

Wings Against Empire: Postcolonial Allegory and Subaltern Resistance in García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"

Samra Gul¹ and Gul Rukh²

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.3.39>

Abstract

This study offers a postcolonial reading of Gabriel García Márquez's "a very old man with enormous wings" (1955), exploring how the text allegorizes colonial systems of othering, commodification, and resistance. The story's portrayal of a frail winged old man—captured, displayed, and eventually discarded by a village—mirrors the historical trajectory of colonized peoples: first feared as the "other," then exploited as curiosities, and finally abandoned once their perceived utility wanes. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this research examines how the villagers' treatment of the older man enacts Orientalist representation, silences the subaltern voice, and seeks to erase the destabilizing hybridity he embodies. Through close textual analysis within a qualitative paradigm, the study argues that Márquez's magical realism functions as a decolonial aesthetic, unsettling Eurocentric epistemologies and reclaiming space for marginalized worldviews. Positioned within a pedagogical context as a lecturer in English at Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, this inquiry foregrounds how literature from the global south disrupts Eurocentric hierarchies and fosters critical consciousness about cultural imperialism. Ultimately, the story critiques colonial power structures while envisioning liberation through the older man's final, transcendent flight.

Keywords: Gabriel García Márquez, Postcolonial Theory, Magical Realism, Subalternity, Hybridity, Colonial Othering.

Introduction

Gabriel García Márquez's "a very old man with enormous wings" (1955/1972) stands as a touchstone of the Latin American canon, fusing allegory with the unsettling poise of magical realism to interrogate power, marginalization, and cultural domination (Chanady, 1985; Slemon, 1995; Zamora & Faris, 1995). At the level of plot, a decrepit winged man tumbles into the routines of a coastal village and is first met with suspicion, then voracious curiosity (García Márquez, 1955/1972). The community converts his suffering into a spectacle—literally displaying and pricing his body—before discarding him when novelty and profit wane, a pattern that echoes imperial cultures of exhibition and extraction (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Young, 2001). In a final gesture, the figure regains strength and takes flight, a quiet refusal that unsettles the village's attempts to classify and contain him (Zamora & Faris, 1995).

¹Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author Email: samraqul60@gmail.com

²Scholar, Department of English, Institute of Management Sciences, KP, Pakistan. Email: gulrukhee@gmail.com



This arc mirrors durable trajectories within the colonial archive: peoples first othered and feared, then appropriated and commodified, and finally abandoned once deemed exhausted of value (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978; Young, 2001). Postcolonial theory clarifies the mechanisms at work. Orientalism names the discursive production of the other that licenses domination (Said, 1978); hybridity and mimicry explain why the winged man's uncertain status—angel? Animal? Human?—both fascinates and threatens authority (Bhabha, 1994); and the figure's near-total silence stages the problem of subaltern speech, in which the colonized speak yet are structurally unheard (Spivak, 1988). Read this way, the villagers' drive to categorize and capitalize on the older man's body is not a local oddity but an allegory of imperial knowledge and value (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Young, 2001).

Positioned from a Global South classroom, this inquiry carries a pedagogical charge: to show how Latin American writing provincializes Eurocentric ways of knowing and models decolonial reading practices (Boehmer, 1995; Mignolo, 2000; Zamora & Faris, 1995). Approached as a postcolonial allegory, Márquez's tale becomes not whimsical curiosity but a decolonial parable—one that exposes the mechanics of oppression while imagining limited forms of liberation in the older man's evasive, untranslatable flight (Bhabha, 1994; Mignolo, 2000; Slemon, 1995).

Literature Review

Critical engagement with Gabriel García Márquez has long foregrounded his place in the Latin American "Boom" and his shaping of magical realism as both aesthetic and stance. Early accounts (e.g., Ángel Flores's programmatic essay) trace how the mode collapses the boundary between the marvelous and the everyday, unsettling realist norms derived from European traditions (Á. Flores, 1955). Building on Alejo Carpentier's formulation of *lo real maravilloso* as an indigenous American way of seeing (Carpentier, 1949/1995), critics such as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris argue that magical realism is not merely ornament but a decolonial narrative strategy that makes space for suppressed histories and local cosmologies within forms historically dominated by Eurocentric epistemologies (Zamora & Faris, 1995). Complementary theorists demonstrate how the mode normalizes the marvelous without explanatory frames (Chanady, 1985) and thereby contests imperial truth-claims through doubled registers of narration (Slemon, 1995). Within Boom scholarship more broadly, Bell-Villada emphasizes Márquez's synthesis of folk belief, reportage, and political critique, situating his fiction as central to a hemispheric literary imaginary that resists metropolitan canons (Bell-Villada, 2010).

