


Araştırma Makalesi

The Critique of Ethics, Mediocrity and Complacency in Márquez and Le Guin's Fictions

Márquez ve Le Guin'in Eserlerinde Etik, Vasatlık ve Kayıtsız Hoşnutluk Eleştirisi

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Abstract: *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* is published by the Nobel laureate novelist Gabriel García Márquez and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* is authored by Ursula Le Guin who is known primarily for her works of science fiction. While the genres and the tones of the sample works chosen and discussed in this study markedly differ, their thematic trajectories and the way they criticize society and public morality is argued to resemble considerably. In the fictional world of the stories, both Márquez's winged-man and Le Guin's miserable child are mistreated by the members of their societies the fact of which relates us the stories' undercurrent concerns of the critique of society, moral complexity, complacency and mediocrity. While the winged-man is abused as he is unfamiliar and does not comply with the cultural and religious expectations of the society, the child is exploited and degraded for the selfish prosperity of an entire community. In bringing together two different generic and unsettling fictions and reading them critically, this study aims to demonstrate and argue how complacency, mediocrity, thought patterns of society, folk wisdom and superstition are entangled with far-reaching variables of culture, politics, economics and even religious-capitalist theodicy.

Keywords: Márquez, Le Guin, Public Morality, Complacency, Mediocrity

Öz: *Kocaman Kanatlı İhtiyar Adam*, Nobel ödüllü romancı Gabriel García Márquez tarafından yazılmıştır ve *Omelas'ı Terk Edip Gidenler*, öncelikle bilim kurgu eserleriyle tanınan Ursula Le Guin tarafından kaleme alınmıştır. Bu çalışmada seçilen ve tartışılan örnek eserlerin türleri ve üslupları belirgin bir şekilde farklılık gösterebilir de, makaledeki ilgili eserlerin tematik izlekleri ve toplumu ve kamu ahlakını eleştirme biçimlerinin oldukça benzer olduğu ileri sürülmektedir. Hikâyelerin kurgusal dünyasında, hem Márquez'in kanatlı adamı hem de Le Guin'in zavallı çocuğu, toplumlarının üyeleri tarafından kötü muameleye maruz kalır; bu da bize toplum eleştirisi, ahlaki karmaşıklık, kendinden hoşnutluk ve vasatlık gibi hikâyelerin örtük kaygılarını anlatır. Kanatlı adam alışılmadık olduğu ve toplumun kültürel ve dini beklentilerine uymadığı için istismar edilirken, çocuk tüm toplumun bencil refahı için sömürülür ve aşağılanır. Bu çalışma, iki farklı türde ve sarsıcı iki kurguyu bir araya getirip eleştirel bir gözle okuyarak, kendinden hoşnutluğun, vasatlığın, halk bilgeliliği ve toplumun düşünce kalıplarının kültür, politika, ekonomi ve hatta dini-kapitalist teodise gibi geniş kapsamlı değişkenlerle nasıl iç içe geçtiğini göstermeyi ve tartışmayı amaçlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Márquez, Le Guin, Kamu Ahlakı, Kayıtsız Hoşnutluk, Vasatlık

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Introduction

Complacency, mediocre public morality, existential inauthenticity, superstitious and bigoted beliefs and practices all cut across regions, religions, customs and the boundaries of all sorts. The mischief of the above-mentioned individual and societal characteristics and their latent results are so malicious that these mental/cognitive-affective and behavioral inclinations, which are the sources and triggers of troubles and hideous crimes in any society and are sometimes barely noticeable, create a multiplier effect in their prevalence when they are combined with religious, traditional, political and economic variables. Under the disguise of morality and convention, they permeate the whole fabric of social and individual life in running rampant and degenerating all forms of human behaviour and mutual relations. In this regard, complacency, which stands out one of the focal points of the study, is buttressed with adjacent themes and arguments throughout the discussion. While complacency literally means the condition of or tendency to be satisfied with oneself, someone or something, as a concept having vast and multifarious aspects of existential, moral, social and political references, it denotes the state of an excessive contentment accompanied by disinterestedness to possible dangers and ultimate failures in public morality and social prosperity resulting mainly from an acute inability and/or unwillingness to address the necessary improvements, enforce the urgent amendments or make the required change of mindset in due time. More than an individual case, complacency necessitates associates in the ‘crimes’ of disinterestedness, irresponsibility and undue satisfaction with what is going on in any society. As the etymological root of the concept connotes, complacency requires accomplices who are driven by other relevant concepts such as mediocrity, cynicism and existential inauthenticity all of which almost always coexist, and often do so, in support of each other.

