

Warped Mythologies: Salman Rushdie's "Grimus"

MUJEEBUDDIN SYED

*Nahi tera nasheman khisr -sultani ke gumbad per
Tu Shaheen hai! Basera kar pahadon ki chattanon mein*

"Not for you the nest on the dome of the Sultan's mansion
You are the Eagle! You reside in the mountain's peaks."

IQBAL¹

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S first novel, *Grimus* (1975),² is marked by a characteristic heterogeneity that was to become the hallmark of later Rushdie novels. Strange and esoteric at times, *Grimus* has a referential sweep that assumes easy acquaintance with such diverse texts as Farid Ud 'Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and Dante's *Divina Commedia* as well as an unaffected familiarity with mythologies as different as Hindu and Norse. Combining mythology and science fiction, mixing Oriental thought with Western modes, *Grimus* is in many ways an early manifesto of Rushdie's heterodoxical themes and innovative techniques.

That Rushdie should have written this unconventional, covertly subversive novel just three years after having completed his studies in Cambridge, where his area of study was, according to Khushwant Singh, "Mohammed, Islam and the Rise of the Caliphs" (1),³ is especially remarkable. The infinite number of allusions, insinuations, and puns in the novel not only reveals Rushdie's intimate knowledge of Islamic traditions and its transformed, hybrid, often-distorted picture that Western Orientalism spawned but also the variety of influences upon him stemming from Western literary tradition itself.

At the heart of the hybrid nature of *Grimus* is an ingenuity that displaces what it has installed, so that the much-vaunted hybridity

is itself stripped of all essentialized notions. The *logos* of each singular narrative strand of his hybrid discourse is constantly raided until what remains is an-"other" world. The demand that this strategy makes on readers is that they not only defer all usual narrative anticipations and enter this other heterotopic world but remain as fully attuned to the actual world, "its literature, philosophies and religions as is intellectually possible" (Cundy 136). The ingenious diversity of *Grimus's* style demands that the reader become what Uma Parameswaran describes as a Gorf-reader (55), having the Gorfic skill at ordering to "read" it:

"Talent" to the Gorfs means only one thing: skill at Ordering. Thus the very skill that caused the Chiefest Question to be asked must be used in its solution, with the aid of the "Learning-lobe," that inexhaustible memory-vault locked within each Gorf, giving the species absolute recall of anything that has ever befallen any Gorf.

(Rushdie, *Grimus* 65)

The "inexhaustible memory-vault" of *Grimus* partakes of a diversity that mixes Norse and Hindu mythology and combines Sufi, Christian, and Hindu mysticism, bringing them all together in the format of science-fiction fantasy. In fact, the novel seems to celebrate what the character Virgil Jones describes as "an infinity of dimensions . . . as palimpsests, upon and within and around our own . . ." (52-53).

Palimpsests are certainly what several of the novel's motifs are: the quest form of the novel culminating in the ascent of Mount *Kaf* not only signifies the emigrant's gradual ascent on the social ladder in the metropolis, as Timothy Brennan suggests (72), but also an amalgamated re-creation of Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Farid Ud 'Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Catherine Cundy points out this important connection between *Grimus* and these two classical texts (131-33). However, if these texts are seminal in understanding *Grimus's* genealogy, they point also to the important subtext of the Prophet's *miraj*, his flight with Gabriel to Heaven and his meeting with God.

Flapping Eagle's journey and his confrontation with *Grimus*, the "annihilation" of *Grimus's* self in Eagle and vice versa, are all constructed around the trope of this divine moment in Islamic theology (something to which Rushdie returns in *The Satanic*

Verses [1988], only to treat it more controversially). In fact, the Prophet's *miraj* forms not only the central trope of Attar's poem but was used by many Sufi mystics and poets, from Bayezid Bistami to Mohammed Iqbal. Further, as Schimmel notes, the literary genre of *Libro della scala*, the Book of *Miraj*, was also "so well known in the medieval Mediterranean world that possible influences on Dante's *Divina Commedia* cannot be excluded" (219). In fact, Miguel Asin Palacios's controversial *Islam and the Divine Comedy* (1926) contends that Islamic traditions and legends of the *Miraj* and *Isra* ("nocturnal journey") were the prototypes that inspired Dante's poem.