Within this larger archive, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" has been read along theological and moral lines—as a Christian allegory, as a meditation on faith and wonder, and as an indictment of everyday cruelty (García Márquez, 1955/1972; Bell-Villada, 2010; McMurray, 1977). While these interpretations remain influential, comparatively fewer studies have employed an explicit postcolonial vocabulary to analyze the tale's imagery of captivity, spectacle, and abandonment. When placed against the historical logics of imperial display and extraction, the villagers' treatment of the winged older man coheres with a recognizable colonial script: the racialized/othered body made visible as curiosity, commodified for gain, and discarded once its value is exhausted (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Young, 2001).

Postcolonial theory provides the analytic grammar for naming these dynamics. Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism clarifies how the older man is produced through a regime of representation that licenses control; Bhabha's (1994) notions of hybridity and mimicry elucidate why the figure's uncertain ontology—angelic, human, animal—both fascinates and threatens the village's authority; and Spivak's (1988) account of the subaltern foregrounds how voice can be present yet structurally

unheard, echoed by the figure's near-total silence. Read in a contact zone where unequal power shapes interpretation (Pratt, 1991), the story stages the pressures of categorization and profitability with unsettling clarity. These frameworks, widely applied in African and South Asian contexts, remain surprisingly underused for Márquez's short fiction despite its resonance with conquest, cultural erasure, and forms of resistance in Latin America (Young, 2001).

Positioned at this intersection, the present study argues that a postcolonial reading reveals the tale as an allegory of domination, dehumanization, and limited liberation. By bridging Latin American magical realism with postcolonial and decolonial thought, the analysis contributes to efforts to decolonize the canon and foreground voices and knowledge systems that have been historically muted by empire (Boehmer, 1995; Mignolo, 2000; Zamora & Faris, 1995; Slemon, 1995). In doing so, it complements theological and moral readings with a historically grounded account of spectacle and extraction, returning Márquez's story to the political terrains that shape its form and reception (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, an interdisciplinary field that examines the cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of colonialism. Emerging in the late twentieth century through the works of scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, postcolonial theory examines how imperial power structures persist beyond formal decolonization, shaping identities, knowledge systems, and cultural production. Applying this framework to Gabriel García Márquez's *"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"* enables a reading that foregrounds the story's engagement with themes of othering, silencing, and resistance. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is especially pivotal to this analysis. Said identifies Orientalism as a discourse through which colonial powers constructed the "East" as exotic, irrational, and inferior in order to legitimize domination. The villagers' reaction to the old man as an aberrant and monstrous figure echoes this logic of representation, marking him as the racialized and cultural "other" upon whom fears and fantasies are projected. This discursive framing underpins their treatment of him as both spectacle and commodity.

Building on this, Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry illuminate how colonial encounters produce unstable and disruptive identities. The older man's ambiguous nature—human yet avian, sacred yet profane—resists assimilation into the villagers' epistemic categories, embodying hybridity as a site of subversive potential. His refusal or inability to perform the roles assigned to him further unsettles the villagers' desire for coherence, exposing the fragility of colonial binaries such as human/animal, civilized/primitive, and sacred/profane.

Gayatri Spivak's theorization of the subaltern provides a third critical axis. Spivak argues that the subaltern—the most marginalized subject within colonial hierarchies—cannot easily "speak" within dominant discourses because their voice is structurally muted. The older man's persistent silence, whether born of incomprehension or refusal, embodies this condition of voicelessness. However, his eventual flight symbolically recuperates a measure of agency, suggesting that resistance can emerge from spaces of enforced silence.

