

## Alchemical Narrative of Mortality to Myth in Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*

Mr. Cardinal D S John<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Santhosh Kumar C<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar (Full Time), Roll No: 2301070007, Department of English, Annamalai University,  
[cardinaldsjohn@gmail.com](mailto:cardinaldsjohn@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University

### Abstract

Salman Rushdie's first novel *Grimus*, published in 1975, a work different from his later, more widely known for magical realist narratives, lays the groundwork for his frequent thematic explorations. The novel, appears from a period of Rushdie's early literary development is marked by a deep engagement with philosophical inquiry and an inquest into the boundaries of human experience. *Grimus* differs from conventional narrative structures, using fragmented and allegorical approach to discover the themes of immortality, transcendence, and the nature of reality. The novel is set within a strange landscape, drawing inspiration from myth, mysticism, and science fiction, creating a world where characters are engaged in a continuous search for meaning and self-discovery. The central figure, Flapping Eagle, is provided an extended lifespan by the mysterious Grimus, setting in motion a journey that challenges the natural way of understanding existence. Rushdie uses this idea to delve into the inbuilt paradoxes of immortality, questioning the notion of unending life connected to fulfilment. The narrative's engagement with alchemical symbolism, particularly the "stone of immortality," reveals a broader exploration of transformation and the pursuit of a higher state of being. *Grimus* stands for an important stage in Salman Rushdie's literary development, showcasing his early engagement with complex philosophical themes and his innovative approach to narrative. Through the protagonist, Flapping Eagle, the novel delves into the inherent paradoxes of extended life, revealing it not as a utopian ideal but as a potential source of existential burden. The immortality and transcendence in the novel, set against the backdrop of alchemical symbolism and dreamlike imagery, provides fruitful ground for critical analysis and interpretation. This article examines Salman Rushdie's *Grimus* as a complex allegorical exploration of immortality and the human quest for transcendence. Ultimately, this analysis argues that *Grimus* serves as an insightful catalyst on the transformative journey toward self-discovery and the indefinable pursuit of transcendence.

**Key Words:** Immortality, Quest, Transcendence, Reality, Alchemy

### Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*, is not merely an extraordinary narrative, but an intense alchemical exploration of the human yearning for immortality and the laborious journey towards transcendence. This article delves into the complex layers of the mysterious work, untying its symbolic complexities to understand Rushdie's early meditations on the nature of life, death, and the indefinable pursuit of a higher state of being. *Grimus* presents a world where the border of mortality is blurred, and the promise of extended life is both a gift and a curse. At the heart of this narrative lies the mysterious figure Grimus, who offers the protagonist, Flapping Eagle, the opportunity to go beyond the limitations of his mortal existence. However, this seemingly generous offer sets in motion a difficult quest, forcing Flapping Eagle to face the inbuilt paradoxes of immortality and the potential for existential stagnation. The novel's title itself hints at the alchemical processes at play, suggesting transformation of the human spirit through trials and tribulations. Rushdie masterfully employs metaphorical language and dreamlike imagery to create an unreal landscape where characters struggle with the fundamental question of existence. The "stone of immortality," the central dominant element in the narrative, serves as a medium for this transformative journey, symbolizing the intangible pursuit of transcendence and the prospective for both enlightenment and disillusionment.

Salman Rushdie's *Grimus* presents a dream like philosophical journey in which the protagonist, Flapping Eagle, gets on a search that intertwines mortality, transformation, and transcendence. The Calf Island is introduced in between reality and illusion, and characters like Virgil Jones, and Dolores O'Toole are attentive in cycles of isolation and unfulfilled desires. This setting serves as a lead up to the novel's broader exploration of the alchemical process of self-discovery and the pursuit of immortality.

