, political/personal—through their narrative interventions, creating what Mohamed terms an "environment of countercultural" possibilities.

Psychological and sociological research shows that narratives inspire empathy, foster solidarities, and reframe oppressive situations as changeable. In many parts of India, programs that engage girls in narrative-based learning demonstrate notable increases in confidence, self-advocacy, and resistance to gender norms. When women leaders narrate their struggles—gender bias, institutional exclusion, or community resistance—they legitimize the experiences of others and catalyze broader change. This narrative work is particularly significant in contexts of surveillance and racialized identity formation. As Gawad's *Between Two Moons* explores, as analyzed by Mohamed (2025)<sup>[4, 5]</sup>, the act of narrating Arab-American lives involves "the watched and the watching," where surveillance structures constrain and simultaneously generate alternative forms of visibility and self-representation (p. 84). Women leaders navigating racialized, gendered, and classed surveillance regimes use storytelling to reclaim narrative authority over their own identities and to expose the violence embedded in hegemonic representations.

Narrative reconstruction also transforms dominant cultural imaginaries. Women authors, scholars, and activists challenge patriarchal "common sense" by inserting women's perspectives into public discourse. Their interventions create cognitive openings that allow societies to envision new arrangements of gender, power, and community. These narrative interventions carry particular weight for historically marginalized communities. As Habeeb and Sait (2025)<sup>[2]</sup> demonstrate in their examination of Tabish Khair's work, *Indigenous and postcolonial narratives of "Identity, and Resilience"* create spaces where trauma can be metabolized into forms of cultural survival and resistance (p. 2). Similarly, women leaders across contexts—particularly those from Indigenous, Muslim, Arab American, and other marginalized communities—use storytelling to affirm identity, assert sovereignty, and build solidarity in the face of systemic erasure.

Rushdie dramatizes the tension inherent in this work through Pampa's conflict with Vidyasagar, the orthodox priest who resists her influence: "Your power has grown greater than mine... I can't stop you" (Rushdie, 2023, p. 87)<sup>[6]</sup>. Their rivalry symbolizes the clash between progressive

and orthodox narratives. The narrator notes the city falling "under the spell of the two rivals... Vidyasagar the priest... and Pampa Kampana herself" (p. 154). Such conflicts parallel the experiences of contemporary women leaders who confront institutional inertia, gender stereotypes, and cultural resistance. Pampa's admission that she and Vidyasagar are "not so different... lost within ourselves" (Rushdie, 2023, p. 161)<sup>[6]</sup> reflects the emotional toll of sustained transformative work, acknowledging the psychological burdens that accompany long-term leadership. As Caruth (1996)<sup>[1]</sup> argues regarding the structure of trauma consciousness, "traumatic experience enters the mind as a defect and leaves a gap in mental and visual fields" (p. 92); similarly, women engaged in sustained narrative transformation work experience fragmentation and exhaustion as they labor to restructure collective consciousness against the gravity of entrenched power.

### **Agency, Posthumanism, and the Reconstruction of the Political**

The concept of agency undergoes fundamental transformation when viewed through posthumanist lenses. Luciano and Chen (2019)<sup>[3]</sup>, in their formulation of "queer inhumanism," insist that we must move beyond humanist conceptions that locate agency solely within conscious, rational subjects. Instead, they propose that agency operates through what they term "interspecies thinking" that "underscore[s] the need for interspecies thinking" while "index[ing] habits and histories of dehumanization" (p. 115). This framework proves invaluable for understanding Pampa's agency, which operates not through individual will alone but through networked relations—between storyteller and listener, between memory and imagination, between the material world and its narrative representation.

Pampa's work exemplifies what might be called relational agency. She does not command; she whispers. She does not impose; stories circulate. Her power emerges through the recursive relationships between narrative and social reality, between individual consciousness and collective imagination. This form of agency, grounded in relationality rather than domination, characterizes much of women's transformative work. Women leaders frequently emphasize consensus-building, dialogue, and collaborative decision-making—not simply as pragmatic strategies but as ontological commitments rooted in their understanding of agency as inherently relational and distributed across networks of human and nonhuman actors.

The posthumanist turn also allows us to recognize how women's leadership transforms what counts as "political" and what counts as "real." Rushdie's insistence that "make-believe created the truth" challenges the humanist separation between imagination and reality, between narrative and fact. In Pampa's world, the stories circulating through the streets are not ornamental; they constitute the fabric of social existence. Similarly, contemporary women leaders challenge humanist distinctions between personal testimony and political argument, between lived experience and policy analysis. They assert that their narratives—their stories of survival, resistance, and vision—constitute legitimate forms of political knowledge and authority.

### **Institutional Transformation and the Restructuring of Power**

Grassroots women's leadership movements across India exemplify how women reshape social structures even

without formal authority. From Gaura Devi's Chipko movement to contemporary Panchayat women leaders, grassroots leadership often begins by reinterpreting local problems through community dialogue and mobilization. Women leaders identify gaps in governance, environmental threats, or social injustices and mobilize collective action to address them.

Recent national studies reveal that women representatives in local governance bodies improve outcomes in sanitation, education, child welfare, and community health. Their leadership tends to emphasize collaboration, conflict mediation, and long-term welfare. Evidence from gender reservation policies shows that women politicians expand women's political participation by recruiting female activists and engaging directly with women voters, producing generational shifts in political awareness. This work of institutional transformation often involves what we might call narrative reconstruction at the institutional level—redefining what problems institutions should address, what knowledge should count, and how decisions should be made.