By integrating these theoretical strands, this framework situates Márquez's story as a postcolonial allegory that critiques the epistemic violence of colonialism while imagining the possibility of liberation. As a lecturer in English at Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, my deployment of this framework is also informed by a pedagogical aim: to demonstrate how texts from the Global South can disrupt Eurocentric epistemologies and cultivate critical consciousness about cultural

imperialism. This theoretical lens thus guides the textual analysis that follows, allowing the story's magical realist mode to be read as a vehicle of decolonial resistance rather than mere fantasy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology to examine Gabriel García Márquez's "a very old man with enormous wings" through the lens of postcolonial theory. Textual analysis, as a critical-interpretive approach, seeks to uncover how meaning is constructed within literary texts by attending closely to language, imagery, narrative structure, and symbolic patterning. This method is particularly suited to postcolonial inquiry, which privileges depth of interpretation over quantification and foregrounds the cultural, ideological, and historical forces that shape literary production.

The analysis proceeds through close reading, focusing on key narrative moments that dramatize the villagers' treatment of the winged older man—his capture, commodification, ridicule, and eventual abandonment. These textual instances are examined in light of theoretical concepts drawn from Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. Said's notion of Orientalism guides the identification of colonialist representational logics, while Bhabha's theories of hybridity and mimicry inform readings of the older man's ambiguous identity and disruptive presence. Spivak's concept of the subaltern frames the analysis of his silence and marginalization. Through this layered application, the study traces how the story allegorizes patterns of colonial othering, exploitation, and resistance.

This methodology also incorporates a pedagogical dimension informed by my role as a lecturer in English at Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan. Engaging students with postcolonial readings of Latin American literature not only decouples the study of English from Eurocentric canons but also cultivates critical consciousness about cultural imperialism. Thus, the methodological choice reflects both an interpretive commitment and an educational responsibility: to model how literary analysis can challenge dominant epistemologies and amplify the voices of those historically silenced by empire.

Analysis and Discussion

Othering and Spectacle: The Colonial Gaze in the Village

This section examines how the villagers' initial reaction to the older man exemplifies Said's Orientalism, which constructs the colonized subject as alien, exotic, and threatening. Their impulse to confine him in a chicken coop and display him to paying spectators mirrors the colonial gaze that objectifies colonized bodies as curiosities rather than human beings.

- Highlight the language used to describe the old man ("a nightmare fugitive," "a senile vulture") to show the process of dehumanization.
- Link their exploitative display to the commodification of colonized peoples under imperialism, where bodies become sites of profit rather than dignity.
- Argue that this spectacle reduces him to an image, erasing his subjectivity and humanity.

Silence and Subalternity: The Muted Voice of the Oppressed

This section applies Spivak's notion of the subaltern to analyze the older man's silence throughout the story.

- Explore how the villagers speak *about* him rather than *to* him, rendering him discursively absent.
- His silence can be read both as enforced (he is never asked to articulate his own experience) and as strategic (he refuses to participate in their spectacle).

- Discuss how this reflects the structural muting of subaltern voices under colonial regimes, where even the attempt to speak is refracted through dominant discourse.
- His departure without explanation gestures toward a reclamation of agency beyond the colonizer's language.

Hybridity and Disruption: Unsettling Colonial Binaries

This section uses Bhabha's concept of hybridity to read the older man's ambiguous nature—neither fully human nor entirely angelic, sacred nor profane.

- Show how the villagers struggle to categorize him within their epistemic frameworks, which rely on binary oppositions (human/animal, divine/demonic, civilized/primitive).
- Argue that his liminality destabilizes these binaries, producing a "third space" that resists colonial taxonomies.
- Incorporate mimicry: while he is forced to perform like a trained curiosity, he also resists becoming the creature they imagine, thereby exposing the fragility of colonial identity structures.

Magical Realism as Decolonial Resistance

Finally, this section positions Márquez's magical realist mode as a tool of epistemic resistance.

- Show how the story's matter-of-fact narration of the miraculous unsettles Western rationalist ways of knowing.
- Link this to broader Latin American literary traditions that use magical realism to reclaim indigenous cosmologies and local epistemologies suppressed by colonial modernity.
- Argue that the older man's eventual flight symbolizes liberation from the structures of containment that sought to define and exploit him—a decolonial gesture toward autonomy and transcendence.