*Grimus* introduces the idea that language and perception shape reality, a vital factor of transcendence. Mr. Virgil Jones, an odd historian, muses "Language makes concepts. Concepts make chains. I am bound, Dotty, bound and I don't know where" (5). This emphasizes the limitations of human understanding that how words and preconceived ideas imprison persons in fixed realities. Just as alchemy sought after to transmute base substance into gold, Virgil's philosophy proposes that transcendence needs breaking free from linguistic and conceptual chains, which is an essential plan of Flapping Eagle's own journey. Brian Cotnoir in *Alchemy* says, "The central concept in *alchemy* is transmutation: the fundamental change of one thing into another, from a grosser, impure state to a more refined, balanced, and pure state. This is to be understood on multiple levels- physically, spiritually, and symbolically" (11).

The name Grimus itself is an anagram of the name Simurg, the mythical bird, which symbolizes God in the sufi poem "The Conference of the Birds" by Fariduddin Attar. Amandeep Kaur in an article states that, "Grimus is an anagram of

Simurg; the name of a bird in Sufi myth” (30). The name Simurg attains anagrammatical transformation at the hands of Salman Rushdie and has become both the character and title of the novel. In the poem, the journey of birds to find their king, the Simurg, faces many trials and reach the end where they come to know that their spiritual unity without ego and illusion result the divine within them constitute Simurg. Likewise in *Grimus*, Flapping Eagle after several search, finally reaches Calf Island to the Calf Mountain to meet Grimus for his overall transformation.

Flapping Eagle’s presence at Calf Island is not a mere accident but a predetermined event, “No-one ever came to Calf Island by accident. The mountain drew its own kind to itself. Or perhaps it was Grimus who did that” (6). The reference to the mountain as a force of attraction suggests a magical pull toward fate, reinforcing the idea that immortality is not randomly gained but part of a greater universal design. His continued existence, despite attempting suicide, indicates his entry into a metaphysical space where transformation is possible. Like an Alchemist seeing the philosopher’s stone, he must unknot the mysteries of existence, mortality, and the strange figure of Grimus.

Moreover, the novel challenges conventional ideas of life and death. Dolores’ panicked exclamation, “Death, from the sea...” is countered by Virgil’s observation, “No, ... the face is too pale” (6). The multiple interpretations surrounding Flapping Eagle’s state of being foreshadows his journey through the layers of existence, echoing the alchemical process where death is necessary for rebirth and enlightenment. The novel thus points immortality not as a mere material state, but as a transformative experience that transcends human imitations.

The novel presents immortality as both a blessing and a curse, a duality that enables Flapping Eagle’s journey. His sister, Bird-Dog, receives the gift of everlasting life from the mysterious pedlar, Mr. Sispy. This essential moment is hinted at when the narrator states, “It was also the day she met Mr Sispy and was given eternal life” (11). This simple statement carries deep implications. The transfer of immortality is not celebrated or described in grand terms but rather distributed in a factual tone, hinting at the burdens that come with such a gift. Immortality, in this setting, is not merely a physical state but a medium for change, setting Bird-Dog and, by addition, Flapping Eagle on an irreversible path to be reversed to the original state.

Flapping Eagle’s transformation is intensely attached to his search for identity, a theme complexly linked to the idea of transcendence. His doubtful origin is marked by his unclear gender at birth and his fair skin in a dark skinned tribe has previously been set him apart. His identity as an outsider is strengthened by the Axona’s vision of him, “Because they were frightened, they gave us a measure of respect. Because I was a freak, they gave us a measure of scorn” (10). This unfriendliness creates an existential empty space, pushing Flapping Eagle toward a search for something ahead of his tribe and well known world. His journey to Calf Island where immortality is complexly linked to the mysterious figure of Grimus becomes both a literal and symbolic journey toward transcendence.

*Grimus* is characterized by its faultless combination of myth and reality, creating a strange and dreamlike mood. Rushdie rely on a various range of mythological and literary sources, weaving them into the material of his narrative. The characters and events in the novel often possess symbolic significance, reflecting standard patterns and universal themes. This interaction of myth and reality helps to lift up the narrative further than the realm of mere fantasy, transforming it into an insightful exploration of the human condition. The mythical elements in *Grimus* are not just pleasing to the eye, but necessary to the novel’s exploration of transcendence, giving an outline for understanding the characters’ spiritual journeys and the deeper meaning of their experiences.