Rushdie, in fact, merrily mixes motifs from both Dante's ascension (Cundy 131-33) and the Prophet's *miraj*, hybridizing and corrupting both traditions at will. Rushdie's description of the final stage of Eagle's journey in reaching Grimus corresponds almost exactly to the final part of the Prophet's *miraj* related in various Islamic traditions. The Hadith of Sahih al-Bukhari reports that the Prophet said that he was taken by Gabriel until "we reached *Sidrat-il-Muntaha*" (Khan 147), which the Quran refers to as "the Lote-Tree beyond which none may pass" (Ali 1444); near this is the *Al-Bait-ul-Mamur*, the Sacred House (Khan 147), and the Garden of Abode (Ali 1445) to which the Prophet alone is admitted (Schimmel 219). The Prophet then beholds God Himself from "a distance / Of but two bow-lengths / Or (even) nearer" (Ali 1444). Eagle and Media, when approaching Grimushome, pass the huge ash tree that is "more than gigantic; it inspired awe" (225). Eagle mentally recalls the Ash Yggdrasil, "the mother-tree that holds the skies in place" (225); then they enter the labyrinthine Grimushome, where finally Flapping Eagle encounters Grimus, who is in his rocking chair, bizarrely enough, knitting.

The Stone Rose, too, has similar multiple import as a trope in *Grimus*; not only does it bear a referential debt to Dante but has connections with Sufi literature, for the rose as an image of God's glory made manifest and of his Prophet is ubiquitous in Sufi literature. Sufis believed that the rose was created from the Prophet's perspiration, thus making it the "most beautiful and precious flower in the world" (Schimmel 222). Despite Rush-

die's refusal to describe his novels as allegories—for allegory “asks readers to make a translation, to uncover a secret text that has not actually been written” (Interview 108)—Rushdie does invest his images with a particular allusiveness that invites further associations. The allusive traces are evident in the heterogeneity of the sign itself. One such sign that helps us read the text is the letter *Qaf*, which is infused with an overriding importance in the novel. Its significance in the novel is underlined by the various puns that it occasions. At one point, the writer intrudes into the narrative through a footnote to inform us that “it is, in fact, a glottal stop for which there is no accurate rendering” (209). Informing us that he has chosen to refer to it as K (Kâf) “and risk confusion with the quite distinct letter Kaf, for the simple reason that it is the only way I can pronounce it” (209), the writer admits that a purist would not forgive him.

It is for no simple reason, though, that he chooses to do what he does. Rather much like Attar's 30 birds—*si morgh*—finding salvation in *Simorgh*, the significance lies in the transformation that the pun on *Qaf* brings about. Schimmel notes that the letter *Qaf* itself bears manifold meanings in Sufi thought. It could, for example, mean *qurb* (“proximity”) or *qanaat* (“contentment”). Schimmel points out that “the perfect Sufi lives, like the mythological bird (*Simorgh*) in the Mount *Qaf* of *qanaat*” and finds true proximity with God (421).⁴ Rushdie adds a different significance, though similarly plural, to this letter. Brennan notes that *Qaf* can refer to the Surah *Qaf* in the Quran “that looks forward to the final Day of judgement when God shall ask Hell, ‘Are you full?’ and Hell shall answer ‘Are there any more?’” (74). The reference to the Quranic *Qaf* as one of the running themes of *Grimus*, however, again depends on a rather nebulous and attenuated pun, for the themes that Rushdie uses—the guided quest, longevity, interplay between reality and illusion—find expression in another verse, *al-Kahf* (“The Cave”). Here we are told the story of Moses's journey with al-Khizr, the immortal Green Man, and of Moses's suspicious attitude towards al-Khizr's actions. The verse also tells the story of Zul Qurnain, interpreted by many Quranic scholars as Alexander the Great, and the tribes of Gog and Magog (Ali 760-65), to which Rushdie ironically alludes in

his own tale of Iskander Harrappa and the insurgent tribes in *Shame*.