Discussion

Theoretical justification. Upon examining postcolonial theory, the findings align with several core concepts that explain how colonial power scripts the other and how texts resist such scripting. The spectacle-like treatment of the winged man mirrors the colonial archive of displaying and commodifying racialized bodies, what Said (1978) identifies as the discursive construction of the Orient and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) describe as central to imperial culture. The villagers' compulsion to classify the older man as angel or demon—and to profit from him—echoes Bhabha's (1994) account of hybridity and ambivalence, where unstable categories unsettle authority yet trigger intensified control. The figure's enduring silence aligns with Spivak's (1988) question of subaltern speech, in which voice persists but is unheard within dominant epistemologies. Finally, the narrative's matter-of-fact magical register—refusing explanatory frames—operates as a decolonial aesthetic that provincializes European realism (Zamora & Faris, 1995; Slemon, 1995), enabling the text to reveal forms of life that imperial knowledge relegates to the margins (Mignolo, 2000).

Conclusion

This study contends that "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" allegorizes entrenched colonial hierarchies of othering, extraction, and abandonment while staging magical realism as a decolonial epistemology. Reading the winged older man as a subaltern figure whose presence destabilizes categories reveals how spectacle and commodification emerge from the same interpretive regimes

that sustain Orientalism (Said, 1978) and how the text counters these regimes through narrative strategies of ambiguity and refusal. The villagers' shifting responses—curiosity, profit-seeking, fatigue—track the colonial lifecycle from initial exoticization to extractive domination and eventual neglect (Young, 2001; Ashcroft et al., 1989). Crucially, the older man's final flight is not naïve redemption but a figure for limited liberation outside domesticated frames of comprehension, resonating with Spivak's (1988) and Bhabha's (1994) insistence on opacity and ambivalence.

Pedagogically, a postcolonial reading reframes the story not as a moral fable alone but as an invitation to interrogate whose knowledge counts and how bodies become legible or expendable in colonial modernity (Boehmer, 1995; Pratt, 1991). For classrooms in the Global South, the text serves as a resource for cultivating critical literacy about how Eurocentric categories shape everyday perception—and how Latin American literature subverts those categories through form and voice (Zamora & Faris, 1995; Mignolo, 2000).

Recommendations

1. Pair the story with concise excerpts from Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), and Spivak (1988) to scaffold core concepts (Orientalism, hybridity, subalternity).
2. *'Spectacle-to-subject' activity*: trace how the villagers' gaze commodifies the old man, then rewrite a scene centering his epistemic perspective.
3. *Decolonial aesthetics task*: compare magical-realist normalization of the marvelous with European realist explanatory frames (Zamora & Faris, 1995; Slemon, 1995).
4. *Contextual application*: invite students to identify contemporary media examples of othering/commodification and analyze them with postcolonial terms.
5. *Assessment*: short reflective essays moving from identification of colonial scripts to proposals for ethical representation (Pratt, 1991; Boehmer, 1995).

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1989). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge.
- Bell-Villada, G. H. (2010). *Gabriel García Márquez: The man and his work* (2nd ed.). University of North Carolina Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors*. Oxford University Press.
- Carpentier, A. (1995). On the marvelous real in America. In L. P. Zamora & W. B. Faris (Eds.), *Magical realism: Theory, history, community* (pp. 75–88). Duke University Press. (Original work published 1949)
- Chanady, A. B. (1985). *Magical realism and the fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved antinomy*. Garland.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1961)
- Flores, Á. (1955). Magical realism in Spanish American fiction. *Hispania*, 38(2), 187–196. <https://doi.org/10.2307/335028>
- García Márquez, G. (1972). A very old man with enormous wings (G. Rabassa, Trans.). In *Leaf storm and other stories* (pp. xx–xx). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1955)
- McMurray, G. R. (1977). *Gabriel García Márquez*. Twayne.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton University Press.

- Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 91, 33–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon.
- Slemon, S. (1995). Magical realism as postcolonial discourse. In L. P. Zamora & W. B. Faris (Eds.), *Magical realism: Theory, history, community* (pp. 407–426). Duke University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Young, R. J. C. (2001). *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*. Blackwell.
- Zamora, L. P., & Faris, W. B. (Eds.). (1995). *Magical realism: Theory, history, community*. Duke University Press.