Institutional transformation also occurs when women enter formal leadership at higher levels. Research consistently finds that gender-diverse leadership results in more ethical governance, broader social investment, and stronger environmental commitments. Finland's rise as a global model for progressive governance is frequently linked to women's leadership, including former Prime Minister Sanna Marin's emphasis on education, welfare, and equity. Women leaders in such positions frequently undertake what might be termed the "queering" of institutional structures—challenging heteronormative, hierarchical, anthropocentric organizational logics and proposing alternative arrangements that center marginalized voices.

Still, institutional culture must evolve alongside representation. Without structural reform—transparent recruitment, gender-responsive budgeting, accountability measures, and inclusive decision-making—women leaders often encounter the same patriarchal constraints that Pampa confronts in Victory City. Institutional change requires deliberate embedding of equity frameworks, not merely symbolic inclusion of women. This requires what Mohamed (2025)<sup>[4, 5]</sup> identifies, in his analysis of posthumanist and queer ecological approaches, as a fundamental reorientation of "agency and representation to rest with creation and with queer bodies" rather than with hierarchical structures and anthropocentric frameworks (p. 91). Such institutional transformation demands not merely adding women to existing structures but fundamentally reconceiving the purposes, methods, and ontologies of institutional life itself.

### Trauma, Resilience, and Women's Leadership

The intersection of trauma and leadership proves particularly significant in contexts of collective historical violence and ongoing systemic oppression. Habeeb and Sait (2025)<sup>[2]</sup> examine how contemporary fiction engages "Indigenous Trauma, Identity, and Resilience," demonstrating that the processing of collective trauma through narrative and community becomes essential not merely to individual healing but to political transformation (p. 1). Women leaders who emerge from communities marked by historical violence—colonialism, slavery, genocide, displacement—frequently carry within themselves the "impossible history" that Caruth (1996)<sup>[1]</sup> identifies as

trauma's defining characteristic. Yet these women transform their traumatic inheritances into forms of political vision and collective action.

This transformation operates through what might be termed wounded witnessing—the capacity to carry trauma while refusing its annihilating force, to speak from trauma without being consumed by it, to use traumatic knowledge as the basis for building more just communities. Pampa's refusal to succumb to widow-burning—to refuse early death despite her mother's abandonment—exemplifies this wounded witnessing. She survives her trauma; she does not transcend it. Instead, she channels her survival into creative, generative work that benefits others. This mirrors the strategies of contemporary women leaders who use their own experiences of marginalization to understand and address systemic injustice.

Contemporary Indigenous and Arab American writers similarly explore how collective trauma can be metabolized into forms of resilience and resistance. As the research on Indigenous narratives demonstrates, survivors use "quiet acts of care" and "the intimate act of storytelling" to become what Gerald Vizenor calls figures of "survival"—an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name." Women leaders across postcolonial, Indigenous, and diasporic contexts similarly transform trauma into testimony, testimony into witness, and witness into collective action for justice.

### Surveillance, Visibility, and Women's Counter-Narratives

The role of surveillance in constructing racialized and gendered identities has become increasingly significant in contemporary scholarship. Mohamed (2025)<sup>[4, 5]</sup> argues that surveillance structures shape how marginalized subjects can be seen and known, particularly for Arab Americans, arguing that "The watched and the watching" creates particular constraints on narrative authority and self-representation (p. 84). Women leaders navigating racialized surveillance regimes—whether as Arab Americans, Indigenous peoples, or other marginalized groups—must develop strategies for reclaiming narrative authority over their own identities and for exposing the violence embedded in dominant representations.

Rushdie's portrayal of Pampa offers an interesting counterpoint to contemporary surveillance regimes. Pampa's stories circulate through the streets without institutional mediation; she whispers her narratives directly to those who need to hear them, creating networks of knowledge that escape the state's capacity for surveillance and control. In contemporary contexts, women leaders similarly seek to build communication networks and narrative spaces that exceed surveillance capacity—whether through oral traditions, community organizing, or strategic use of digital platforms.

### Conclusion

Women leaders transform societies by reshaping narratives, mobilizing communities, and reforming institutions. Pampa Kampana's narrative-making in Victory City—where stories "created the truth" (Rushdie, 2023, p. 47)<sup>[6]</sup>—offers a powerful metaphor for how women restructure social reality through imagination, resistance, and collective agency. Contemporary women leaders undertake similar work, using stories to challenge dominant ideologies, organizing

communities to demand justice, and reforming governance structures to prioritize welfare, equity, and sustainability.

The theoretical frameworks drawn from posthumanist thought, trauma theory, and contemporary literary scholarship illuminate the depth and complexity of this work. As Luciano and Chen (2019) <sup>[3]</sup> argue, "queer inhumanism" offers crucial tools for understanding how women's leadership operates through relationality, collective agency, and the disruption of hierarchical power structures. As Caruth (1996) <sup>[1]</sup> demonstrates, trauma both fragments and generates new forms of consciousness and agency. As Mohamed (2025) <sup>[4, 5]</sup> and other contemporary scholars show, narrative becomes a crucial site where marginalized communities assert sovereignty, build resistance, and imagine alternatives.

While structural barriers remain, the cumulative impact of women's leadership is undeniable. Societies and organizations with meaningful women's participation experience stronger social cohesion, improved welfare outcomes, and more sustainable development trajectories. The work of leaders from Savitribai Phule to modern grassroots activists, from literary figures like Pampa Kampana to historical and contemporary women leaders across contexts, shows that transformation is both possible and ongoing.

Supporting women's leadership is therefore not simply a matter of inclusion but a fundamental strategy for building equitable and resilient societies. Women's narratives and leadership practices continue to expand the possibilities of collective life, echoing the generative power embodied in Pampa Kampana's story. In a moment marked by ecological crisis, political polarization, and persistent injustice, women's relational, trauma-informed, and narrative-based approaches to leadership offer essential resources for imagining and building worlds otherwise.

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