Chapter IV

Grimus

Grimus was Rushdie's first debut in the literary world. However, it was received coldly by critics and scholars found it difficult to digest due to its chaotic fantasy and mimetic multiplicity. It is indeed a critical challenge to find a discernible pattern within such a complexity of narratives. Margarita Peterson in her essay "Grimus and the Alchemical Tradition" in Mittapalli and Kuortti's collection of articles on Salman Rushdie, has stated that

> The novel contains a patchwork of myths collected from different parts of the world. Several scholars suggest that the myths lack inner coherence. I, on the contrary, see them as subordinated to one myth or one symbolic language, the language of alchemy, which also plays a part in Rushdie's later works. The alchemical tradition is essential in the interpretation of Rushdie's works because it contests the accusation against him for taking part in western orientalism. It also shows his universal ambitions over and above his more local political and satirical ambitions (2003, I.1).

Indeed, in Grimus, alchemy becomes Rushdie's metaphor for hybridity. In this novel, alchemy, which implies the art of transmutation, has been used to illustrate and explain the complex cultural cross currents, and therefore, it may be said to set the trend of Rushdie's narrative experiments in later novels like Midnight's Children and The Satanic Verses, which brilliantly explore his notions of hybridity in terms of narrative, history, politics, religion and society. Alchemy is actually one of the ancient eclectic traditions. The proliferation of alchemy has been noted in Europe, Egypt, the Arabian countries, in China and India. But the importance of alchemy lies in the fact that its practice became the site of interaction of various cultures like that of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, Persian, Syrian and Christian, among others. It was out of the cosmopolitan environment of ancient Alexandria that the immigrants forged a hybrid culture of syncretistic rites, cults and a conception of the synthetic character of nature or matter. Through this art of transformation

> The adepts tried to force substances to transmute into each other in the alchemical laboratories. Above all, they wanted to transform lead into gold. The basis for the idea of transformation was the monistic conception that everything that existed consisted ultimately of the same substances — everything corresponded. The idea has a parallel in early Greek philosophy, where it was assumed that all things, even metals, consisted of different

> combinations of the four elements, earth, water, fire and oil. This concept became a philosophical basis for the idea of transmutation of alchemy... (Paterson, 3).

According to the ancient practices of alchemy, the art of transformation contains all oppositions or polarities, for example, male and female. At its most basic philosophical level, alchemy embodies the union of opposites. Prima materia must be crushed to produce something new to emerge. This idea has been explained by DiBernard in Alchemy and Finnegans Wake (1980). The cyclical nature of the process is manifested in the actions of blending, coagulation, dissolving and reunion. Such blending of opposites and the multifarious become Rushdie's manner of illustrating on the one hand, the multicultural society as well as the complex intertextual pattern in the novel. For one thing, the entire novel may be read as an allegory of the artistic process whereby the myth of Simurg, which is actually a myth about religious insight, has been fused into an aesthetic unity in order to underline the theme of cultural multiplicity.

In most of his novels, Rushdie has attempted to explain and embody the multiple aspects of polycultural activity. This may be seen on the inter-textual level in Grimus. In his later novels, Rushdie has often given expression to the theme of cultural encounter through the motif of exile. Most of Rushdie's scholars have above all concentrated on this

motif in their analyses of Grimus as well. Timothy Brennan in his brilliant book, Salman Rushdie and the Third World has noted that

> Grimus prefigures with unusual clarity, Rushdie's major interests. Even in the area that seems most different, he provides evidence of his eventual practice: namely, an underlying attachment to Indian culture and the multiple overlapping of various national myths. For example, Calf Mountain (Persian, Quranic, Dantean) is described in passing at one point as being "rather like a giant lingam weltering in the yoni that is the sea" (Grimus, 66). The lingam and yoni are respectively phallus and vulva, the customary iconography of the Hindu god Shiva. Rushdie's allusion to this iconography is appropriate at this point given Flapping Eagle's hermaphroditic past and the sterility of the immortals on Calf. Rushdie invokes Shiva...once again when he explains Flapping Eagle's name.... Thus, either the Indian expatriate fertilises the barren cultural landscape of England or threatens to destroy its former supremacy (Brennan, 76-77).

Brennan's analysis throws light on the manner in which Rushdie has expressed his art of mythical transposition by turning his exiled hero an American 'Indian', denoting "a people bound to the Indians of the East

by the geographical ignorance of their European colonisers" (Brennan, 77). Flapping Eagle has been born in the milieu of "Phoenix" and as such illustrates the reincarnation of the nonconformist in an intolerant land. And as Brennan reminds us that:

> The Amerindians and the Indians are bound together in Rushdie's mind negatively: the religion of Axona mirrors the strict rituals and hypocrisy of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism: women are chattel; those open to foreign influences are repudiated by a community of bigots (Brennan, 77).

