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Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*: An Attempt to forge the
'Uncreated Conscience'

Born in 1947, in Bombay in the family of Anis Ahmed Rushdie, a businessman who had received his education in Cambridge, and his wife, Negin, Salman Rushdie, indisputably is known as one of the greatest living English novelists. In a family of four siblings (three sisters and one brother) Salman was admitted to an English Mission School in Bombay in 1954 and was a student there till 1961, when he was sent to England for his secondary education, at Rugby School. After moving to Karachi in 1964 Rushdie- family admitted him in to King's College, Cambridge to read History in 1965. Though not a believer in any religion, he grew a n interest in Islam. During this period he was involved in acting with the 'Cambridge Footlights', and developed a liking for world cinema as well. In 1968 he returned to Pakistan and worked briefly in television before returning to London to join a company of actors. In 1969 he started working as a copywriter for different advertising agencies, and also took time out to write a first novel on Indian Themes which remained unpublished. It was in 1970 that Rushdie met Clarissa Luard, whom he married in 1976 in April. In 1974 he went for a five months' tour to India and Pakistan. 1975 is the year when he began his career as a novelist and the first book *Grimus* was published. This year he was also actively involved with Black and Asian groups in London. In June 1979 his wife Clarissa Luard gave birth to his son Zafar and then he gave up his copywriting job and took to full time writing as a career. In February 1981 his novel *Midnight's Children* was published, which won him the famous Booker Prize in October 1981. It was around two years after that he published his next novel *Shame* in 1983. After one year in 1984 he travelled to Australia with the famous

writer Bruce Chatwin and met Robyn Davidson there. In 1986 he travelled to Nicaragua at the invitation of the Sandimista Association of Cultural Workers there. He met there the American novelist Marriane Wiggins. Based on the visit, in 1987 he published *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* in January. In 1988 he took divorce from his first wife Clarissa Luard and married Marriane Wiggins. In September 1988 another controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* was published, and was denounced in India and Pakistan, and was publicly burnt in the street in Bradford. In 1989 on 14 February, Ayatullah Homeini announced the 'fatwa' against Salman Rushdie, and an offer of a reward was announced by the state of Iran for his murder. Rushdie had to go underground, under the special protection of the British Police. The affair drew global attention and stimulated anti-Islamic feelings in the west. The government of Britain made representation to the government of Iran to get the 'fatwas' revoked but to no avail. It was during the period that Rushdie got separated from Marriane Wiggins. In 1990 the world witnessed publication of several books on the 'Fatwa-issue', and in September same year, Rushdie's next book '*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*' also saw light of the day. The next year in 1991 in the month of March, Rushdie published '*Imaginary Homelands: Essays 1981-1991*' which included a section devoted to essays which provide Rushdie's own perspective on his situation after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In 1992, '*The Wizard of Oz*' was published by the British Film Institute, and it took Rushdie another two years when he published his next collection of Stories '*East-West*' in 1994. The next year in 1995, '*The Moor's Last Sigh*' was published and received a luke-warm response from the Western media. In 1997, '*The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*' edited by Rushdie with Elizabeth West was published, and gave way to much negative criticism in the fraternity of the writers of regional languages in India, for it included only one short story 'Toba Tek Singh' (by Urdu writer Sadat Hasan Manto) out of the whole body of writings in Indian languages, and thus, was a collection of Indian Writing in English only. In February, 1998 on the 9th anniversary of 'Fatwa' against Rushdie; Rushdie met the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and requested him to begin the diplomatic moves afresh with the government of Iran, and finally in September 1998 the Iranian-government officially distanced itself from the 'Fatwa'. Rushdie, of course, took a sigh of relief after this.

Rushdie's debut novel *Grimus* was written for a science-fiction competition offered annually by Victor Gollancz, who though published the novel but comprehensively rejected the novel for the prize. Lacking in the colour of a good science fiction work, it was constructed with great ingenuity. It deals with the epic fantasies of excessive imagination a

little loosely woven in the texture of science - fiction. Critics have been of the opinion that in his effort of writing a science - fiction Rushdie, as he instinctively is, comes out with something 'new' in *Grimus*. Here is the short analysis of *Grimus* in this perspective.

Grimus is perhaps considered as the most postmodern of all the writings of Rushdie. Most of the features associated with postmodern fiction like parody, subversion, intertextuality, fragmentation and experimental literary devices characterize Rushdie's novel *Grimus*. At the same with the use of traditional narrative strategies like allegory, parables, myths, history and fantasy, this novel offers scope for a wide range of interpretations also. *Grimus* belongs to a long tradition of intellectual caprices that syndicate dreamlike, creative journeys with serious social or philosophical criticism. This novel uses of a combined first-and third-person narration in which Flapping Eagle is both the protagonist and the principal narrator who poses one of the works main questions: Does reality exist beyond the conceptual constructions of a single mind's imagination? The failure of Ignatius Gribb's rationalist philosophy and the final dissolution of Calf Island suggest that imagination and reality are one and the same and that those human beings who ignore the powers of imagination and myth do so at their own risk.