Against the backdrop of these statements, *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* (in Spanish, 1968) written by Colombian novelist Gabriel José García Márquez, who is associated with the literary style/movement known as magic(al) realism, and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (1973) authored by American novelist Ursula Kroeber Le Guin and known for her speculative/science fiction, the works of fantasy, and (dys)utopia, are chosen for critical analysis and comparative/close reading. Despite their generic differences, both narratives converge in their critique of societal complacency and moral mediocrity. Through the symbolic marginalization of a winged outsider (Márquez) and the sacrificial exploitation of a child (Le Guin), both authors expose how communities normalize injustice under the guise of tradition, religion, or utilitarian logic. Drawing on Nietzschean ethics, Sartrean existentialism, Bentham utilitarianism and Leibniz’s theodicy, the analysis of the works demonstrates how systemic complacency—buttressed by capitalist and religious theodicy—perpetuates collective moral failure. By juxtaposing the fictions of magical realism with dystopian allegory, the study illuminates the universal mechanisms by which societies scapegoat the vulnerable to preserve illusory harmony.

The choice of the fictions also arises from the necessity that the key themes discussed through these unsettling fictions demonstrate both *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* problematize such issues as the moral complexity and the ambiguity of human values which are brought together through authorial ingenuity. The selection of narratives from the short story genre, by virtue of compactness, will unequivocally elucidate the key concerns and themes that are the focus of the study. Thus, revolving around the key concepts, both narratives provide an invaluable and an apt comparison between the separate yet evocatively similar conditions, highlighting the similarities of the mindset of the supposedly divergent and fictive communities. Navigating through entangled nets of human nature, suffering,

anti(em)pathy and most importantly bio-political and cultural exploitation which are strangely intertwined with capitalist and religious theodicy, both thought-provoking and evocative stories delve into human nature and criticize taken for granted values accustomed through time and deadly routine. Although the genres and tones of the plots are quite different from each other, the selection and examination of the two short stories together clearly highlight the fact that societies or small-scale communities that are extremely distant in terms of the appearance and lifestyle preferences can surprisingly resemble each other with regard to malignant inclinations and mild or grave perpetrations. In this sense, the works to be examined and the arguments to be put forward in parallel with the concepts point to the dimensions and the potential dangers of personal and social degeneration.

1. In the Name of Mediocre Public Morality, Thought-Patterns and Folk Wisdom: Mild Perpetrations and Complacent Accomplices in *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*