Viewed in this manner, Grimus incarnates this quest, which is a transcendental vision of heterogeneity or heterogeneity made beneficial. The context of such heterogeneity, however, involves an inverted or mixed order with supreme creative abilities, which are only talked about and not demonstrated narratively. At this point it is important to note that Rushdie has brilliantly explored this crystallised "otherness" primarily in terms of his fictional craft and intertextual plan in his imaging of (this Otherness) in a language game. He has concentrated on the palindrome and the anagram, of which the most important is "Grimus" itself, which s again the anagrammatic embodiment of "Simurg":

> The Divine Game of Order, the Game extends far beyond mere letter-puzzling. The vast mental powers of the Gorfs (large god-like 'frogs') make it possible for them

> anagrammatically to alter their very environment and indeed their own physical make up (Grimus, 77).

Catherine Cundy in her essay entitled "'Rehearsing Voices': Salman Rushdie's Grimus" has highlighted the novelist's presentation of the theme of exile. Cundy has seen in Grimus the novelist's first tentative investigation of post-coloniality. And the obvious motif is the Eagle, who is both White and an Indian. By selecting such a motif, Rushdie has invariably stressed the in-between or hybrid status of the migrant artist, who belongs to many places and continents at the same time. This hybridity becomes one of the principal reasons for the expelling of Eagle from his birthplace among the Axona Indians, who, then becomes a chameleon turncoat and who is later shadowed in Saladin Chamcha in The Satanic Verses. In her essay Margareta Paterson explains that

> In K, he tried to find a home. 'The way of K' is the name of the philosophy of life — a way of living which preserves the men in the cocoon of the past and in the minutiae of the present.... 'It is the natural condition of the exile putting down roots in memories' (Paterson, 22).

Syed Amanuddin in his essay on "The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy" has stated that in Grimus Rushdie has initiated the exploration of the heritage of colonialism. He has seen Grimus as a European, "discovering" the native Eagle and exploiting him

for his own purposes (Amanuddin, 1989, 143). Again both Cundy and Johansen in his essay on Grimus have emphasised the oppression by the Whites. Johansen has drawn parallels from the Tempest and shown similarities between Grimus and Prospero and also between Eagle and Caliban (Johansen, 1985, 22). Indeed, in Grimus Rushdie has repeatedly illustrated the condition of the migrant. The literary image which is used to explain such a situation is that of gravity and lightness. Gravity becomes a metaphor for a settled condition and lightness has been likened to migration. Like the narrator in Shame, the migrant has learnt how to overcome the law of gravity and practice the art of flying. It is to be noted that such difference is to be found in Grimus also. This distinction has been actualised, as has already been noted, in the life of gorfs and birds. The gorfs represent gravity, immobility, sterility and intellect. They are contrasts to those men who are related to birds, Eagle and Grimus, who are both migrants.

The men in K seem to be created in analogy with the gorfs because the first person who Eagle encounters in K is Stone, a man who is engaged in an act of worship. He is on all fours and crawls the length of the city. He does so because the street is said to be his microcosm (Grimus, 130). Margarita has noted that in Grimus

> Everybody in K gradually appears petrified — in striking contrast to the birds. Migrants, who in a similar way

> petrify in reiteration of the manners and customs of their native place, recur in Rushdie's later novels.
>
> We can find still other interpretative possibilities. The word 'gorf' is an anagram of frog. The name of their master is Dota, which could be another anagram, toad. They live on thera, which could be an anagram of earth. Making and deciphering anagrams is one of the most important occupations of the gorfs (Paterson, 23).

In this way alchemy has been used in Grimus as an ambiguous literary trope to highlight the charged symbols for death and rebirth, and the transformation and encounter between opposite poles in the situation of the migrant artist and which Rushdie forcefully explores in his later novels. Thus

> ...an alchemical context does not exclude other ways of understanding the novel. On the contrary, one could argue that migration is a basic experience of many characters in Rushdie's texts, and migration is seen as a wholly revolutionary process. It leads cultures to mix and change, and for humans to be transformed. Migration means that old certainties are questioned, which in turn leads to doubt and the necessity of compromise — this is one of the themes of The Satanic Verses. All these themes are comprehensible without reference to alchemy. However,

> this tradition elucidates the themes and clothes them in a powerful symbolic language while at the same time also dressing them in existential and political dimensions (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, 24-25).

