

**Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration**  
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**Lecture – 23**

**Busting Fictional and Cognitive Monochromatism:  
A Review of A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings by Gabriel Garcia Marquez**

Hello, welcome back. In this lecture on magical realism, let us get to the story straight away. A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings is the story. I call this lecture ‘Busting fictional and cognitive monochromatism: a review of A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’. Well, fictional and cognitive monochromatism of the kind that I discussed earlier - about being very rigid about reality; that which can be verified by senses alone can be true. If I do not see your goodness on your face, it does not exist - it can be as ridiculous as that! So, without getting back to our conversation in the previous lecture let us get into the story straight away. A young couple live in an unknown space and an unknown history. We do not know when; it begins like a folk story, typical in some space and time.

The couple - Pelayo and Elisenda - get up in the morning only to experience roaring winds, gloomy sky and torrential rain, and they are on the seashore. And when they get up, they have a little infant and she is running very high temperature, and Elisenda is applying some Vicks (medicine/balm) of some kind on the baby. And Pelayo gets up, he goes out, he discovers that lots and lots of crabs have populated their front courtyard. And Pelayo and Elisenda sincerely feel that the stench caused by the dead crabs could be the reason for their daughter's high temperature. So anyway, the day looks gloomy and sad. And the description is so good that you feel the day is sad. It feels so, you taste it and you smell it all saddens you; that is how the remarkable story begins. But that is not all, something more remarkable or marvelous is going to come now.

What happens? Pelayo walks beyond the courtyard and discovers some strange creature lying down in front of their courtyard. He goes there and Elisenda also goes and they look at him very carefully. It looks like an old man, emaciated for sure, with no tooth, and a bald head. But they

also see him with enormous wings - but they are not imposing; they are fragile and look broken, but more importantly they look stuck in the mud.

So, Pelayo and Elisenda are initially surprised but the more and more they look, the more familiar they become with this old man or this magical creature. And what follows after that is very interesting. So, this is the beginning and the next part of the story is all about how the old man with enormous wings becomes famous in the neighborhood. Let me not go to the second part now, but I will just hint at the idea that the second part of the story after this remarkable marvelous introduction is about how the old man with enormous wings or the emaciated creature, and Elisenda and Pelayo become famous because of this creature's presence near the courtyard or chicken coop.

But contrast this with a story like Robinson Crusoe. Elisenda and Pelayo, they both believe that the old man is a castaway from a shipwreck. Robinson Crusoe, a remarkable modern myth of Western imagination is about how a mariner - equally shipwrecked - goes to an island, makes the island, conquers it, produces economies of scale that suit his individuality and he colonizes the island all for himself; that is the story of Crusoe. Here, contrast that with the old man who somewhat integrates with Elisenda and Pelayo and then become part of their life.

Initially, he looked different but ultimately he becomes integrated with the neighborhood and the neighborhood comes in huge crowds and sees him. But for our purposes, this can also remind us of the freak show because lots of people say lots of things about that very old man who looks differently. For example, the second part of the story is all about how both the old man (and equally, the couple) becomes famous, and how the new situation gets attention from the neighborhood.

Take for example Father Gonzaga, who is a church priest. He hears about this mysterious stuff. Then he comes, he manages to cut through the fence that the couple had built between the old man and the visiting crowds, and he manages to look at the creature. And he speaks in Latin and says something. The 'angel' (or the old man) did not say anything.

Then he quickly concludes: “he is not an angel, he might be an imposter, a devil impersonating as angel”. “Why?” “Because he did not speak Latin!”.

In some way, Marquez is making social commentaries about the presence of magical realism in the presence of the all powerful church in towns like this where this kind of reality can be seen as the devil's display. But is he antichristian? No, that is not how stories and ordinary folk realities work. It is one among the many observations that happen in this hamlet. For example, a lot of people come to look for miracles to happen. And miracles do happen, but not in the expected way. What is the expectation that you expect in the presence of a creature like this? You would expect a blind man to see, a lame to walk and so on. Here, a blind man grows three new teeth! Well, that is not how you would expect a miracle on a blind to happen. Again, Marquez uses these presences to see public spaces as a place of expectations and those expectations can be what they believe in. Belief in miracle, belief in God, belief in social transformation, belief in building wealth, belief in moral culture, and many things, and many things compete with each other and some succeed at some point and some others do not succeed. But they mishmash and come together to form a complex reality.

So let us keep traveling. The old man does not go without challenge, although he is just lying down like a poor creature among chickens. In the miracle side of reality, he faces some challenges. For example there is a young girl in the village. She goes to some festivity without the permission of parents and as a consequence she is struck by lightning, and then eventually becomes a tarantula (a spider). So, she looks like an enormous spider with a funny head and so on. And she becomes a competition to the old man. And now some of the neighbors and people from far away come in the spirit of watching these two competitive freak show objects or fixture displays.