The transition of *Qaf* into *Kâf*, however, is dependent on a mispronunciation for its curious status as an ambiguity. The transferred or "translated" sense of *Qaf* as *Kâf*, *K*, *Calf*, is apparent only when written or pronounced *in English*. One recalls the "O fortunate ambiguity of transliteration" of the Buddha episode in *Midnight's Children*, where a similar pun is at work in the word *Buddha*. Buddha, with "soft-tongued D's, meaning he-who-achieved-enlightenment-under-the-Bodhi-tree" (349), is built into Buddha "old man," and both meanings are rendered ambiguous by the word's transcription into English.

Rushdie's town of *K*, despite its Kafkaesque resonances, alludes also to the Quranic reference of the land of Gog and Magog, being the "town of reprobates and degraded types . . . selfish, decadent people . . ." (41). According to Islamic traditions, the tribe of Gog and Magog, having been imprisoned by Zul Qurnain in their own land, bide their time until just before the end of the world, when they shall be unleashed on the world (Ali 757). Classical scholars such as al-Tabari locate the land of Gog and Magog as being the Caucasus,⁵ and, as Edward Lane, the well-known (but rather inveterately opinionated) Orientalist, points out, *Kâf* was also the name given to the chain of Caucasus and might have given rise to the early belief that the Caucasus was the limit of the earth (118). The mythical Mount *Kâf* itself, Lane asserts, was believed to be the chain of mountains that surrounds *el-Bahr el-Moheet*, the Circumambient Ocean, and forms a boundary terminating the earth (19). That Flapping Eagle should wash ashore Calf Mountain, having drowned in the proximate Mediterranean Sea, is significant in this regard.

The pun on the letter *Qaf* and its consequent translation/transliteration into *Kâf*/*K*/*Calf*, however, also sets up associations with Kashmir (as in the valley of *K*, with its Dull Lake in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*) and *Kailash*. Grimus locates himself atop a high mountain, resembling Shiva's Mount Kailash, the Hindu heaven, "the highest dwelling, the high spot" (O'Flaherty 75). Mount Kailash's location (according to Hindu beliefs), the Himalayas, and mountain climbing itself are given an extended

gloss in *The Satanic Verses*. For Allie Cone the mystical Himalayas "are emotional peaks as well as physical ones" (304) because "a mountain, especially a Himalaya, especially Everest, is land's attempt to metamorphose into sky; it is grounded flight, the earth mutated—nearly—into air, and become, in the true sense, exalted" (303).

Significantly, as Brennan points out (76-77), Calf Mountain is described at one point in the novel as jutting out "rather like a giant *lingam* weltering in the *yonis* that is the sea" (55-56). The *lingam* and *yonis* are symbols of Shiva and Parvati, respectively. Shiva is evoked again when Flapping Eagle's name is explained, rather invertedly situating it in Amerindian mythology: "the eagle has an interesting significance in Amerindian mythology. Am I not right in saying that it is the symbol of the Destroyer?" (46).⁶ Shiva, the destroyer, Brahma, the creator, and Vishnu, the preserver or protector, form the central trinity in the Hindu pantheon of gods; characters in Rushdie's later novels are imbued with their attributes.

The confluence of classical traditions influencing *Grimus* is not limited only to Persian or medieval Western texts but extends to Indian myths and philosophy as well as to Norse mythology, areas that have remained largely unnoticed by the few critics who have chosen to comment on *Grimus*. Uma Parameswaran's exhaustive article on *Grimus* denies it any "Indianness":

... in its real and pseudo metaphysics, its caravan of characters, its panorama of settings and symbols, there is nothing particularly Indian except for shades of the historical Chanakya that occasionally visits us through Virgil Jones. (15)

