

A Tale of a Lost City: The Resurrection of Mughal Capital City Fatehpur Sikri in *The Enchantress of the Florence*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* as a literary reconstruction of the lost Mughal capital, Fatehpur Sikri. The argument is: Rushdie reimagines the historical city founded by Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century and transforms it into a vibrant fictional city and through the text the reader can relive the times of the Akbar the Great. In this work, history and imagination meet through magical realism. Based on the historical figures, political developments, and architectural grandeur, the novel recreates the cultural and intellectual world of the Mughal court while reshaping it through the techniques of magic realism. The study analyzes Rushdie's portrayal of Akbar the Great, his policies of religious tolerance, the artistic flourishing of his court, and the syncretic ethos of Hindustan. It further investigates how the narrative constructs a parallel between Mughal India and Renaissance Florence, thereby expanding the historical views beyond geographical boundaries through fiction. Through a close reading of selected passages, this research highlights how Rushdie revitalizes an abandoned city and converts history into narrative and through it gives the reader a chance to relive the ancient times. The paper argues that the novel functions as a creative act of resurrection, demonstrating that literature possesses the power to restore forgotten spaces and reanimate the past within contemporary imagination.*

Keywords: Fatehpur Sikri, Magic Realism, Mughal Empire, Akbar the Great, Hindustan, Historical Fiction

INTRODUCTION

History records the rise and falls of empires, yet literature possesses the unique capacity to restore what history leaves silent and forgotten in the quagmire of historical details. Fatehpur Sikri, once the magnificent capital of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Akbar, stands today as a deserted architectural marvel lost and left unattended. Although historians document its construction, political significance, and eventual abandonment, Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* reopens this closed chapter by transforming the city into a living narrative space or a third space. Through fiction, and thanks to his extensive research Rushdie reclaims Fatehpur Sikri from historical stillness and reanimates it with cultural, political, and imaginative vitality.

In the Indian historical context, the blending of native Indians and Muslim immigration resulted in a prolific output in literature, art, music, technology, and architecture, which peaked during the Mughal Empire. Founded in 1571 and declared the imperial capital, Fatehpur Sikri symbolized Akbar's vision of unity, religious tolerance, and administrative innovation. The city embodied the emperor's aspiration to create a harmonious empire that transcended divisions of faith and ethnicity. However, despite its architectural grandeur and political importance, it was later abandoned, becoming a silent relic of Mughal ambition. Rushdie revisits this historical moment and reconstructs the city not merely as a physical space but as a metaphor for intellectual experimentation and cosmopolitan exchange. The convergence of literature and culture peaked at the time of Akbar, the Great Mughal. Well known for his religious tolerance and syncretism, he ruled beyond the expectations of the times. Many would argue, he lived a supreme era, an era that was predominantly more successful than his counterpart Queen Elizabeth, though they ruled entirely different regions and corners of the world. To Rushdie, Akbar the Great, "was the Enchanter. In this place he would conjure a new world, a world beyond religion, region, rank, and tribe" (Rushdie, 2008, 19). Rushdie's *Enchantress of Florence* is written after extensive research, as the references portray. In the novel, history and fiction intersect seamlessly. Historical figures such as Akbar, Birbal, Tansen, and Mariam-uz-Zamani are reimagined as dynamic literary characters. Rushdie integrates factual events with elements of fantasy and magic realism, thereby challenging rigid distinctions between history and works of literature. The arrival of the Florentine traveler in Akbar's court further expands the narrative into a dialogue beyond India, linking Mughal India with Renaissance Europe. This study reads that how Rushdie reconstructs Fatehpur Sikri through art and literature. Rushdie's work is an effort to strike a balance between the historical authenticity and fictional freedom, the portrayal of Akbar's ideology, and the role of magic realism in reconstructing the past. By analyzing the novel's depiction of architecture, court culture, and political philosophy, the paper argues that Rushdie transforms a virtually deserted city into a living fictional city. Rushdie's work establishes literature's authority over history: though city's fade, and empires die, a writer can resuscitate the spirit and the cultural memory.