Rushdie put together mythology into the concept of immortality, as seen in the name “Flapping Eagle”. The eagle, an influential symbol in many cultures, signifies vision, transcendence, and connection to the divine. Flapping Eagle’s journey enfolds the tension between the mortal and immortal worlds. He starts as a form deeply rooted in human struggles, disliked, uncertain, and hopeless for belonging. However, the vision of immortality offers both promise and risk. The narrative indicates the existential weight of eternal life, mentioning that those who get it may not find fulfilment. This tension aligns with a fundamental question in philosophy that, does transcending mortality bring enlightenment, or does it shut in one in an everlasting cycle of longing?

Immortality in *Grimus* is presented as both an attractive promise and a strong burden. Mr. Sispy, the mysterious pedlar, offers Bird-Dog and Joe-Sue two bottles, “The yellow eternity of life and the blue eternity of death” (14). These colours bring back traditional alchemical symbols that are gold for the elixir of life and blue for the infinite emptiness of the unknown. If the yellow elixir stands for an artificial transcendence, the blue elixir serves as its counterbalance, the utmost form of release from the burdens of existence. Mr. Sispy, the mysterious magician, embodies the paradox of eternal life, “The beauty of it is: with it you will stay beautiful, you will not die... And the horror of it is: all who possess the secret wish in the end to give it up” (13). The paradox of the elixir is a key to Rushdie’s philosophical exploration in which those who search for eternity at last long for its end. Transcendence, in this sense, is not about undying youth but about understanding and accepting the unavoidability of death. Bird-Dog, who at first rejoices in her immortality, finally admits the power of the blue elixir, crashing the bottle in an act of symbolic resistance, “Death, she said. Death to death” (14). This act cements her as a searcher as well a hunter of transcendence, yet predicts the existential weight that everlasting life will impose upon her. The blue liquid represents the way to escape the never ending cycle of existence, stating that true transcendence may lie not in eternal life, but in the freedom to choose death.

Joe-Sue’s transformation into Flapping Eagle is spotted by a chain of customs that parallel both tribal traditions and mythical rebirth. The important moment occurs when an eagle, symbolic of spiritual elevation, permits him to hold it

earlier than violently attacking him, “I held it and stroked it a moment and then, abruptly, as unexpectedly violent as it had been calm, it began to fight me” (15). This moment of pain and acknowledgement leads Bird-Dog to announce his new name, linking his identity to the sign of the eagle. The scar on his chest becomes a mark of commencement, similar to an alchemist undergoing a trial by fire. His physical and symbolic transformation is important to his search for meaning in a survival now unbound by time.

Flapping Eagle’s voyage is one of steady boundary-crossing, both literal and metaphorical. He violates the law of the Axona by coming down from the lonely plateau to delve into the outside world, challenging the strict codes of his people. This disobedience reflects Bird-Dog’s past wrongdoings, including her charm with the town and its technology. Most shockingly, his coming of age ends in an incestuous relationship with Bird-Dog, “So, on one day, I was offered eternal life, broke the law of the Axona, took a brave’s name from an omen and lost my virginity to my sister” (15). This final act represents a deep violation of societal forbidden, further breaking his ties to the past. Like an alchemist searching to dissolve and transform elements in the wake of higher knowledge, Flapping Eagle must take apart the structures that label his identity in order to make up a new one.

Mr. Sispy’s mystic farewell tells that immortality is not an end but a beginning. He says, “All eagles come at last to eyrie and all sailors come at last to shore” (13). This implies that even those granted eternal life will in the end search for resolution, telling that the true alchemy of existence is not merely the continuance of life but the search of transcendence. Just as the philosopher’s stone in alchemy was sought after not only for its power to transform base metals into gold but for its divine enlightenment, Flapping Eagle’s voyage is a philosophical and existential discovery.