"Traces" of India are apparent all through *Grimus*: Flapping Eagle is not *only* the Amerindian Eagle but also an amalgam of Dante's celestial eagle, which in itself is a conglomeration of saints and holy personages who make up its luminous and radiant "M" ("Paradise" Cantos XVIII and XIX). However, this ornithological inter-text not only extends to allusions to other mythical birds such as the Phoenix and the Roc of Sindbad but also is traceable to another subcontinental influence: Sir Mohammed Iqbal's famous *Shaheen* poems. The *Shaheen* in Iqbal's poetry represents not only a Sufi aspiration to divinity but also a

symbol of constant, virile quest, for Iqbal believed that "only those who are engaged in constant search are really alive."⁷ Roaming, home, mountains, and the kingdom of birds are also the tropes of Iqbal's poems:

Through the kingdom of birds an Ascetic I roam
The hawk builds no nest, for the hawk needs no home.
(Kiernan, *Poems from Iqbal* 60)⁸

There are other subtle but astute nuances that delineate the hybrid disposition, the *Indian* side, of *Grimus*, as they point to Rushdie's choice of Sufism as a literary anchor over mainstream Islam. The stress that both Hindu and Sufi schools of thought lay on the "I"-ness of divine experience is remarkably similar: the *Ana l Haqq* of Sufism comes close to *Soham* ("I Am He") of the Upanishads and the *tat tvam asi* ("That I Am") of the Vedanta.

The similarity in Sufi and Vedantic perceptions of God is a phenomenon that Rushdie's subcontinental literary forebears, such as Iqbal, did not fail to explore.⁹ Rushdie believes that Islam in the Indian subcontinent has "developed historically along moderate lines, with a strong strain of pluralistic Sufi philosophy" (*Imaginary Homelands* 54). Sufism's heterodoxical nature, and its movement away from a singular perception of God towards a more plural embrace of His divinity, must have certainly appealed to Rushdie's sceptic and cosmopolitan intellect.

Sufi philosophy itself historically came into productive contact with Hindu schools of thought and philosophy, producing such iconoclastic poets as Kabir, Jayasi, Usman, and Abdul Quddus Gangohi, whose *Rusdnama* "represents the classic instance of a specifically Sufi attempt at embracing philosophical positions which were intrinsically Hindu" (Mishra 46).

In discussing Rushdie's place in Indo-Anglian literature, Uma Parameswaran overlooks this possibility when comparing Raja Rao and Rushdie (17-20). Rao's major work, with the possible exception of *Kanthapura*, is nothing if not an elaborate rendering of Vedantic philosophy; *The Serpent and the Rope*, in fact, borrows its title from a famous Vedantic simile that denotes the equation between reality and illusion in this world. Rao's view of the "perfect civilisation"—as "where the world is not, but where there is nothing but the 'I'. It is like the perfect number, which

is always a manifestation of 1.1.1. . . . The Vedantin says the perception is real, yes; but that reality is 'my Self' (339)—denotes the ultimate quest of the *Atman* for union with the *Paramatman*. Rushdie, though in an inverted sense, also describes a similar experience in the ultimate commingling of Grimus and Flapping Eagle: "Self. My self. Myself and he alone. . . . Mingle, commingle. Come mingle. Grow together, come. You into me into you" (242). Here both the Sufi concept of attainment of god through annihilation (*fana*) of the self and the Vedantic idea of the attainment of *Paramatman* through annihilation of the Ego (*aham*), both achieved with the help of a guide or master (Shaikh for the Sufi and Guru for the Vedantin), are enacted.

Before any charges of reductionism are made, however, it has to be stressed that the quest, the search for meaning in life, has different connotations for each of these two writers. For Rao, Vedanta has a metaphysical value that transcends all mundane, worldly considerations. Rushdie, however, has a different use for metaphysics in *Grimus*; he sets up a fictional universe that deliberately partakes of a variety of metaphysical and mythological discourses in order to, ultimately, demolish them all symbolically, in one swift, last stroke.