Akbar the Great (1556-1605), son of Hamayun, was born in Umar Court India. Abu'l-Fath Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar is a beloved and celebrated sovereign of Mughal India. In his presence, the boundaries of the Indian empire stretched to the maximum extent and social and political harmony was at its peak. Historically the foundation given by Akbar the Great had the potential to sustain serious blows emerging from different sources. Akbar was fascinated by diverse forms of the human intellect and religions, particularly Hindu, Parsee, and Christian religions, in search of the "ultimate truth." He hosted religious and philosophical conversations in a separate facility known as the House of Worship. In 1582, he established the Din Ilahi, or "Divine Faith," a new religious system. The rites of this diverse cult were heavily influenced by the Parsees' Zoroastrian beliefs. However, Akbar's new "religion" never spread beyond the Mughal court.

Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* is frequently examined by literary critics as an exploration of "the mirror effect" between the East and the West during the sixteenth century. By juxtaposing the cosmopolitanism of Akbar's Fatehpur Sikri with the political pragmatism of Renaissance Florence, Rushdie invites a postcolonial reading that deconstructs the binary of "civilized" Europe and "exotic" Orient (Gurnah 14). Scholars like Pranav Jani argue that the novel's reliance on the oral tradition and the figure of the *storyteller* serves to critique the rigidity of Western linear history, replacing it with a "polyphonic" narrative that prizes subjectivity and wonder (Jani 210). Additionally, the central mystery of the "hidden princess" acts as a catalyst for investigating the role of memory in national identity, suggesting that the past is not a fixed record but a malleable fabrication shaped by desire and artistic license.

In *The Enchantress of the Florence* history and fiction amalgamate developing an inimitable fictional picture of the city *Fatehpur Sikri*, an Indian city developed by Akbar the Great. In particular, the

magnificence and charm of the capital of the Indian empire take a rebirth in Rushdie's hands. Johnson et.al (1987) the concept of a new city came in 1571 when Akbar moved twenty-six miles from *Agra* to *Fatehpur Sikri* which was built and declared the capital city by 1585. During this period of fifteen years, Akbar tackled all the major crises. Mughal Empire flourished when significant organizational and administrative initiatives and measures in the Mughal imperial system were introduced; revenue, coinage, military organization and provincial administration systems were practically adopted (29). Rushdie's description of the city of Fatehpur Sikri reincarnates the city of the past described by historians like Faizi¹. His first impression itself holds the geography, architecture, splendour and diversity. And most importantly the enchanting features were enough to "dazzle and awe his guests" (3). On the other hand, the pages of history speak no less; it is the city that gifted a son and lots of fortune to the emperor, Akbar the great and laid the foundations of the Mughal Empire. Mughal Empire and Renaissance Florence, it is replete with princesses and pirates, mysterious strangers and long-lost cousins, enchanted waters and magic cloaks. But what it does not contain is as telling as what it does. (Deresiewicz 33) Salman Rushdie's world of this city is just like the picture of history where the empire was not run by mere force but the view of the court intellectuals meant a lot. Figures from different walks of life with expertise beyond any other common man were hired to share their judgments in the matters. Akbar's Navratna or Nine Stars a cluster of fine intellects contributed greatly. The following names with certain allegiance to their past are portrayed by Rushdie: Akbar the Great, Mariam-uz-Zamani (or Jodhaa Bai), Maham Anaga – wet nurse of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. She was the de facto regent of the Mughal state after the exclusion of Bairam Khan in 1560 to Akbar's assumption of full power in 1562, shortly before her death. Adham Khan, Akbar's foster brother Babar – founder of the Mughal Empire, brother of Angelica Outlugh Nigar Khanum – Babar's mother Khanzada Begum – Babar's sister Humayun – second Mughal Emperor, father of Akbar Gulbadan – daughter of Babar, sister of Humayun, aunt of Akbar Prince Khusraw – son of Prince Salim (Jahangir), grandson of Akbar Abu'l-Fazl – Akbar's chief advisor and author of Akbarnama, Birbal – Grand Vizier (Wazir-e Azam) of the Mughal court in the administration of the Mughal emperor Akbar and one of the nine jewels in Akbar's court Miyan Tansen – Legendary musician, well known for his voice and music, and Ali- Shir Nava'i – poet of Herat, author of "My Dark Eyed One".

