

**Postcolonial issues in Rushdie's Grimus**

Profa. Dra. Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira

Professora de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa da UNIGRANRIO

In an interesting essay devoted to Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie (1991, 277-8) exposed his own view of migration, which I will borrow to serve as a starting point for my analysis of his first novel, *Grimus*:

A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own.

Roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what is to be a human being. Denying all three, the migrant is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human.

Being himself a migrant writer, Rushdie has made of literature the arena of discourse, where themes such as migration, hybridity, imperialism, nationhood and exile are brought out. As Goonetilleke (1998,1) has pointed out, "Rushdie transforms biography into art".

His endless interest in the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, that is, in the ways through which immigrants cope with a new world, has given way to highly imaginative and outstanding novels. *Grimus*, the first one, did not get either the critical acclaim or the commercial success his author had probably hoped for. Its numerous references to literary works—Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Farid-Ud-Din Attar's 12th century Sufi poem "The conference of the birds", Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Edda*, to name a few—encompass a complex net of intertexts that has been interpreted by many critics as a "futuristic fantasy". The hybrid character of the novel seems to contribute to the difficulty to describe it according to any set of generic conventions.

The highly defiant framework of the novel has been pointed out as responsible for its unsuccessful reception: according to the critics, the combination of such widely diverse elements produced a book that was too complex for the taste of the literary consumers. However, for those who argue that *Grimus* is a difficult book to read due to its unreliable, excessively abstract narration, it is possible to find an explanation in Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*: for him, "reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge"(RUSHDIE, 1991, 25). What seems to be unreliable might be an analogy for the way in which we attempt to read the world.

The novel has been almost totally ignored by postcolonial critics, who have argued that it lacks the maturity of Rushdie's later works. Some critics (CUNDY, 1996,129), consider that it contains flimsy tentative steps towards an examination of postcoloniality, being a kind of early manifesto of Rushdie's heterodoxical themes and innovative techniques (SYED,1994,135).

The fact is that even the critics in the West have created a horizon of expectations around the fictions of the diasporic postcolonial authors, a kind of litmus test through which they try to canonize counter-canonic works. Nevertheless, any serious study of the process of transculturation would not ignore the fact that the germ of his author's creativity, as well as the attributes that have characterized his writing, had already been revealed in it. In *Grimus*, Rushdie tries to launch all available elements of his writing skills, his ability to merge genres, and at the same time he tries to blend the Eastern and Western philosophies, myths, and narrative techniques.

The theme of alterity is dealt from the beginning. As Stuart Hall (apud KING, 1999, 21) points out in his essay "The local and the global": "identity is always a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative".

The plot is about Flapping Eagle, a Native American who is member of the fictitious tribe of Axona Amerindians. Because his mother died when giving him birth, the tribe first calls him "Born-from-dead", leaving him between the world of the dead and that of the living, what was a bad omen in his tribe. Besides, he is white-skinned, contrasting with the dark color of the Axona, for whom Flapping Eagle's unusual birth and his "whiteness" represent a lack of racial and ethnic identity. He effectively becomes the "Other" in his own group.

Moreover there is an approach to the political discussion of sex orientation in the novel. His sister's unconventional behavior, making clear her preference for man's duties, brings about a feeling of disapproval, because "breasted providers were anathema to the Axona" [1]

On his turn, Flapping Eagle was born a hermaphrodite, whose male sexual predominance was only later defined. In order to spare him hurt and because of the uncertainty of his sex at birth, the tribe changes his name to "Joe-Sue". The ambiguity and the duality of such a hermaphrodite's name are echoed by a shifting narrative point of view: [The bottles] They were his, mine. (G 21)

That passage anticipates Flapping Eagle's hybrid identity and the introduction of one of Rushdie's dearest themes, the transcultural identities.

In chapter II, the protagonist assumes the role of a first narrator to tell his own story, although showing a clearly split identity:

I was the boy. I was Joe-sue, Axona Indian, orphan, named ambiguously at birth because my sex was uncertain until some time later, virgin, younger brother of a wild female animal called Bird-Dog, who was scared of losing her beauty, which was ironic, for she was not beautiful. It was my (his) twenty-first birthday, too, and I was about to become Flapping Eagle. And cease to be a few other people. (I was Flapping Eagle). (G 15)

The choice of his brave's name seems to be a failed attempt to achieve unity. Nevertheless it is only on surface. Flapping Eagle's "Otherness" is acknowledged in the following passage:

What Bird-Dog never accused me of, what I found out only after she had gone, was the main reason, the true cause of our detachment from the tribe, was not our orphan status, not her manliness, not her taking of a brave's name, not her general demeanour, not her at all. It was me, Joe-Sue. For three reasons: first, my confused sex; second, the circumstances of my birth, and third my pigmentation. To take them in order. To be a hermaphrodite among the Axona is to be very bad medicine. A monster. To mutate from that state into a "normal" male is akin to black magic. They didn't like that. To be what I was, born from the dead, was a dire omen; if I could bring death at the moment of my birth, it would sit upon my shoulder like a vulture wherever I went. As for my colouring: the Axona are a dark-skinned race and shortish. As I grew, it became apparent that I was, inexplicably, to be fair-skinned and tallish. This further genetic aberration- whiteness- meant they were frightened of me and shied away from contact. (G 17-18)

The situation of "exile" imposed to the protagonist is an allegorical criticism on racism and sexual discrimination. The excesses of the Axona self-preserving view, their obsession with health and cleanliness, stand for the extremism of certain contemporary groups: "All that is Unaxona is Unclean"(G 25).

The absurd of extremism is defined through Flapping Eagle's view of his own condition: "I was an exile in an isolated community". His true exile in the outside world assumes in the story a metonymic function: to depict the migrant writer's problem of definition. Rushdie refers to that problematic situation in *Imaginary Homelands* (RUSHDIE, 1991,17-18):

What does it mean to be “Indian” outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?

No Axona had ever descended from the self-supporting plateau where they lived, save Bird-Dog, who was the first to break the law, learning the language and developing a kind of affinity for the people who lived in the plains. It was during one of her incursions into the town that she listened to a song from a “singing machine”. That song was about a clever and fiendish creature called bird-dog, from which she borrowed her brave’s name

The Axona were prevented from temptation to leave the plateau because of an old legend that mentioned some “Whirling Demons”.

Rushdie provides an interesting study of the effect of tradition on individuals, by showing that it has been politically used as a means of restraint. His literature has been based on ideas of “multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed”(RUSHDIE, 1991, 32).

One of his pleas has been to show the danger of the adoption of a “ghetto mentality” (RUSHDIE, 1991, 19):

To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in south Africa is called the “homeland”.

On Flapping Eagle’s twenty-first birthday, a special date for the Axona, Bird-Dog tells him about her encounter with a peddler who had given her two bottles of different colors: yellow for immortality and blue for death. The man had sent an identical pair of bottles to him. While he runs into his tent in order to bury his gift, his sister takes the liquid that will grant her immortality. In full certainty of her choice she dashes the blue bottle to fragments but Flapping Eagle does not take his. When she incites him to accompany her to the town in the plains, he feels tempted, and, despite his fear, decides to go. Having reached the town, he finds out that all the people in the town are white.

Only later, after Bird-Dog’s disappearance and his being expelled from the tribe as a punishment, he drinks the life-giving fluid, in order to face the world outside in advantage.

From that moment on, Flapping Eagle’s experience of displacement requires from him a means to interact with the outside world: “I was an adaptable sort of man, more a chameleon than an eagle, better a reaction than an action”(p.27).

At first, he accepts from life whatever it gives him and becomes an older woman gigolo, taking benefit of her wealth. After her death, twenty-five years later, he finds out his blue bottle had disappeared. Consequently, he is irremediably condemned to immortality.

Forced by the unexpected circumstances, he starts his search for his sister and Sispy, the peddler. His former passiveness changes into action.

Studies on migration have shown that a migrant is in a continuous process of adaptation, facing the challenge of dealing with different cultures and, consequently, of accepting the co-existence of multiple identities.

In that sense Grimus might be interpreted as an allegory of the migrant's saga:

He was the leopard who chanced his spots, he was the worm that turned. He was the shifting sands and the ebbing tide. He was moody as the sky, circular as the seasons, nameless as glass. He was chameleon, changeling, all things to all men and nothing to any man. He had become his enemies and eaten his friends. He was all of them and none of them. (G 31)

Only two things keep Flapping Eagle's quest: the first is his knowledge that only Sispy would know if there were a way to restore his mortality. The second is a message that Sispy had sent to Flapping Eagle through Bird-Dog in his first appearance: "Tell your brother that all eagles come at last to eyrie and all sailors come at last to shore".

Growing old is his main ambition. To get rid of a curse that obliged him to move from a place to another, assuming different identities, in order to keep his immortality in secret.