The novel figures Grimus as a palimpsest entity bearing similarities with and attributes not only of Attar's *Simorgh* or Dante's Divine Lord and the Vedantic Atman but also of the chief Norse god Odin. *Grimus*'s connection with Norse mythology has been usually ignored by critics, perhaps due to the minor role it seems to play in the suffusion of heterogeneous discourses in the novel. Minor or not, motifs from Norse legends are subtly woven in the narrative of *Grimus*. Virgil Jones's description of the town of K, succinctly sums up this connection:

Valhalla: where dead warriors live on in stark splendour, fighting their past battles daily, reliving the hour of glory in which they fell, falling bloodied once more to the gleaming floors and being renewed the next morning to resume the eternal combat. Valhalla, the hall of fame, the living museum of the heroism of the past. Valhalla, close to the pool of knowledge where Odin drank, shaded by the Great Ash Yggdrasil, the World tree. When the ash falls, so does Valhalla. (100)

The novel picks up these themes in the action that follows. The conflation of the town of K with Valhalla, with its immortal citizens and their chequered histories, reflects Grimus's power over the town. For he, like Odin, has "chosen" the inhabitants that make up the town's plurality and has endowed them with immortality. However, more important are the references to the Ash Yggdrasil tree, which in Norse mythology has a similar status to that of Mount *Qaf* in Sufi philosophy. It towers above the nine worlds and holds them firmly in place, its three roots plunged into the three different levels of the universe, just as Mount *Qaf* encircles the world.

Grimushome is an ironic enshrinement of two symbols of eternal universal order, built as it is on Calf Mountain and with a huge ash tree outside. Grimus's "burrowing away, away from the world, into books and philosophies and mythologies, until these became his realities, these his friends and companions" (243), reflects Odin's own unquenchable thirst for knowledge. The legendary Odin paid a high price to drink from the Fountain of Knowledge—he gave up one of his eyes as demanded by the keeper of the fountain, Mimir. More importantly he paid the final penalty to gain the ultimate knowledge—the wisdom of the dead—by hanging, with a spear in his side, from a branch of the Yggdrasil for nine days and nine nights. After this ordeal had killed him he resurrected himself to use "what he had learnt for the good of gods and mortals" (Evans and Millard 23). Grimus's manner of death, one he chooses, bears significant similarities to that of Odin, for he, too, is hung from the ash tree outside Grimushome and killed. But, like Odin's resurrection, Grimus has already transposed himself into Flapping Eagle, Grimus's "Phoenician Death" (233).

However, Flapping Eagle manages to conquer his Grimus-self—the irony of the annihilation of the self in the supreme-being is self-evident—and what follows is *Ragnarak*, "fall. Total destruction" (230). The novel ends on an apocalyptic note, with the Grimus effect destroyed, the Stone Rose demolished, the ash-tree burnt, and Grimus's power over the Island broken. Nevertheless, there is a sense of regeneration, for Eagle and Media are shown making love while the world of Calf Mountain

unmakes itself into "the raw material of being," into "primal, unmade energy" (253). This last scene reinforces the *lingam/yonī* ("phallus/vulva") image that Rushdie had used earlier to describe Calf Mountain. Ironically, like Shiva, the god of destruction who also possesses enormous sexual potency and re-creative power, Eagle is both destroyer as well as creator of a new world, breaking the curse of sterility that infested Calf island.

Grimus here also faithfully follows Norse mythology in its prediction that after the total destruction of the world, its gods and mortals, a new start will be made. Lif and Lifthrasir (the couple that hid in the Yggdarsil amid all the chaotic destruction) shall renew the human race and partake of a fresh, fertile Earth.

Remarkably, Rushdie chooses, at the climax of *Grimus*, to provide a clue to the reading of his own novel: explaining the difference between *Ragnarok* and *Ragnarak* and their use in the Poetic Edda, Grimus informs Eagle that *Ragnarok* is:

an entirely erroneous term. . . . The word *ragnarok*, twilight, only occurs once in the entire Poetic Edda, and is almost certainly a misprint for the word *Ragnarak*, which is the one used throughout the songs. The difference is crucial. *Ragnarak*, you see, means fall. Total destruction. A much more final thing than twilight. *You see how one letter can warp a mythology?* (230; emphasis added)

It is not only mythologies, however, that are warped in the catachrestic narrative logic of *Grimus* but also individual strands of the motley throng of discourses that constitute its hybrid makeup. Through misprints and mispronunciations, anagrams and palindromes, *Grimus* signals its use of parody as a strategy of installing and subverting dominant discourses, for parody, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, need not necessarily mean "ridiculing imitation" (186) or mimicry. It is also an "ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 185). (The Greek prefix *para* suggests both counter or against as well as near or beside [Hutcheon 185-86].)