Rushdie uses magic realism as a brush to bring the life of different continents together. The power of art and the artist's superiority is also discussed by the writer. Rushdie's art of Magic realism resurrects and redefines the city and its denizens. This art can be defined as: Magical realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, [...] Capturing such boundaries between spaces is to exist in a third space, in the fertile interstices between these extremes of time or space" (Cooper 1).

Salman Rushdie's young storyteller is mystified at the very sight of the well-constructed city Fateh Pur Sikri, the then capital of the Mughal Empire "The city was finished at last, in time for the emperor's fortieth birthday. It had been twelve hot years in the making, but for a long time, he had been given the impression that it rose up effortlessly, year by year, as if by sorcery" (13). Indian society seemed very rich at the time where economy was never a very serious problem. It was a majestic city which was the pinnacle of art and architecture.

In the day's last light, the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of molten gold. A traveler coming this way at sunset--this traveler, coming this way, now, along the lakeshore road--might believe himself to be approaching the throne of a monarch so fabulously wealthy that he could allow a portion of

¹ A renowned writer-poet and historian of Akbar's time.

his treasure to be poured into a giant hollow in the earth to dazzle and awe his guests. And as big as the lake of gold was, it must be only a drop drawn from the sea of the larger fortune (Rushdie 3).

Rushdie's work is a reflection of the Akbar the Great's time. At that period the emergence of renaissance as a rebirth and revival also had certain prevailing changes taking place throughout the world. Medicci of Florence, Queen Elizabeth of England and the power full rulers of Khurasan were the contemporaries of the Indian ruler. To sustain the extreme pressure of the volatile attacks from outside and from within and for the successful administration and rule, Akbar used both force and the power his intellect to reign a peaceful united Indian Empire. Rushdie's plot begins with the arrival of a traveler from Florence to Akbar the Great. Later, he claims that he is a long-lost-relative of his majesty, son of a lost Princess who was the sister of Zaheer uddin Babur². This matter announces the birth of a stir in the court raising several questions, and doubts. The traveler finds it hard to convince the Mughal Emperor of his truthfulness. Anyhow, stories move between two continents embodiments of history, fantasy and fable mixed together. Soon after the birth of Prince Salim, the long-awaited heir to the throne of India, the emperor was committed to rise a capital city in the Sixteenth Century for the empire. The child was named after a Saint namely Chisthy Salim, who predicted the birth of a son heir. Metropolis took some fifteen years to complete and established enough to support the governance of the fine Mughal India which was relatively peaceful and progressive by this time. Some of the monuments of Fateh Pur Sikri still enchant the viewers for their grandeur and fine architecture art; Rushdie eulogizes the planned city with much enthusiasm and beholds it in the following words:

Plainly it was one of the grand cities of the world, larger, it seemed to his eye, than Florence or Venice or Rome, larger than any town the traveler had ever seen. He had visited London once; it too was a lesser metropolis than this. As the light failed the city seemed to grow. Dense neighborhoods huddled outside the walls, muezzins called from their minarets, and in the distance he could see the lights of large estates. (Rushdie 5)

Salman Rushdie's secular sentiments tend to find comfort in the Mughal Emperor's doctrines of *Deen-i-Illahi*³ and *Sullah-e-kull*.⁴ The majority Hindus and other minorities took the initiative as a step towards creating inter-religion harmony, while, on the other hand Islamic clerics like, Mujdid Alfe Saani⁵, criticized him harshly for supposedly trying to change the very basic concepts of Islam. The *Jazia*⁶ imposed upon the non-believers in the Indian Empire was abolished and cow slaughter was considered as an act of crime by law. Certain acceptable features of all religions were included in the *Deen-i- Illahi* which intended to resolve the apple of discords in the multi-religious Indian society, "A Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted only peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in terms. Such was the greatest ruler the land had ever known" (16). However, Akbar's own creed was never readily accepted by the unfailingly divided India and therefore died with him soon after his demise and therefore he is simultaneously famous and notorious for his kind of religious teaching and fundamentals he propagated during his life time. Rushdie uses the

² Zaheer udin Babur grandfather of Akbar the Great, was a Mongol from Samarkand, Turkmenistan who invaded India in 1526 AD, defeated Ibrahim Lodhi and established The Mughal Empire.