Such fictional techniques and thematic concerns place the novel equivalent to François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564) and extends through Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In more recent terms, *Grimus* also bears some relation to the contemporary school of fiction known as Magical Realism, in which fantasy and reality continually intersect in ways that criticize or comment on history and politics.

Grimus deals with the binaries of mortality/immortality knowledge/ignorance use/abuse of the human imagination, though the author sounds a little immature in the treatment of the above subject. The novel begins with the arrival of a lonely man on an island, the adventures he undertakes amongst the inhabitants of the island and his moral and spiritual crisis. The hero, Flapping Eagle is a sort of paradox in his being – a white American Indian of uncertain sexual status who has drunk an elixir of life which has made him immortal. The hero's past life is narrated in flashback in twenty pages, and we get the hints like he has had intense relationship with a sister "Bird-dog", their enslavement to the magician Mr. Sisyphus etc. The magician gives them two types of elixir yellow for life and blue for death. The sister drinks the yellow one, and smashes the blue bottle. The brother drinks the one and keeps the other. Later he loves a girl Livia Cramm, who warns him that "Where

you walk, walks death"¹. At the death of Livia, Eagle sets off on a symbolic voyage in her yacht. The technique here is demonstrative. Eagle is a sort of mental traveler, a voyager through the remote regions of the mind, and the process does command own interest.

At this juncture, Flapping Eagle has lost the death-dealing blue bottle, and a failed suicide attempt brings him to the island. But, this is a fantastic island and no ordinary one like that of Daniel Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe'. It has strange similarities with the mysterious mountains in Spielberg's film 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' which was released around the time *Grimus* was written. It has also something to do with some of the anthropological novels around this time.

Thus, *Grimus* presents us with a country of the mind. The centre of its power is the stone Rose, created by the bird-man Grimus - an antagonist to Flapping Eagle. All this Rushdie seems to have taken and refashioned from the tradition of oral epics, and kafka, and Beckett.

Flapping Eagle meets Virgil Jones, an almost Beckettian figure, who introduces him to the island. He has his chair and bicycle, and ironically administers the 'kiss of life' to those who would have been 'suicides' otherwise. Virgil Jones gives flapping Eagle a clue about the plural realities, something Rushdie demonstrates at length in his later work too :-

"If you concede that conceptual possibility you must also concede that there may well be more than one. In fact, that an infinity of dimensions might exist, as palimpsest, upon and within, and around our own..."²

Virgil further introduces him to spiral dancers, who had 'elevated a branch of physics until it became a high symbolist religion, and found that 'the pure, beautiful dance of life' who at the heart of matter, may be celebration of the structure of D.N.A. in fiction³. Virgil Jones, through his synthesis has arrived at a kind of reality which makes him mindful of the capability of man to create his own worlds - fictions where a man could live. This gives an insight into what Rushdie takes for his imagination project and the alternative realities he ever tries to rope in, into a situation. From here onwards Flapping Eagle, encounters, and destructs some of the obstacles. He kills Khallit, and Mallit, two devilish forms, manifestations of his own feelings. At this juncture, Jones reminds Flapping Eagle to take care of his imagination which is sort of vagabond, and this is necessary as Eagle has yet to go long before meeting his doom. He has to make his way to the city of 'K', as Rushdie names

¹ Salman Rushdie : *Grimus*, London, Paladin, 1989, p. 27

² Salman Rushdie : *Grimus*, London, Paladin, 1989, p.52, 53

³ Salman Rushdie : *Grimus*, London, Paladin, 1989, p. 75

the destination of doom, and in order to go, has to meet the people at the island who have come there voluntarily.

'K', their ultimate destination, is the place where they will feel complete, beyond change, and beyond, question. In his typical style Rushdie tells that there is a lady Elfrida Gribb who under the impact of insomnia, will 'ride through K on a small velvet donkey'.⁴ She is in unbelievable love with the gnome like husband Gribb, once a university- professor, and now author of the all-purpose Quotable Philosophy. Then, Eagle meets the drinking community of K in Elbaroom where he finds Flann Napoleon who lives a "haze of obscenity and vomit, reveling in threats of violence a masturbation of power"⁵. Eagle also meets Madam Jacosta, and the distinctive girls who work in her brothel The Rising Sun, and then the most beautiful man on earth, Gilles Priape. This is a parody form, quite characteristic of Rushdie.