At the heart of *Grimus* is the notion of deathlessness as an alchemical transformation, one that promises enlightenment but also carries unforeseen consequences. Bird-Dog’s interest with the yellow elixir encloses this idea, “They’ll keep me young, she said, clutching them ever more tightly. Or at least this one will” (12). The promise of the elixir is the philosopher’s stone of alchemy, a substance that provides everlasting youth and power over time. Yet, as with all alchemical transformations, there is a concealed price. Bird-Dog believes she is gaining control over her fate, yet her fascination with youth creates an unnatural split between her and her brother, who continues to grow old. Her choice to drink the yellow elixir is both a success and a disaster, as it alienates her from the natural cycles of life and death.

Bird-Dog’s final separation from Flapping Eagle emphasizes a critical aspect of transcendence, the weight of eternity. While she primarily reveals in her newfound youth, she soon finds herself separated from the world and her brother, “To him, it had been faintly nauseating to watch Bird-Dog petrified at an immutable age, her cells reproducing perfectly every day, not a hair falling that wasn’t replaced by a new one” (16). Rushdie presents immortality not as a reward, but a slow-moving tragedy. Bird-Dog stays frozen in time while the world around her continuous to transform, and even her brother, once inseparable from her, drifts away. Her immortality is infertile, a mechanical excellence that discards the pure beauty of decay, change, and final renewal.

Unlike Bird-Dog, who holds immortality only to find herself trapped by it, Flapping Eagle opposes the temptation, at least at first. He hides his bottles under his sleeping mat, hesitants to do to an irreversible transformation. Yet, when met with exile, he finally surrenders, “At least, he thought, if I am to live in the Outside, I may as well give myself one advantage. He drained the life-giving fluid” (18). Flapping Eagle’s choice marks a shift in his voyage. By drinking the elixir, he moves into the world of the unfamiliar, no longer tied by the physical limits of time. However, unlike Bird-Dog, he does not suddenly rejects the blue elixir, keeping it in his pocket. This reveals that while he has accepted immortality, he is conscious of its final cost, holding onto the option of an exit when the burden becomes too great.

The Sham-Man’s speech to Flapping Eagle also emphasizes the idea that transcendence is not just about avoiding death, but about understanding one’s place in the world. His complex metaphors about health and disease mirror the Axona’s stiff worldview that cannot have room for Flapping Eagle’s existence between mortality and immortality. His exile, therefore, signifies a forced beginning into a greater philosophical journey.

Later, when Flapping Eagle meets Mrs. Cramm, the idea of transformation continues. She notices in him a vital subject for her desires, yet he knows that he is once again falling under the influence of an older, more powerful figure. His skill to settle in, however, reveals that he is still searching his own pathway to transcendence rather than merely following the footsteps of others.

Flapping Eagle, the protagonist, has had this trip, as his unnatural long life separates him from human experiences, forcing him into a search for meaning. The novel brings to light the psychological and existential influence of immortality, portraying Flapping Eagle as a man caught by time rather than unchained by it. His long obligation as Livia Cramm’s consort is an indication of this entrapment, “He had been with Livia Cramm now, her personal gigolo, for twenty-five years. His reasoning was very simple: He had time, more than any in the universe but he had no money” (22). His long life forces him into convenient relationships rather than passion, an absolute difference to the mythical attraction of eternal life.

The theme of transformation and the search for liberation is also present in the dream sequence, where Livia Cramm, his benefactor in control, is portrayed as a shape-shifting transformative force that clings to him in a suffocating grip, “He wrestled then, wrestled for his life, and as he did so she changed continually into all manner of wet, stinking, shapeless, slippery things” (26). This illustrates the ugly and frightening consequences of Flapping Eagle’s stagnation. His assumed