³ Akbar the Great focused on the amalgamation of different religions thus creating a universal religion having all the positive essentials of all.

⁴ It is the philosophy promulgated by Akbar the Great which means "Peace with everyone". It was considered a significant leap towards the attainment of a secular India.

⁵ He best known as an Indian Islamic scholar; a Hanafi jurist who denounced the policies introduced by Akbar the Great

⁶ An Islamic tax applied to a non-believer living in the Muslim society.

historical particulars to enhance it and colours it with his opinion. However, the main historical aspects are kept intact.

The important figures of the court have a place in the Enchantress of Florence. Rushdie's analysis deeply penetrates into the characters and one can find certain people living there in the court. He is acquainted with the most of the ideas in the book most probably because the writer is himself a graduate of history, and says that this work is the most researched work. The court of Great Akbar, a mosaic of finest of artistry and brilliance, hosted religious scholars, musicians, and historians; all were graciously welcomed by the king. The *Ibbadat Khana* (place of worship) helped the king establish a place where he could he talk religious philosophy art and literature. Figures like Tansen were an essential part of his court:

Akbar sent a mission to the Baghela Rajput ruler Ram Chand at the Kalinjar, his capital, to induce the famed singer-musician Tansen to come to the Mughal court at Agra. Ram Chand...sent Tansen with his instruments and lavish presents to Akbar's Court. Akbar is said to have given Tansen two hundred thousand rupees as a gift on the occasion of his first performance at court. Acquisition of Tansen's services simulated Akbar's active patronage of music. Tansen, and after him, his sons and other pupils actively cultivated what was to become known as North Indian or Hindustani music. (Johnson, Bayly, Richards 16-17)

Similar identity of the singer's worth in the novel is mentioned:

The songs of Tansen could break open the seals of the universe and let divinity through into the everyday world. The poems of Faizi opened windows in the heart and mind through which both light and darkness could be seen. (19)

Due to the far-sightedness of the emperor in a few years he was able to draw a sketch of a powerful empire. The main contributor was his own genius in dealing the Indian fragile community where different religions were deeply rooted. "It was due to Akbar's personal energy and intelligence, therefore, that the Mughal empire so quickly became the most powerful kingdom in India's history." (Johnson, Bayly, Richards p.53) Among them Muslim and Hindu confrontation was imminent almost at all the time but the masterly mind did not let that happen. He married from other religions particularly Hinduism. Joda Bahi was his most beloved wife. In short, he blessed the society with peace and harmony:

Blacksmiths were at work, and carpenters, and in chandleries on all four sides of the enormous square men planned their journeys, stocking up on groceries, candles, oil, soap, and ropes. Turbaned coolies in red shirts and dhotis ran ceaselessly hither and yon with bundles of improbable size and weight upon their heads. There was, in general, much loading and unloading of goods. Beds for the night were to be cheaply had here. (Rushdie 4)

Jodha Bai was the daughter of a Rajput Hindu Lord who married Akbar the Great. Her title was Mariam-uz-Zamani Begum. She enjoyed great influence on the emperor. The portrayal of this Queen is very interesting in Rushdie's hands "Master Abdus Samad the Persian portrayed her himself, painted her from the memory of a dream without ever looking upon her face, and when the emperor saw his work, he clapped his hands at the beauty shining up from the page. "You have captured her" (13) Near his palace in Fathpur Sikri, Akbar established an atelier with workrooms for the arts of painting, goldwork, weaving, and the manufacture of armaments. Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad remained chief painters at Akbar's academy, which employed over a hundred painters of various nationalities to illustrate Persian manuscripts (Dimand, 1953). Most of these painters were Hindus from Kashmir, Gujarat, and Punjab, who brought with them the traditions of local schools (p 53). Jodha Bai is presented as a made-up construction of Emperor's mind but no one is permitted to talk about her and her beauty; "All acknowledged not only her existence but also her

beauty, her wisdom, the grace of her movements, and the softness of her voice. Akbar and Jodhabai! Ah, ah! It was the love story of the age” (13). Akbar rejoices her company in the story and same was the case in the real life. She was a competent business woman who had several trade ships and her part in the state affairs was very important. “Mariam-uz-Zamani was granted the right to issue official documents (singularly called farman), usually the exclusive privilege of the emperor” (Ellison 227–238).