Indeed, the multiple themes of migration, change, transnationality and hybridity find expression in the multiplicity of voices in Grimus. Of course, allied with a recognition of such related questions, one of the principle issues in the novel is Flapping Eagle's search for himself: "I am looking for a suitable voice to speak in" (Grimus: 32).

Actually, the diversity of choices emerges in, for example, the varying narrative points of new of the world. In spite of the fact that the novel is mainly narrated from the omniscient point of view, there are occasional first-person narrations, as in the cases of Flapping Eagle (Grimus, 46), Dolores (Grimus, 57-58), Virgil (Grimus, 95-96) and Tina (Grimus, 179). According to Joel Kuortti, "this functions as a gesture allowing multiple points of view in the narrative. It is part of the democratic quality which the novel form is claimed to contain. In the novel, especially the Endimions stand of this kind of diversity when this feature of reality is misused, it endangers the whole community, the whole universe" (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, 1.56). At this point it is interesting to note that Colin Smith in "The Unbearable Lightness of Salman Rushdie" has shown how Grimus

> dances allusively through the worlds of Persian, Nordic and Indian mythology (...). Rushdie's fictional model, which aims to expose the human causes of re-emergent historical patterns, deliberately sets itself in the broadest possible tradition, in which Eastern and Western myth-making merge (Smith, 105).

In bringing together different and opposing traditions through a world of allusions, Rushdie's narrative liberates in a certain sense, the limitations of language, circumscribed by nation and race. We have already witnessed this in his brilliant play of symbols and motifs like the anagram. However, in this multi-cultural fabric, Rushdie also shows how time and again the powerful fictions created by the religious, patriarchal and colonial authorities become the reality people live by and within. And when we see how the Gorfs, alien immobile stone frogs exercise their power of control by their employment of monograms, we also become aware of the secret behind the Gorfic notion of conceptualisation which empowers one to make things happen: "I think, therefore, it exists". Grimus initiates Flapping Eagle to this secret in the following passage from Grimus.

> In a sense, Flapping Eagle, I created you, conceptualising you as you are. Just as I created the island and its dwellers with all the selectivity of the artist.

— We existed before you found us, said Flapping Eagle (Grimus, 233).

We note here that Flapping Eagle is never content with Grimus's view. As has been noted by Joel Kuortti, "The descriptive power of the colonialist cannot be claimed as the originating point of the existence of the colonised. Against these dominating fictions, other counter-fictions are offered and claimed to be no less true. This feature is later developed more maturely in Rushdie's work, but it is there already in Grimus (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, I.57).

In fact, the coloniser has always been considered as an usurper in a foreign land. He tries to impose his version of history on the inhabitants of the occupied country. Actually, then he attempts to translate his status of an usurper into one of legitimacy by falsifying history. Read in this manner, much of Rushdie's narratives not only expose such attempts by illegitimate colonialists but also create parallel narratives which militate against such efforts. Thus, most of his novels of the middle period like The Satanic Verses and Midnight's Children as well as his later novels like The Moor's Last Sigh or Fury dealt with the hybrid character of multiple narratives, which not only transcend demarcations of nation but obviate any simple linearity of racial superimposition on other nationalities. This may be seen in Grimus, where the Gorfs are projected as "illegitimate colonialists", albeit in a postcolonial environment where they become so disillusioned and indifferent that they finally allow

Grimus to appropriate the Stone Rose, the instrument of their power. It remains true that the catastrophe following Grimus's inability to control the effect through the use of the Stone Rose testifies to this indifference. Joel Kuortti has remarked in this context that

> The above would not suffice to prove that the Gorfs to stand for the French. As a further support for the present interpretation, it can be noted that they do not, after all, live on some faraway planet, but on palimpsest Earth, 'Thera', in the palimpsest Universe, 'Nirveesu' (Grimus, 64). What is even more suggestive of it is that the Gorfic idea of the simultaneously existing Endimions or Dimensions could well denote the democratic ideals so forcefully put forward by the French Revolution: especially equality, but liberty and fraternity as well. As such, there seems to be at least a shadow of these ideals in the Utopian (Grimus, 85&149), Communist (Grimus, 116 & 148-49), or, indeed, religious (Grimus, 100). Paradises, as conceptualised in the reversed, epic 'underwater Underworld' of Calf Island (with echoes of Atlantis, Robinson Crusoe's island, the Odyssey's Ithaca, More's Utopia, and the classical Ultima Thule among others) and particularly in the town of K. And as with the Gorfic planet, Virgil explains the existence of Calf Island in terms

> of Endimions, than 'an infinity of dimensions might exist, as palimpsest, upon and within and around our town' (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, I.47).