The setting of Márquez's work is an ordinary town where the eponymous character is cast away due to a violent storm. In accordance with the traditions of magic(al) realism, the story of the half-mythical and the half-real creature/man and the treatment he has received throughout the narrative is portrayed with a mixture of mundane details of everyday life and marvelous incidents. After being struck by a violent storm, the couple named Pelayo and Elisenda encounter the old man with wings in their backyard while they are busy getting rid of the crabs from their garden. Although they are first impressed by the strange creature and try to understand the nature and the meaning of their encounter with the man-creature, they get accustomed to the strangeness of the incident. Couple and the townspeople's short term curiosity cannot be satisfied by Father Gonzaga, who is deemed to be a spiritual authority. He suspects the strange man-creature to be an imposter and he ends up that he should consult his superiors in Rome to be sure of the identity of the winged-man who is in derelict situation, cannot speak Latin, and is far from being a heavenly messenger. Shortly after their encounter, Pelayo and Elisenda lock the man into the coop and cash in on his appearance and popularity in the town by charging those who want to see him. Just as Le Guin's *Omelas* cannot be restricted within the constraints of a simple story, which indeed has the undertones of politics and culture, Márquez's story also bears far-reaching undercurrents of political satire and capitalist criticism particularly when "Pelayo and Elisenda exploit the miraculous old man as factory owners do their workers" (Faris, 200:14). Accordingly, the old man with wings is not only turned into something less than a human being but a miserable circus animal to which food is tossed and a despicable creature whose feathers are infested and constantly plucked by poultry with which he is tucked into the coop. People in the town treat him in a manner that is cruel, superstitious, unjust, and ignorant to the extent that they find him too haughty to deign to look at mortals let alone to speak with them. The old man tolerates all the mischief and awful treatment with a profound patience which is regarded as his only supernatural merit by the people around him. It has never occurred to the townspeople why the old man - in the world of magic(al) realism- should have supernatural powers at all just because he has wings. His silence and seemingly all-accepting behavior become the justification of the offences of the public. The level of abuses decreases and vanishes entirely only after the town is visited by a circus which has a spider-woman who is cursed and transformed into a huge tarantula as she refused to follow the advice of her parents. Since the town has found its new sensation with the one who speaks and whose moral lesson is easily comprehensible as opposed to the old man with the wings, who does not speak, does not entertain and ultimately challenges the expectations of the people, old winged-man is at last left to his own devices. Nevertheless, he continues to be a 'nuisance' in the couple's house and infuriates Elisenda leading her to complain ironically that

she is living in a “hell full of angels” (Márquez, 1971:76) since the old man seems to be wandering everywhere, both in and out of the house and chanting his unintelligible ritualistic rhymes, with the change of seasons. Only later when the old man grows new feathers which enable him to fly again and disappear in the horizon, Elisenda sighs with relief.

Márquez wittily criticizes the complacency and conventional morality of those who surround the winged-man due to their mindset which are adjusted to taken for granted assumptions. The attitude of the townspeople becomes a target of universal human parody which is foil to sound mind and rational extrapolation. Márquez sarcastically relates how the townspeople readily jump to the conclusions in the estimation of the intrinsic meaning of their encounter with the winged-man and of his true identity. Such incidents and assumptions of the people, who cannot resist but succumb easily into the validity of their own convictions, can be observed in the instances when neighbor woman’s deduction is readily accepted about the identity of the man. According to the woman and the rest of the community, unfortunate winged-man must be an angel who was coming for the sick child, he must be declared of the mayor and the general of the world, mothballs are the proper food for angels and many more (Márquez, 1971:71,73). Once the wild speculations are uttered, it becomes inevitable for townspeople to convince themselves into impossible conclusions both initiated and fueled by mediocre public morality or in general, mediocrity. As a term, mediocrity initially has neutral and sometimes positive sense in the meaning of intermediate quantity (Morehead, 2002:501) or state of moderation in the sense of Aristotles’ golden mean which means the middle ground; somebody or something between two extremes; that is, between one of excess and deficiency (Hartmann, 2002: 253). Through time, it has acquired the disparaging sense of not very good or the state of being average. As for a socio-cultural, ethical and political concept, mediocrity suggests a prevailing lack of excellence or distinction in the perception of life and the praxis of this perception to all spheres of life. Steven James Bartlett, who studies and expounds upon the psychological bases of mediocrity, proposes its various types extending from intellectual one to those of aesthetic and moral ones. Consulting to the book by José Ingenieros, the founder of the Argentine Psychological Society, whose series of lecture notes on psychology of character were collected together and published under the title of *El hombre mediocre / Mediocre Man* (Ingenieros, 2018), Barlett evaluates the problem of mediocrity as the exaltation of the trivial and superficial due to the poverty of the soul, (Bartlett, 2011:120). He emphasizes that moral negligence has become the rule so much so that no one takes responsibility, and this fuels a new kind of barbarism. (Bartlett, 2011:121). By focusing on individual pathology, while Ingenieros attributes mediocrity to personal obtuseness (Ingenieros, 2018:39) Barlett considers social mediocrity underscoring that people with this obstruction have a high tendency to get together with people like themselves and that they readily turn into a barbaric crowd acting with their instincts (Bartlett, 2011:130). Additionally, Barlett rightly proposes that “mediocrity is most at home in a life filled with routine, a fully scheduled existence. The mental life that fits such an existence is similarly routinized; decisions and judgments are facilitated and made a matter of habit through prejudice, stereotyping, and adherence to conventional beliefs, all of which save people the need to think” (Bartlett, 2011:189) Perfectly overlapping with what Barlett suggests Ingenieros also prescribes this myopic, contagious and stubborn fixation as “the routine men, instead, neither correct themselves nor abandon their misconceptions; their prejudices are like nails: the more they are stricken, the deeper they get.” (Ingenieros, 2018:45). Mediocrity, which often smoothly turns itself into a collective ‘mediocracy’ by the aid of masses, proves discernible when it generates a sort of cultural entropy the level of which is escalated by dull and parochial surroundings. Accordingly, it affects collective moral values and ethos; therefore,