Ib Johanssen rightly points out that what characterizes *Grimus* is "its very heterogeneity, its refusal to adhere to any *one* particular semiotic code, any *one* narratological scheme" (29). Therefore, if Attar and Dante provide the book's basic sources, Norse and Hindu mythologies provide some of the book's important mo-

tifs, while Sufi and Vedantic thoughts are at the core of the novel's theme. Yet none of these is accorded a central importance and none is elevated to the position of an originary or transcendental truth. On the other hand, what is of central importance is the subversion of these discourses, the "warping" of their solemn import.

Thus the anagrammatic Grimus actually turns out to be an evil, megalomaniacal version of *Simorgh*, Attar's allegory for God. Media, the whore, replaces Dante's beatific and pure Beatrice, the Prophet's *miraj* becomes the degraded, ironic tale of Flapping Eagle's ascent on Mount Kaf, and the Rose, symbol of divine love in Dante and manifestation of God's glory in Sufi poetry, becomes the symbol of misused power that ultimately has to be destroyed.

The concluding section of *Grimus* provides ample evidence of the book's subversion of religion, especially Islam. As argued earlier, Rushdie's keenness in investing his discourse with religious overtones is evident in Flapping Eagle's ascent of Calf Mountain in that it is indebted to the journeys that both Attar and Dante describe in their poems and to the subtext of the Prophet's *miraj*. But minor episodes that form a prelude to the ascent of Mount Kaf are significant in their own way. Parodic treatment of Quranic recitation is obvious in Liv's reading of Virgil's diary: "I shall read now from it," she said, and began to recite. . . . She knew the book by heart" (207). Knowing the "book" by heart and reciting it from memory are among the fundamental requirements of an Islamic way of life. Flapping Eagle notes the "sense of ritual" attached to the recitation: "the book recited, the candles lit, the litany spoken" (219). Later on, Bird Dog renders Grimus's message to Flapping Eagle in "a memorized, sing-song voice," recalling the sing-song rendering of Quranic verses and Rushdie's own wry description of "Arabic prayers" as "mumbled parroting" (*Imaginary Homelands* 381).

But most significant of all is Grimus's attempt at conferring the regency of his power on Flapping Eagle, an ironic retelling of the Quranic verses depicting the creation of Adam. Chapter II (entitled *Bukhara* [The Heifer]), verse 30, tells us that God, having decided to create Adam, tells the angels: "Lo, I will appoint a

khalifa [vice-regent] on the earth" (Russell 177).¹⁰ Outlining his intentions, Grimus tells Eagle, "[t]hrough . . . the annihilation of self, the Phoenix passes its selfhood on to its successor. That is what I hope to do with you, Flapping Eagle. Named for the king of earthly birds. . . . You are the next life of the Phoenix . . . the Phoenician Death." Later, in the same passage, he adds grandly, "by shaping you to my grand design I remade you as completely *as if you had been unmade clay*" (233; emphasis added). According to the Quran, Adam/man was created by God's own hands: God kneaded Adam's clay for 40 days and gave him life by breathing into him His own breath. The role of man as envisaged by the Quran is that of an agent:

It is He Who hath made
You (His) agents, inheritors
Of the earth:

(Ali 339)

Flapping Eagle's refusal to accept and continue his legacy prompts Grimus to cite the rhetorical question, the refrain from Surah *al-Rahman* ("The Merciful") in the Quran: *Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?* (233). This particular line, in fact, reverberates sarcastically in both *Midnight's Children* (340) and *Shame* (77), censuring the fanaticism of supposedly Holy Wars. Here it obliquely points to the Biblical and Quranic theme of man being created in God's image; for Surah *al-Rahman* also says: "All who live on earth are doomed to die. But the face of your Lord will abide for ever, in all its majesty and glory" (Dawood 19-20). The similarity between Grimus's and Flapping Eagle's faces is thus given an ironic religious connotation.