His protean quality, his particular capacity to host many different selves, enables him to function as a link between the different worlds within the fiction: "the Gorf knew, when he saw Flapping Eagle, that this man was the link" (G 67).

In his wanderings, he is in a boat, sailing into the port of X, when he meets his dead lover's counsellor, Nicholas Deggle, who tells him that had assumed a new identity. Now he is Lokki, the magician. Immediately, Flapping Eagle understands that it would be impossible for an ordinary man to have lived for such a long time, unless he were one of them. During a conversation with that man, he falls from the boat into the Mediterranean, through a hole that takes him to a parallel dimension. He finally arrives at Calf Island, the place where he expects to find his sister and grow old, or die.

As Sophie Massé (1995) points out in her essay "Transfictional identities in Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*", hybridity is not restricted to fictional characters in the novel, pervading the fictional universe as well:

But hybridity is not restricted to fictional characters; it pervades the fictional universe as well, taking on various aspects. First of all it is described as being purely Geographical. Only a few geographical locations are mentioned, one of them being Amerindia (where Flapping Eagle and his tribe live) while the other is "the port of X on the Moorish coast of Morispain" (G 34). Nevertheless both locations display aspects of hybridity. As for the port of X it is reminiscent of Oedipus' crossroads and as such is a powerful symbol of hybridity. No wonder then that Flapping Eagle should leave from the port of X to arrive on Calf, the immortals' island, after falling, like Alice in Wonderland, "through a hole in the sea" (G 14). There again, the passage from one universe to the other is depicted in terms of a fall – that fall marking the passage from a realistic universe (Amerindia, Morispain and the world in general) to a fantastic one (Calf Island): "The sea had been the Mediterranean. It wasn't now; or not quite" (G 14).

Calf Island is inhabited by immortals that had found their longevity so burdensome that accepted to be guided by Sispy— the "pedlar"— to be with their own kind. An island formed by a single mountain, in which there is only one town: K.

Virgil Jones, an ex- gravedigger, who is going to be his guide to the mountain where he expects to find his sister and Sispy, rescues Flapping Eagle.

The analogy to Dante's *Divine Comedy* is clear. It is anticipated by the image of the fall, reinforced by the idea of the quest and the guidance to the top of a mountain.

The climb provides a blending of Eastern and Western culture, as it also refers to the novel's source, the twelfth-century Sufi narrative poem called "The Conference of the Birds", which, according to the author, "is the closest thing in Persian literature to [The] Pilgrim's Progress"(HAFFENDEN, 200, 43).

The book's title is an anagram for the Persian word "Simurg", whose meaning the novel itself provides:

The Simurg, he told us eagerly, is the Great Bird. It is vast, all-powerful and singular. It is the sum of all other birds. There is a Sufi poem in which thirty birds set out to find the Simurg on the mountain where he lives. When they reach the peak, they find that they themselves are, or rather have become, the Simurg. The name, you see, means thirty birds, Si, thirty. Murg, birds (G 261-2).

The actual Persian title of the poem, however, is Muntaq-attair, meaning "The Logic of the Birds".

In *Grimus*, Rushdie tries to take, in his words, "a theme out of Eastern philosophy and mythology and transpose it into a Western convention" (HAFFENDEN, 2000, 43). The modern Persian edition of the poem comprises three hundred and thirty-three pages and explains all the stages of a Sufi's quest for the ultimate truth, including also numerous *Hakayat*, or fables related to various moral and philosophical questions.

Although some critics think that there is no worthwhile East-West fusion in the novel, Rushdie's plan seems to be quite clear: to create an analogous quest for the meaning of life.

According to Timothy Brennan (1989,71) *Grimus* draws from a different Persian source:

The book's central myth is taken from *Shahnameh* (Book of the Kings), a tenth century ethical history of Persia, whose semi-legendary characters, for example, include the 'Simurg'—'a huge bird who has seen the destruction of the world three times and has all the knowledge of the ages'.

Apart from the discussion about the source, it is relevant to focus on the treatment Rushdie gives to the myth, since he reinterprets it in order to bring out the question of identity.

Differently from the inhabitants of K., obsessed by their own stasis, held by a kind of paralysis, a mute conformity to life in a place where nothing changes, Flapping Eagle scales the island's peak, from which the mysterious *Grimus Effect* emits.