mediocrity can accidentally set random standards guiding the behavior of individuals within a society often forcing its members to come to terms with the beliefs and demeanours about what is right and wrong. Thus, it fosters the thought and behavior patterns triggering the lack of commitment to higher principles among its adherents who have been robbed away the opportunity of thinking rationally and acting according to a just moral compass. The levelling effect of mediocrity in art, literature, and politics is observed and argued frankly by liberal thinkers in the 19th century, when modern society emerges in its most obvious and fullest sense. In this context, the simple and effective observation of the political philosopher and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who succinctly summarizes the case is considerably noteworthy. He argues “a universal mediocrity seems to be spreading little by little over everything. All those who had a reputation or merited one seem to be disappearing; and where is the new man who gives a well-founded hope, in science, the arts, in literature, in politics” (In Kahan, 1992: 49). Needless to say, arguments of this kind by thinkers and observers apply to morality as well as art, literature and politics. In the sinister atmosphere of mediocrity, the new men, whom Tocqueville refers, do not often act in a promising way for the blossoming of science, art and literature but they not only ignore adhering to the minimum standards but also accept tolerating —or even worse— perpetuating the unethical and illegal behaviors transgressing the limits of basic human rights. While commitment to mediocrity reinforces the sense of being a community or it assures a social cohesion, it jeopardizes the overall health and the proper functioning of a community as the conscious reverence for or unconscious fidelity to it inevitably victimizes a person or a group of people, who can also be the member/s of the same community. Public morality shaped by mediocrity lead townspeople in Márquez's story to accept their assumptions and what they simply observe as unquestionable truths until a more entrancing version of it let out, the mindset of which substantially first triggers then regularizes and ultimately establishes the unjust, harsh and prejudiced —if not immoral all the time— behavior towards the winged-man.

While the ignorance of the people in the story is constantly underlined by Márquez in each opportunity to bring forth the comic effect of the narrative, the particular type of ignorance of the townspeople manifests itself when they never suspect about their convictions and never hesitate to put them into practice, almost all of which result in a further annoyance and trouble to the winged old man. Ignorance compounded by complacency, which is not easily noticed as opposed to other moral contradictions such as cruelty (Kawall, 2006:343), reinforce one's contentment with themselves and their own situation(s) in cases where evil is denied, leading to moral self-conceit and satisfaction which inevitably makes self-criticism impossible (Szabados and Soifer, 2004:266). Accordingly, complacency mingled with ignorance not only hinders the opportunities of self-correction but it also brings about the illusion of virtue for those who are plagued with it. In this context, the level of trouble to the old man occasionally gets too acute so much so that the undoubting townspeople, who are dictated and led by their mediocre morality and complacency, go further in branding him with a hot iron. Only when the old man causes a whirlwind of chicken, dung and dust by flapping his wings —still not out of anger but of pain— do the townspeople understand that they should be “careful not to annoy him because the majority understood that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose” (Márquez, 1971:74). In a way, the story points out that the insular members of mediocre morality retreat back only after they have been countered by the same or greater force of opposition, which seems to cut across the regions and cultures. In this context, though Márquez's narratives often take place in a fictional town named Macondo which do not necessarily limit their meaning in rural

areas unlike those labelled as regionalist fictions, “themes of violence, economic disparity, and the absence of social justice are universal” (Pelayo, 2001:71-72) as this one reveals.