The novel has an iconoclastic intention, however, as suggested earlier, rather than any pious purposes in this figural transmutation of Grimus. In Flapping Eagle's refusal to comply, to *submit* (the word *Islam* means submission), and in his emphatic denial of Grimus's power—"I will not assume your mantle" (237)—the novel underlines its subversive design, its scepticism of metanarratives that accepts "uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 405).

However, there is also an ominous tendency, towards gendering theological orthodoxy *and* towards demonizing it, that works

at a more banal level. Flapping Eagle's encounter with the Goddess Axona delineates, in some ways, Rushdie's attitude towards both women and religion. To Axona's challenge—"All that is Unaxona is unclean . . . Is it to commit sacrilege upon this holy place that you come, whiteskin, pale face, mongrel among the pure, traitor to your race, is it to commit your supreme act of defilement that you come?" (87)—Flapping Eagle responds with violent assault:

—I don't know what you are . . . but when I defile you, I am cleansed of my past. Cleansed of the guilt and shame that possessed some hidden part of my mind, of which your presence is the proof. To free myself, I must render Axona unclean. . . .

He spoke the words with a gentle astonishment, like truths he had just understood.

Then he raped her. (89)

The ambivalence of this passage—the sense that to be rid of guilt and shame one has to defile an object of consecration, which significantly here is a gendered association with divinity, and the rape itself—prefigures some of the problems that the Rushdie text seems unable to avoid. Rushdie's fictional agenda to depict women's "lives and loves without fear or favour" (Cundy 135) seems to falter due to a marked disposition towards infusing female sexuality with a fiendishness that is, as Aijaz Ahmad rather modestly puts it, "sexually overdetermined" ("Rushdie's *Shame*" 1467).

Given Rushdie's urge towards plurality, one finds the one-dimensional representation of women disturbing. *Grimus's* women are made to bear—as in the case of Elfrida Gribb and Irina Cherkassova, one guileless and pristine and the other urbane and sexually liberated—this dichotomous binary of promise and menace. The only resolution is in Flapping Eagle's fantasy of "Elfrina," who could cater to both his "love of innocence and lust for experience" (172). The "Elfrina" of his vision bears a suspicious resemblance to the familiar male fantasy of "the perfect woman"—"the-faithful-wife-who-is-also-a-whore-in-bed." In describing brothels as "a place of refuge" (133) in both *Grimus* and *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie is actually turning to the traditional figuration in Urdu literature of the courtesan as a liberated female entity in a repressive society, à la Ghalib and Ruswa's

Umrao Jan Ada.¹¹ In the process, however, in *Grimus* as well as in his later work, he becomes complicit in those aspects of male construction of female sexuality that marks women as golden-hearted prostitutes or envisions them as monstrous goddesses unleashing apocalyptic violence in wreaking their vengeance.

Seen from the standpoint of his later work, it would seem that Rushdie is least concerned with questions of postcolonial identity and exile, questions that dominate and define his later fiction. The journey out of the "table-top" (21), the impregnable Axona plateau, for Eagle and Bird-Dog, is both an expedition of discovery as well as a confrontation with different societies holding alternative visions. This encounter with the outside world, however dismal the city of Phoenix, with its "automobiles and launderettes and juke-boxes and all kinds of machines and people dressed in dusty clothes with a kind of despair in their eyes" (21)—recalling Eliot's "unreal city"—nevertheless has Flapping Eagle hooked: "The glimpse had infected me already and entirely . . ." (21). The poignancy of the idea of exile in an alternative, wider world, however, fails to live up to its promise, as Eagle is presented as a heroic figure, however peripheral, who does manage to change the existing order radically. He is no Saleem Sinai, who can rewrite histories only by retelling them as stories. Nor is he Saladin Chamcha, who has to define his migrant, hybrid identity against an oppressive system of cognition that deems him a monster.