Virgil warns him from the beginning against the perils of the ascent by saying that "what the human race fears most is the working of its own mind" (G 53). The monsters that constitute an obstacle to climb the mountain are one's own devils. The only way to escape the *Dimension-fever* is by paralyzing imagination, locking on to the mind of another living being. A journey into the Inner Dimensions is like an internal inferno. Past must be shut out from the mind.

In his youth Virgil had found that one could create worlds, physical external worlds, neither aspects of oneself nor a palimpsest-universe, but a fiction where a man could live. In the dimension, the truth is as one believes it to be.

On their way to the mountain, Virgil and Flapping Eagle enter the city of K. The latter thinks that in order to be accepted by those people he would learn their past, making them his own. He was in search of a history.

In *Shame*, Rushdie provides a comment on exile that should be equally applied to Flapping Eagle's lack of a unified identity:

What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations? I think it is their hopefulness... And what is the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage....We have floated upwards from history,

from memory, from Time. (Shame 70-71)

It is Virgil who calls Flapping Eagle's attention to the insistent sound of birds:

The bird-kingdom is remarkably suitable for myth-makers (...) The names are more than descriptions; they have become symbols. Consider, too, the profusion of bird-gods in Antiquity (...) and of course, the master of them all, Simurg himself (...) If I am not very much mistaken, Mr Eagle, Mr Jones added, the Eagle has an interesting significance in Amerindian mythology. Am I not right in saying that it is the symbol of the Destroyer? (G 54)

The association of the image of a bird with the idea of myth-makers is a clue to Grimus' real role.

In the same way as transcultural identities are described by Rushdie as being at once plural and partial, the identities of both Grimus and Flapping Eagle are characterized by their hybridity. As Sophie Massé ( 1995 ) points out, Grimus is described as a semi-semitic Middle European, a refugee, a description that is a perfect illustration both of partiality and of duality. As for Flapping Eagle, he is an Amerindian, a term which sets him between two cultures.

It is only when he reaches the peak of the mountain that things start to be unveiled. His face is like the face of Grimus, who, being a master of disguise, had once approached his sister as Sispy; a man who claims to be the orchestrator of his life.

Virgil, Degger and Grimus had been partners in the past. Virgil kept a register of those times. Everything started with Virgil's discovery of an object carved in stone, just like a geometric rose; the Stone Rose. On the same day he had met a strange man: Grimus. That was not his real name, but just an anagram he had adopted as a name. I was him who had shoed Virgil and Degger that the rose had power; it was able to transport them to other worlds.

Grimus had brought the two bottles from the planet Thera. He felt like a god, able to dispense eternal life to other men. Thus he planned to create a new world of immortals where they would be the first ones. On a second step they would find those who would take profit of an eternal life, and finally to find a place of refuge.

To answer Degger's question about how to find those people, Grimus showed them the Watercrystal. By adjusting correctly the Rose, they would be able to conceptualize the lives they wanted, just like Flapping Eagle's life. It was only a matter of fixing thoughts upon the selected type of recipient; a dangerous matter of playing God.

They had been building a world. He did not know whether the island had been found or made. Grimus named the place: Kâf Island. As for its population Grimus had made a discovery: "each life he was able to see there came from a fractionally different dimension, existing in a slightly different potential present... his phrase":

Will there be a problem in assimilating immigrants from these different planets in the one society? Grimus is cheerfully optimistic. The differences are too minute to matter, he said. I trust he is right. (G 265).

Flapping Eagle finds his sister and the Gate to Grimushome. There is again an analogy to Dante's Inferno. There the gates of Hell are marked by the haunting inscription "Abandon all hope, you who enter here". In Grimushome there is an inscription engraved in the stone over the door: "That which is complete is also dead".

Completeness stands for a unified identity, the impossibility to convey other selves. When Flapping Eagle finally meets his creator, he merges with him, and both of them become part-Eagle part-Grimus, thus perpetuating their original duality.

On Calf Mountain, the blue elixir of death has no power and Grimus wants to die. That land of immortals was planned to be a place where dead could only be achieved by an act of violence. There would never be a natural death. However Grimus has the Phoenician impulse inside him, a kind of rebirth from ashes. Flapping Eagle represents the Phoenician Death for him:

When I became Grimus, I took the name from a respect for the philosophy contained in the myth of the Simurg, the myth of the Great bird which contains all other birds and in turn is contained by them. The similarity with the Phoenix myth is self-apparent. Through death, 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 stage of the cycle, the next bearer of the flag, Hercules succeeding Atlas. In the midst of death we are in life. (G 293)

The final conversation between them is one of challenge:

- How can you refuse? Said Grimus after a pause. Consider your life: you will see that I have shaped it to this express purpose. 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 any artist.