Behind the mild offences towards the winged-man, except the terrible idea of clubbing him to death (which they cannot dare to do) since he might be a fugitive of a heavenly conspiracy, the violation of the right to be left at peace by the townspeople is caused by their general perception about the angels which are to have certain magnitude, perfection and grace all of which he is devoid of and explicitly in stark contrast to his present condition. The cruel and superstitious treatment of the townspeople to the winged-man include almost all the sections of the community as these characters in Márquez’s country constitute “a cross-section of society including the church, the judge, the mayor, the priest, the barber [...] exist in a world of constant oppression, poverty, violence, disease, unfulfilled dreams, and repetitive nightmares which mirror their feelings towards the nation’s sociopolitical reality as reflected by their climate” (Adams, 1995: 70). Even if cultural and socio-political realities cannot justify the ignorance and perpetration of misdeed, it is evident that violence and poverty breed and duplicate themselves in the most abhorrent ways.

Father Gonzaga, who is regarded as an authority figure, is no less bigoted than his fellows as he needs to write to his superiors to ask about the identity of the man as he has found him as an imposter since “he did not understand the language of God [Latin] or know how to greet His Minister” (Márquez, 1971:72). According to Father Gonzaga, he is at best a rough Scandinavian sailor with an unintelligible dialect and with huge wings and at worst a devil trying to use tricks and confuse the public. Until Father Gonzaga, who will write “to his primate so that the latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the final verdict from the highest courts” (Márquez, 1971:72), receives a letter explaining the winged old man’s identity, the meaning of the encounter and the identity of the winged-man is ‘a matter of either – or’. Father Gonzaga’s rationalization is evidently blurred simply because the winged-man does not fulfill the cultural and doctrinal images of celestial beings yet what Father Gonzaga disregards is that the winged-man’s case and his nature single-handedly prove to be marvelous and surprisingly wonderful. Father Gonzaga therefore falls victim to the “stubborn refusal to appreciate the miraculous” (De Wager, 2013:86). The attitude of the one deemed to be an authority figure in the narrative blatantly intensifies —if not begets— the degree of oppression of the people to the silent old winged-man.

The overarching imagery of the winged old man’s pitfall into which he finds himself can be interpreted beyond the mere restraint of the narrative in that the portrayal of an unfortunate supernatural man who becomes an object of mockery in the hands of a parochial public. Even if it does not entirely overlap with Márquez’s career as a novelist —though he worked in obscurity for years— the winged-man’s condition can be interpreted as the hardships of an artist who is ahead of his time but has not been acclaimed and toiled without any considerable recognition until much later when s/he comes to the limelight. While the townspeople become the impatient public, who expects extraordinary things from the artist whose wings has become the symbol of beauty, aesthetic perfection and transcendence of any kind about his/her artistry, the old winged-man symbolizes the artist who resists the infantile and whimsical demands of the public and has his/her own way with regard to his/her creative qualifications.

Márquez directs his readers’ attention to the townspeople’s superstitious beliefs and illusory practices instead of merely dwelling on the nature and the authenticity of the old man. Concentrating on such underlying themes and motifs such as how people would think, feel and