The novel takes a turn here and, in the bar, Jones is attacked by O'Toole, and Eagle goes with Gribb where Gribb tells him about his determination to return philosophy to the people in popular forms: "it's all there to use, in old wives' tales, in tall stories, and most of all in the cliché"⁶. Now, Eagle is introduced to the cherkassovs, Aleksandr, and Irina, who are self-exiled Russian aristocrats, and who are still living in revolution: "What were we, after all, but dogs who had had their day? Night and the executioner awaited his all."⁷ All of these have voluntarily surrendered their identity in the island and have forgotten that there could be other realities. Virgil Jones and Flapping Eagle know well that there may be other dimensions in their search for Grimus.

At this point, in the section third of the novel, Flapping Eagle finally goes in search of Grimus. He is now accompanied by Media, a whore from Jacosta's brothel. She is at the place of Virgil Jones amidst the allusions. The zenith of all this comes when Eagle meets Grimus and finds out that Grimus is his double. The meeting takes place in the house of Grimus, on the mountain-Top of the shape of human brain. This is associated with coming danger and with spiritual enlightenment also. This has association with prophet- Mohammad ascending the mountain to hear the words of God. The image was developed later on in *The Satanic Verses* by Rushdie. The house is a metaphor for Grimus's cutting away from the world, and reminds of Tennyson's 'Lotus Eaters'. Grimus now chooses to die as he thinks he is complete as powerful and wise, but, he can only die like phoenix which "passes self-hood onto

⁴ Ibid, p. 108

⁵ Ibid, p. 123

⁶ Salman Rushdie : *Grimus*, London, Paladin, 1989, p.129

⁷ Ibid, p. 139

successors."⁸ And will be born immediately in another identity. Now Eagle is the next identity Grimus will be born in. Now Eagle and Grimus are fused into one, single identity. The passage is full of Rushdie's philosophic designs:-

"Myself and his self in the glowing bowl. Yes, it was like that myself and himself pouring out of ourselves into the glowing bowl..... my son. The mind of Grimus rushing to me. You are my son, I give you my life. I have become you, I have become you are me..... the mandarin monk released into me an orgasm of thinking..... My son, My son, what father fathered a son like this, as I do in my sterility."⁹

We remember now that immortality and sterility are the simultaneous norms at the calf-island. At last Grimus is murdered by the gang of O'Toole as a part of his own design. And then, we see the calf mountain destroying itself to make itself a fresh, "its molecules and atoms breaking, dissolving, and quietly vanishing into primal, unmade energy. The raw material of being was claiming its own."¹⁰

No doubt, as we have seen in the course of discussion that Rushdie, even in this not so well received first novel is in search for new values. It is a novel of ideas where ideas run the whole show and ultimately establish that there can't be an absolutist reality, but realities of the world. The novel is an effort of Rushdie to imaginatively negotiate these realities for the readers. Then, *Grimus* is a novel for the youth, quite ambitiously written, and one finds it over literary and overheated. A famous critic of Rushdie Liz Calder considers it brilliant in its design, and successful in many of its devices; and if the ideas run the show, they are at least absorbing ideas¹¹ but, speaking on the lines of many of the hostile critics, Rushdie himself conceded in an interview given after the publication of *Grimus* that it was too clever for its own good. Perhaps Rushdie tries to sound too modest here because if as he tells, the novel is too clever, then it doesn't take away many of the qualities affixed to it. That's why; Rushdie later on accepted that *Grimus* had its place in the body of his work, and "metaphysical concerns were present in a different way in the first novel".¹² It is a little unfortunate that some critics took the novel just for a failure. Brennan finds *Grimus* "parable of crude

⁸ Ibid, p. 233

⁹ Salman Rushdie : *Grimus*, London, Paladin, 1989, p. 242, 243

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 251

¹¹ Liz Calder : *The First Life of Salman Rushdie*, Hamilton, 1999, p. 101.

¹² Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds) : *The Rushdie File*, London, ICA/Fourth Estate, 1989, p. 30

acculturation" and "the stance of complacent philosophical scepticism".¹³ And Catherine Cundy too considers *Grimus* "a chaotic fantasy with no immediately discernible arguments of any import"¹⁴, and, thus, quite inappropriately ignores the novel's novel humanism and high spirits. Even critics of the Indian subcontinent are divided in their opinions about *Grimus*, as Randeep Rana remarks that:-

"Its (of *Grimus*) journey-man-quality as a work of fiction does not entitle it for a critical study" and considers it "a big flop under the camouflage of science-fiction".¹⁵ But, it would be rather fair if we share the sense of urgency with which Rushdie persuades the novel to 'forge..... the uncreated conscience of the reader.'

¹³ Brennan : *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*; Myths of the Nation, London, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 72, 74.

¹⁴ Catherine Cundy: *Salman Rushdie*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 16.

¹⁵ Randeep Rana : *The Politics of the Postmodernist Fiction* (unpublished theses), M.D.U. Rohtak, 1998, p. 13.