In spite of its brilliant attempt at creating an ironic *meta-histoire*, a sardonic *philosophia perennis*, *Grimus* falters in its failure to countenance postcolonial concerns. Its ingenuity, its cerebral approach, its "post-Joycean and sub-Joycean" experiments (Rushdie, "Author" 23), prove inadequate in providing *Grimus* with a mooring, an anchor that can provide its high profile a well-defined identity. It also reveals, in a way, Rushdie's initial, rather unqualified, embrace of "modernism and its offspring" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 377).

Brennan points out that *Grimus* demonstrates the truth of Fanon's claim "that a culture that is not national is meaningless," for novels must be rooted in "a coherent 'structure of feeling,' which only actual communities can create" (70). Rushdie's ear-

liest effort to work out a fictional resolution of his own peculiar insider/outsider location at the interstices of both metropolitan and indigenous societies does not take off from the level of its *topos*, which Said defines as "a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work . . ." (177). *Grimus* revels in this citation game, inventorying the "infinity of traces"¹² with which this peculiar locale has endowed its author, but suffers from a lack of what Raymond Williams calls "practical consciousness," that is, "what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived" (130-31). As Rushdie himself has confessed in his *Scripts* interview, it is "a fantasy without any roots in the discernible world" ("Interview" 125), something of which he quite rightly though belatedly disapproves.

NOTES

- 1 From Sir Mohammed Iqbal's poem *Ek Nau-jawan ke Naam*, "To a Young Man" (401). Translation my own. See also Victor G. Kiernan's translation of the poem *Shaheen*, "The Hawk" (*Poems from Iqbal* 59-60).
- 2 All quotations are from the 1989 edition (London: Paladin).
- 3 Khushwant Singh maintains that Rushdie did a thesis with this title (1), though it is more likely that he did some sort of long essay for his tripos on this or a similar topic at Cambridge from 1968 to 1972.
- 4 See also Johanssen.
- 5 See Wensinck (637) and Meserve (240).
- 6 See also Brennan (77).
- 7 The translation from Iqbal (in prose) here is by Ralph Russell (183).
- 8 Victor G. Kiernan translates *Shaheen* as the "hawk" (which may also as easily mean "eagle"), perhaps to give a sense of the youthful, untamed beauty that *Shaheen* in Iqbal's poems denotes.
- 9 Mohammed Iqbal, being deeply influenced by Sufi thought and doctrine, seems to have been aware of the similarities between Hindu Vedantic and Sufi thought. His early *Aftab* ("The Sun") is perhaps the only extant translation, in Urdu, of the Vedic "Hymn to the Sun." His second collection of Urdu verse, *Bal e Jabril* (Gabriel's Wing), is introduced by a translation of a Sanskrit verse from Bhartrihari. (See Russell [176-88].)
- 10 Russell uses Iqbal's somewhat unusual rendering of *khalifa* as "vice-regent" (see also Ali 24). Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (36) and A. J. Arberry (33) translate *khalifa* as "viceroy."
- 11 The courtesan, in the conventions of Urdu poetry, has an importance that cannot be over-stressed. The poetic universe is an imagined city where a *Ku-e-malamat* or a "street of reproach" (Kiernan, *Poems by Faiz* 34)—the entertainer's quarters, with its courtesans and prostitutes—always exists. Here frantic lovers carry on forbidden love affairs despite the risk of disapproval and persecution. The

courtesan's love, unfettered by worldly considerations, yet bears the handicap that it is also available to many. It is thus ultimately hopeless. Metaphorically, however, all this love's fever denotes the spiritual seeker's thirst for divine truth and, as Kiernan points out, "in this signification, in turn, literal melt(s) into metaphorical, and God himself might be either reality or symbol" (*Poems by Faiz* 34). Mirza Ghalib's famous (and scandalous, for the nineteenth century) affair with a courtesan-poet, however, adds a pinch of reality to this highly fantasized figuration of love. From the early twentieth century onwards, however (especially since the appearance of Meer Hadi Hassan Rusva's *Umrao Jan Ada*), the figuration of the courtesan has sometimes predicated itself around the subversive idea that "the women who had any sort of freedom to make fundamental choices for themselves were the ones who had no 'proper' place in that society" (Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric" 21).

¹² The phrase, of course, is borrowed from Gramsci's famous *Prison Notebooks*.

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