As the Gorf Koax becomes the titular head of the other Gorfs, called Magister Anagrammari, he moved toward heresy (Grimus, 66). It is remarkable that the Gorf Koax's heresy here corresponds well with the irreverence, associated with Sufi mystics like Attar and Al-Halay, or the novel form as such, since France was among the most important sources of its initiation. But it is precisely this acquiescence and willingness on Gorf Koax's part to patronise features of a foreign colonised culture, which leads to his own expulsion. This very similar to the fate of the Flapping Eagle, who was expelled by his own people for his (impure) espousing of a foreign culture like that of the Unaxona. This hybrid character of both the Gorf Koax and the Flapping Eagle shows that they are not monolithic, but rather eclectic in temper, since the Gorf Koax wants to measure their civilization with that of the others. This is actually the nature of the migrant artist and which later finds comprehensive expression in The Satanic Verses and Midnight's Children (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, I.48-49). Once again, the irony with which the colonial Gorfs are presented are never lost on the reader since these Gorfs may be highly self-ironic portraits of the author-figure later appearing in many other novels. Thus, in The Satanic Verses Gibreel witnesses the apparition

of the Supreme Being in person, sitting across on the bed, facing him. This Supreme Being is actually Salman Rushdie in person.

> He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt and pepper beard cropped closed to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and more glasses. This was not the Almighty he has expected (S.V., 318).

In this manner both the Gorf Koax and the Flapping Eagle may be said to prefigure the hybridity of the postcolonial writer which ranges throughout Rushdie's fiction and critical writings. This "multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridisation of such opposites as Oopar and Neechay" in the artist in The Satanic Verses (S.V., 319) form the basis of such mosaic of motifs, images and cultures in Grimus.

Apart from alchemy and monomyth, opposites and their union become cultural motif in the novel and which very well explain and illustrate Rushdie's interest in plurality and "union-by-hybridisation". Campbell has referred to Joyce's words in Finnegans Wake "equals of opposites (...) polarised for reunion" (Campbell, 1973, 108; Joyce, 1947, 92). Such phrases like "equal and opposite" are interrelated and illustrate their mutual need for each other and explain why such theories of purity and originality as well as something good are always questioned by Rushdie. In Grimus the fusion of opposites have been incarnated in image

of sexual intercourse in alchemical tracts and images, because the masculine and the feminine contain the polarities of human existence. Intercourse has been incarnated in various forms of incest in the novel. Margareta has explained how incest between sister and brother is a common motif in alchemy, an image of the merging of the central ingredient of sulphur and mercury or for the restoration of a divided hermaphrodite (Paterson, 13).

The figure of Mercury which is found in Grimus has been explained as a personification and materialisation of the Collective Unconscious by Jung in Mysterium (1989). Margareta has also shown how the mandala in Jung becomes a symbol for the union of opposites, that is, a union of conscious and unconscious. Such a mandala contains a centre, "the psychological centre of personality and can be combined with a circle" (Paterson, 13). The idea of the mandala has been incarnated in a Stone Rose which plays a decisive role since it has the ability to make the whole supernatural world possible. According to Jung, the movement of the slabs, the rotation around the centre of the Stone Rose, suggests concentration on the most important, the Self. The novel has many rotations and circling movements at crucial moments, explicitly implying dissolution and union. In Grimus such movements become symbolic, heavily burdened with psychological overtones. In this way such rotational and dance-like movements symbolically illustrate the opposition between static atoms and dynamic ions in man:

> At the level of plot, Eagle searches for 'stasis' in K but is forced to 'kinesis' (Grimus, 235). In K, the revolutionary shares a house with the count. Eagle is drawn between two plate witches he says, identified twins, "opposite" and the same (Mittapalli & Kuortti, 2003, 12).

In this manner Grimus may be seen as Rushdie's play with a symbolic world, a puzzle, where some pieces seem to have been lost and where the ultimate end eludes us. Rushdie has actually created several fictional levels and built up complicated worlds. The reader, like the Eagle, soon becomes conscious of the existence of several levels and several perspectives. Grimus anticipates Rushdie's later novels where reality has been presented in more ways than one both in terms of substance as well as in terms of technique. This novel also experiments with Rushdie's favourite themes of cultural multiplicity and complexity on various planes like that of the allegorical, symbolical, linguistic and aesthetic. It has been Rushdie's intention to highlight the multiple resonances of narratives, whereby the reader escapes his fixity within a monolithic pattern. This flexibility and fluidity of the migrant artist, who cannot be imprisoned within the boundaries of nation, culture or race, has been given allegorical and symbolic expression in Grimus, through which Rushdie has made his debut in the literary world.