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**THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS: MARGINALISATION AND THE  
TREATMENT OF THE ALIEN FIGURE IN GABRIEL GARCÍA  
MÁRQUEZ'S A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS**

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## ABSTRACT

Gabriel García Márquez's *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* explores the dynamics of otherness through the portrayal of a mysterious winged figure who disrupts the mundane life of a small coastal community. This paper examines how the narrative constructs and critiques the politics of marginalisation by depicting the treatment of the "alien" figure. Using postcolonial and sociocultural frameworks, the study argues that the old man becomes a site upon which societal fears, curiosity, exploitation, and indifference are projected. Márquez exposes the mechanisms through which societies dehumanise what they cannot understand, thereby reflecting broader issues of exclusion, power, and ethical failure.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of "otherness" has long been central to literary and cultural studies, referring to the process by which individuals or groups are defined as fundamentally different and inferior to the dominant norm. In *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, Márquez presents a striking example of otherness through the arrival of a strange winged man whose ambiguous identity—angelic, human, or monstrous—defies categorisation. Rather than inspiring reverence or compassion, the old man is subjected to ridicule, exploitation, and neglect.

This story, situated within the framework of magical realism, merges the extraordinary with the everyday, thereby normalising the miraculous while simultaneously exposing the cruelty embedded in ordinary human behaviour. The treatment of the old man reflects a broader commentary on how societies respond to difference—often with suspicion, commodification,

and violence. This article explores how Márquez critiques these responses and reveals the politics underlying the construction of the “alien” figure.

### **Magical Realism and the Construction of Otherness**

Márquez’s use of magical realism plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of the old man. The narrative presents the winged figure in a matter-of-fact tone, refusing to provide clear explanations for his existence. This ambiguity destabilises traditional binaries such as human/divine and natural/supernatural.

The old man’s wings, which should signify transcendence or divinity, instead mark him as grotesque and abnormal. His physical appearance—dirty, weak, and parasitic—contradicts conventional images of angels. This subversion reinforces his status as the “Other,” someone who exists outside accepted categories.

From a theoretical perspective, the old man can be seen as what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the “ambivalent Other”—a figure who both fascinates and threatens the dominant culture. The villagers’ inability to categorise him leads to anxiety, which is then managed through acts of control and exclusion.

### **Marginalisation and Social Exclusion**

The old man’s treatment illustrates the mechanisms of marginalisation. Initially discovered in a muddy courtyard, he is quickly confined to a chicken coop—a symbolic act that reduces him to the level of an animal. This spatial segregation reflects how societies isolate those deemed different or undesirable.

Despite the possibility that he might be an angel, the villagers show little genuine concern for his well-being. Instead, they treat him as a spectacle, charging admission fees to see him. This commodification highlights the intersection of marginalisation and economic exploitation.

Moreover, the authority figures in the story, such as Father Gonzaga, fail to challenge this treatment. The priest’s reliance on bureaucratic procedures to verify the old man’s identity underscores the institutional indifference that often accompanies marginalisation. Rather than offering moral guidance, the Church becomes complicit in the alienation of the Other.

### **The Alien Figure as a Site of Projection**

The old man functions as a blank canvas onto which the villagers project their fears, desires, and beliefs. Some view him as a divine messenger, while others see him as a fraud or a threat. These conflicting interpretations reveal more about the المجتمع than about the old man himself.

This process aligns with Edward Said's concept of "Othering," in which the dominant group constructs the identity of the Other to reinforce its own sense of superiority. By defining the old man as inferior, the villagers affirm their own normalcy and authority.

The arrival of the spider-woman further complicates this dynamic. Unlike the old man, her story is easily understandable and morally instructive, making her more acceptable to the audience. Her popularity demonstrates society's preference for narratives that reinforce existing norms, rather than those that challenge them.

### **Power, Exploitation, and Ethical Failure**

At its core, the story critiques the power structures that enable the exploitation of the Other. Pelayo and Elisenda, the couple who find the old man, quickly transform his presence into a profitable enterprise. Their actions reflect a capitalist mindset in which value is determined by utility rather than humanity.

The villagers' behaviour also reveals a broader ethical failure. Despite witnessing what could be a miraculous event, they respond with cruelty and indifference. This reaction challenges the assumption that exposure to the divine necessarily leads to moral improvement.

Márquez suggests that the real "monstrosity" lies not in the old man's appearance, but in the inability to recognise and respect difference. The story thus becomes a powerful critique of the dehumanising effects of social and economic systems.

### **CONCLUSION**

*A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* offers a profound exploration of the politics of otherness and the mechanisms of marginalisation. Through the portrayal of the winged old man, Márquez exposes the ways in which societies construct, exploit, and ultimately discard those who do not conform to established norms.

The story's enduring relevance lies in its ability to reflect contemporary issues such as xenophobia, discrimination, and the commodification of difference. By presenting the extraordinary within the ordinary, Márquez compels readers to confront their own assumptions and biases.

Ultimately, the narrative calls for a more compassionate and ethical engagement with the Other—one that recognises shared humanity rather than reinforcing divisions.

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