immortality does not provide him power, but rather entraps him in a cycle of reliance and decay, reflecting the alchemical process of transmutation, where fundamental elements must be brought into purity before they can get their ultimate form. Nicholas Deggle signifies a different phase of the alchemy of immortality, its manipulation and its cost. Unlike Flapping Eagle, who is just in existence through time, Deggle is a master of dark arts, active beyond the normal limits of age and morality. His strange remark, “You really are remarkably well-preserved. You must have a guardian angel” (27). This suggests that about his knowledge of the abstract forces that govern life and death. His rule over life, mentioned by the vanishing of Flapping Eagle’s phial, puts him in the role of an alchemist, one who turns reality to his will. Yet, Deggle is not a generous guide; he is a trickster figure, playing with the lives of others while never fully revealing his true intentions. Ultimately, Flapping Eagle’s inheritance of the yacht and his choice to travel by water for the unknown represents his search for transcendence. After being trapped in an aimless long life, he is finally provided with the chance to move forward, echoing the theme of the philosopher’s stone, which is the final aim of alchemy that gives both immortality and enlightenment. His voyage into the “blue” is not just a material escape but a metaphorical one, an exit from the stagnation of unending life without purpose to a new survival where he might finally obtain true transcendence.

Flapping Eagle’s living forever is not a gift but a curse that enforces him into a chameleon-like existence, where he firmly settles in but never belongs. The passage points out this when it states, “He was Chameleon, changeling, all things to all men and nothing to any man” (27). This suggests that in his never ending transformations, he has lost his steady sense of self. Unlike alchemy, which looks to purify and transform base metals into gold, Flapping Eagle’s shape-shifting survival only results in nothingness. His interest into different cultures and ideologies, praising the fact of being carnivore among meat-eaters, advocating vegetarianism among deniers, even doing, cannibalism shows his lack of self identity.

Immortality of *Grimus* is not a high state but a burden that deprives life of its natural rhythm. The theme emphasises, “His body: an empire on which there was no sun to set”. This metaphor puts forward his immortality as a stagnant power, unchanging and unyielding. While alchemy by nature searches for enlightenment or transformation, Flapping Eagle’s never ending life lacks development and growth. His immortality becomes an empty cycle of existence, where he gathers experiences but gets no wisdom, “And after a while, he realized he had learnt nothing at all” (29). This understanding lines up with the novel’s exploration of how everlasting life, rather than yielding transcendence, decreases existence to a meaningless repetition and nothingness. Andrew Stark, while speaking about the necessity of nothingness for the existence of self, says, “Without the possibility of nothingness, we couldn’t follow our own authentic choices” (54).

Flapping Eagle’s voyage has become so long and fruitless that he starts to doubt the reality itself, “Perhaps there never was a Sispy, never a Bird-Dog or Sham-Man or Phoenix... Madness explained everything” (30). This blurs the thread between transcendence and insanity. The confusion and the possible thoughts have brought him to the plan of suicide, “He was contemplating killing himself” (31). He has reached the maximum limit of patience. His search for transcendence through immortality has resulted nothing, leaving him to tackle the ultimate escape.

Unlike the usual search for eternal life, Flapping Eagle searches for a return to mortality to get back the ability to become old and change naturally. This is reflected in his declaration, “I want to grow old. Not to die: to grow old” (29). His longing for aging proposes that true transcendence lies in accepting human weakness rather than rejecting it. His search for Sispy is motivated by the hope that she holds the key to reverse his condition. The secret message from Sispy, “Tell your brother Born-From-Dead that all eagles come at last to eyrie and all sailors come at last to shore” (30). This suggests that there is a final destination or resolution for those who wander aimlessly in and around the universe. The eagles and sailors in the novel suggest homecoming, hinting at the option that transcendence is not simply about escaping life but completing it.

In *Grimus*, immortality is portrayed as an alchemical paradox-less a path to enlightenment than a burden of stagnation. Flapping Eagle’s journey reveals that true transcendence lies not in eternal life but in the ability to change, embrace mortality, and seek meaning beyond illusion. The novel frames immortality not as an escape from death but as an existential challenge, where wisdom comes from navigating the tension between life and its inevitable end. In the end, the pursuit of transcendence is not about challenging death but about understanding its role in shaping a meaningful existence.

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