On a number of important positions Hindus and Sikhs were given the charge. He judged them well and gave them power and respect in the court. “The governance of Raja Man Singh and the financial skills of Raja Todar Mal meant the empire's business was in the best of hands. And then there was Birbal, the best of the nine who were the best of the best. His first minister, and first” (19). Moreover, the construction of Fatehpur Sikri and birth of Salim proclaimed the progression of the empire which laid the foundation of the longest period of rule by any Indian emperor. It might be roughly considered from 1526 when Zaheer udin Babar invaded India to 1857 when last emperor Bahadurshah Zafar was exiled and sent to Rangoon. Undoubtedly, such a rule for a long period of time without strong foundation would not be easy without proper foundations:

Mughal Hindustan was literally being invented; the union of the artists prefigured the unity of the empire and, perhaps, brought it into being. "Together we are painting the emperor's soul," Dashwanth told his collaborators sadly. "And when his spirit leaves his body, it will come to rest in these pictures, in which he will be immortal. (54)

The important buildings of the capital city are precisely discussed in the story. Even the construction map is well deliberated. Since, the main city itself is now deserted and is only a tourist attraction, the reading of the story gives a rebirth to everything to a great extent. The places for common discussions was “*Deewane Aam*” and “*Deewane Khas*” was for the special purposes. The “*Ibaadat Khana*” was reserved for different debates on religious and philosophical matters:

An Oriental padishah or emperor sat, at sunset,

under a little cupola at the apex of a pyramid-like five-story building made of red

sandstone, and looked out over a golden lake. To his rear there were body-servants wielding large feathered fans. (87)

Akbar the great was famous for patronizing the works of arts and literature. He had a great library with thousands of books in Kashmiri, Hindustani, and Sanskrit, Persian languages. He was a bibliophile and his court was the Florence of the East in terms of his works. Men were paid to have the works safe and protected, “At least fifty painters were employed on the work, and about one hundred men overall. The workshops, therefore, had become very large very quickly, evidence both of the extent of Akbar's interest in book production, and of the ability of the Mughal court to attract artists and craftsmen to its employ (Johnson, Bayly, Richards p.27).

The Enchantress of Florence becomes a literary monument through which Salman Rushdie resurrects the lost Mughal capital of Fatehpur Sikri and reanimates its historical memory. The novel does not merely recount the past; rather, it transforms documented history into a living, breathing narrative space. By blending archival detail with imaginative reconstruction, Rushdie reclaims Fatehpur Sikri from historical abandonment and situates it once again at the center of cultural and intellectual vitality. The study demonstrates that Rushdie’s portrayal of Akbar the Great and his court sustain a careful balance between historical realities and creative re-visioning by the authority. The emperor emerges as both sovereign and

visionary, an enchanter who attempts to construct not only a capital city but also an ethical and philosophical order rooted in pluralism, diversity and commitment of idea of man over any other difference. Through the depiction of institutions such as the Ibadat Khana, the Din-i-Ilahi, and the artistic ateliers, the novel foregrounds the syncretic and cosmopolitan character of Mughal Hindustan. The narrative technique of magic realism enables Rushdie to dissolve rigid boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, India and Florence. This aesthetic strategy produces a “third space” where opposites coexist, and where historical record is enriched by myth, fantasy, and storytelling. In doing so, Rushdie underscores the idea that history itself is a form of narration, shaped, remembered, and reimagined through language. Also, with the help of it, Fatehpur Sikri, once deserted in reality, thus regains symbolic permanence in literature. Its architecture, courtly culture, intellectual vibrancy, and political complexities are revived. The city becomes more than a geographical site; it stands as a metaphor for ambition, experimentation, and the fragility of empire. Therefore, the paper establishes that Rushdie’s novel is not simply historical fiction but a creative act of resurrection. By reweaving documented events with narrative enchantment, he restores voice to a silent city and reasserts the enduring dialogue between history and imagination. Fatehpur Sikri, though physically in ruins, survives powerfully in literary consciousness—an enduring testament to the transformative power of storytelling.

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