And there is some kind of competition happening, but things keep happening for years. So, it starts on a fine morning - well a sad morning - but these things go on for years. In the years to come what happens? Because of this freak show phenomenon and social hermeneutics about these strange looking creatures, Elisenda and Pelayo slowly become rich.

They suddenly discover that since this magical creature is anyway here and lots and lots and crowds of people are coming, they start charging a fee or payment for those who want a glimpse of the Old Man.

So, they make a payment and then through a slow accumulation of these payments they build an enormous house. Now, both the couple are no longer poor people. They are rich, middle-class people. So as a consequence, what happens? Well, the old man - the creature with wings - he just becomes a nuisance and in fact Elisenda complains at one point that she is living in a hell full of angels because wherever she turns the creature seems to be there. It seems that the creature is endlessly replicating himself. So, the couple start treating him as a nuisance. The story goes on and on, at some point after several years, the nuisance that is the old man who has made them gain enormous wealth, now he is seen as a nuisance; “we got wealth now what is the big deal about his presence?”. I would recall *Metamorphosis* which I mentioned in an earlier lecture here; once your utility is over, you can be abandoned - we had discussed this as part of the theme of abandonment in that lecture.

So, they consider him a nuisance and so on, but at some point when Elisenda is cutting vegetables or doing some ordinary routine, the old man tries to gain strength of his wings, slowly alights, gets up and goes away into the horizon, and he does not come back at all!

So, what did we achieve in saying and listening to this story? Fictional and cognitive monochromatism busted! How? Well, here an ideal modern scientific mind would imagine Pelayo spotting the old man with enormous wings as some kind of early morning hallucination - maybe he had lots of alcohol in the previous evening or it is a kind of morning slippage of vision. But that is not how things happen here. The magical, the real, religious, secular, institutions, institutions of faith, economies; many things coexist together to weave a complex picture about human expectations, human emotional investments, investments of pleasure, freakishness and so on. So lots of things coexist here and that is how the story bust open, fictional monochromatism and cognitive monochromatism.

What are the things that the story plays with, or relies on to do this? Well, the notion of ambiguity! For example, all the time we do not know what is real. Should we believe in reality that senses give or should we consider reality as that which we believe in, or should we believe in reality of hearsay or should we believe in reality that comes through gossip? Or should we believe in realities given by religions, faiths, habits, attitudes, cognition, virtual simulation or all of the above? So, you will find all of them doing the rounds together, keeping the readers at the edge of reality.

What else does the story rely on? It relies on complex social and cultural hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the science and the art of interpretation. We cannot construct reality by not considering social interpretations and social interpretations are multiple. It depends on where you speak from. The couple speak from the child's point of view; Father Gonzaga, the woman in the neighborhood, girls, distant travelers they all have their point of views and they all contribute to the public space discussion. And there is always a negotiation happening and that is how social hermeneutics work. There is this interesting critique you might consider to understand how the story is an example to fight intellectual statism or fictional monochromatism - Lois Parkinson Zamora. She comes with the notion of 'insubstantial self'. The word 'insubstantial' here does not mean the person lacking self or lacking substance. On the other hand, it means that on our own, on our own psychological reality, we are hollow; we are incomplete, we need realities to strike us. We do not have to agree with everything around us.

But nevertheless we have to be seeing, experiencing, inheriting and chewing upon many realities so that our selves become substantial; otherwise we become insubstantial. So, in other words if competing realities are not given fuller treatment or respect, then that fictional work can be called intellectually stasized and cognitively monochromatic.

Let me read an interesting statement from Octavio Paz as a way of conclusion: "We know that hunger to be other is always in our being, and that we will only be ourselves if we are capable of becoming other. We ask from art, the secret of the change, and we seek in every work, whatever its epoch or style, that power of metamorphosis that constitutes the essence of the magic act". Basically Paz in these elegant words say that we gossip about others and we want to know about

others because we crave to know about other. Octavio Paz is in sympathy with that because we cannot be ourselves if we do not have this craving to know the other. But there are many ways to know about the other. One is the dismissive way, it would go like, “what does he know? He is a lower caste, he is a black, he is non intellectual, he or she is not beautiful, she does not have intellect, she is dark”... that kind of thing. The other is abjection; they are poor and therefore they are uncivilized. The other is disgust; he has leprosy, therefore we have to keep away. That is one method.

The other method is seeing oneself reflected in the other, sculpting oneself in such a way that you borrow goodness from others and so on. So, without such three-dimensional realities, our selves will remain insubstantial. Magical realism with its three-dimensional realities or even polyvalent realities, is bound to fulfill this gap. And more importantly for our purposes, it removes or keeps away intellectual statism from overview.

For the both the lectures I relied on this very nice book ‘Magical Realism and Literature’ by Christopher Warnes who is at Cambridge University. It is a kind of companion volume on magical realism. You might usually benefit by reading a chapter or two from the book. All the best. Thank you.