- We existed before you found us, said Flapping Eagle.

- Surely, said Grimus tolerantly. But by shaping you to my grand design I remade you as completely as if you had been unmade clay. (G 293)

Then Grimus reveals that in another potential dimension they continue to live their own mortal lives. Flapping Eagle suddenly understands he had always been a man searching for a voice in which to speak. A voice of his own, that he has finally met:

You can play your own death as a kind of perfect game of chess. But in the end it all depends on me, Grimus, in some way which you haven't yet explained. It all hangs on my choice and I tell you now I am not going to play (...)I want to destroy you, repeated flapping Eagle, but not in the way you want. I will not assume your mantle. (G 298)

Grimus finds his death, exactly as he wanted, by means of the violence of the mob from K. His mind, merged with Flapping Eagle's mind, however, goes on the struggle for survival.

Flapping Eagle makes his own choice denying Grimus' plan. He dismantles little by little the world created by Grimus, disconnecting Calf Island from all relative Dimensions, until it dissolves into primal, unmade energy.

The "unreliable narration" proves to be a serious study of the danger of absolute power, although that is not its unique theme. It might either be interpreted as an allegory of fiction making; of man's everlasting ability for fabulation, or even as a symbolical interpretation of postcolonial issues, just like migration, transculturation, imperialism and plural identity.

Whatever be the path to be followed, no one can deny that *Grimus* comprises an ingenious, well-engendered "colloquium" of Eastern and Western literary works, whose utmost merit is to show that migrant writers have conjoined to build a new world out of an old one, due to the double perspective of those who have been at the same time insiders and outsiders in a new society.

#### Referência Bibliográfica

- AMANUDDIN, Syed. "The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy." *World Literature Today* 63:1, pp. 42-45, 1989.
- BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994.
- BRENNAN, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie & the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. NY: St. Martins Press, 1989.
- CLARK, Roger Y. *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie's Other Worlds*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001
- CUNDY, Catherine. "'Rehearsing Voices': Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*". *Ariel* 27:1, pp. 128-38, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996.
- FANON, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. NY: Grove Press, 2001.
- HALL, Stuart. *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade*. Trad. Tomaz Tadeu da Silva. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Da diáspora*. Trad. Adelaine La Guardia Resende. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Local and the Global". In: KING, Anthony. Ed. *Culture, Globalization and the World System*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.
- HAFFENDEN, John. "Salman Rushdie." Interview. Ed. Michael R. Reder. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.
- HUME, Kathryn. "Taking a Stand while Lacking a Center: Rushdie's Postmodern Politics." *Philological Quarterly* 74:2: pp.209-30, 1995.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. NY: Routledge, 1988.
- KING, Anthony. Ed. *Culture, Globalization and the World System*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.
- MASSÉ, Sophie. "Transfictinal identities in Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*". *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines*. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, n°8, pp. 89-95, 1995.
- RUSHDIE, Salman, *Grimus*, New York, Toronto: Modern Books Library, 2003,[1975]
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Shame*. NY: Picador USA, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta/Penguin, 1991.
- SAID, Edward W. *Orientalism*. NY: Vintage Books, 1979.



\_\_\_\_\_. Culture and Imperialism. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. Travelling Theory. Raritan: 3 (1982), 41-67.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Narrative and geography". New Left Review, n.180, March/April, pp.81-100,1990.

SYED, Mujeebuddin. "Warped Mythologies: Salman Rushdie's Grimus." Ariel 25:4, pp.135-52, 1994.

WALSH, William. Indian Literature in English. Harlow: Longman, 1990.

---

[1] RUSHDIE, Salman, Grimus, New York, Toronto: Modern Books Library, 2003,[1975], p. 17.  
Subsequently referred to as G.

Sobre a autora:

Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira é Mestre em Lingüística Aplicada e Doutora em Literatura Comparada pela UFRJ. Atualmente, é Coordenadora do Curso de Letras da UNIGRANRIO e Professora Adjunta de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa e Literatura Comparada nos cursos de graduação e pós-graduação. Tem artigos publicados em periódicos no Brasil, EUA, México, Inglaterra e Portugal.

Site pessoal: <http://www.shirleycarreira.homestead.com/index.html>

e-mail: [mitchell@centroin.com.br](mailto:mitchell@centroin.com.br)