behave if they encountered with an angel/supernatural being particularly when it does not comply with their expectations, Márquez not only criticizes the mediocre public morality and the thought-patterns of the folk wisdom but he also, paradoxically, in a seriously playful manner achieves to depict how people find accomplices in misdemeanor when they follow what Friedrich Nietzsche calls as *Die Sklaven-Moral*. Formulated first in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) by Nietzsche, *Die Sklaven-Moral*, which literally means slave morality and which pervades almost all his works, is employed by the thinker to explain the moral behaviors of the people living under coercion and dependence. For him, in accordance with the survival strategy of those living under oppression, they come up with a new set of ethics that depreciates strength, power, individuality and higher standards of morality. Provoked deeply by the sense of resentment towards the powerful, by which those who are morally inferior revert desired ambitions and change them with lower standards, the dependent and the oppressed develop moral values, in the form of a defence mechanism, feigning their failures as virtues so that they can both safeguard themselves and vilify the morality and the achievements of the powerful. (Nietzsche, 2009:180-183). In Uçar's work, *The Failure of Imagination and its Redemption: John Banville's The Book of Evidence*, a similar situation is attributed to Levinas' work "on the ethical relation with the other, feeling, accepting, and respecting the responsibility of the other" (2024:868). Even though used in a context that is opposite, master morality sounds to favor the traits of assertiveness, despondency and violence over equality, tenderness and forgiveness, the concept refers to the tendency of people to conform to societal norms and values of the majority. The tendency to conform becomes more pronounced not only among oppressed members of a society in terms of power dynamics but also in view of dependence and weakness in rational judgment and moral standards. Nietzsche's concept also denotes to a desire for and comfort in the safety and protection in collectivity and anonymity as—both literally and figuratively—the dependent and the oppressed find security in aligning themselves with the solidarity of the majority. Those who have fallen victim or held captive by the slave morality secure and multiply the position of customs, a particular 'weltanschauung' and the status quo of every kind; be it religious, political or tradition amalgamated with superstition, as observed in the attitudes and thoughts of townspeople in *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*.

The excessive and at the same time unjust interest in the winged-man only decreases when he is understood that he cannot address the ailments with which some members of the town have been afflicted. The winged-man is constantly haunted by the expectations of miraculous cure by the townspeople. Within the atmosphere of magic(al) realism, the hope of recovery of those who could not sleep due to the noise of the stars, a sleepwalker undoing things that he does during the daytime and a woman having a fixation to count her heartbeats since childhood but now runs out of numbers, does not come to fruition. (Márquez, 1971:73). Worse than that, there are such humorous 'beneficences' by the winged-man to a blind man who is bestowed with extra three teeth instead of the recovery of his sight, to a paralytic who cannot regain his walking but almost wins a lottery and an ironic charity to a leprosy whose sores do not heal but grow sunflowers. (Márquez, 1971:73). Just as the townspeople do not neatly understand and they readily opt for fumbling around the deserved conduct and the identity of the winged-man resulting from their compulsive disregard of the needs of him, his response to their demands turns out to be hilariously cursory enough to counterbalance the treatment he has received. Although Márquez seems to be neutral and always benign towards his fictional characters in spite of their excesses and no matter how much he refrains from passing an evident value of judgement throughout the narrative, his

satiric intent to mock with the irrationality of slave morality, mediocrity and to expose the extent of their superstitious practices of mob mentality is obvious.

Viciousness of the treatments that the winged-man has gone through is underscored when the doctor, who comes for the children having caught chicken pox as they usually visit the winged-man in the coop, cannot help but examine him as well. The doctor has to acknowledge that although the old man's health is in a derelict situation, his wings seem such a common human organism that he cannot understand why the rest of the humanity does not have them at all (Márquez, 1971:73). The doctor's clinical observation—that the angel's wings are biologically mundane—exposes the townspeople's irrational othering of difference, which nullifies the prejudices, anticipations of miraculous phenomena and above all the treatment deem proper for the winged-man solely on the basis of a difference in physical appearance. The townspeople's inability to recognize the winged man's humanity—reducing him to a spectacle—exemplifies Nietzsche's 'slave morality,' where fear of the unknown transforms difference into a threat. Their insistence on interpreting his wings through religious dogma (e.g., demanding he speak Latin) reflects a mediocrity that privileges conformity over curiosity, echoing Bartlett's assertion that mediocrity 'saves people the need to think' (Bartlett, 2011:189). The existence of the doctor and his way of thinking about and treatment to the old-winged-man points out the possibility that there can still be hope and room for the presence of sound thinking and moral attitude in the milieu where complacency and mediocrity run rampant.

Silent and unnamed winged visitor, who can be interpreted as the symbol of the marginalized, those who are misunderstood and treated as outsiders in any community as well as in a far-fetched reading as a starving artist, manages to survive in a rampantly intolerant and vicious society. From an individual perspective, his physical condition and the lack of basic communicative skills increase his vulnerability. In societal perspective, the patient winged-man embodies the representation of falling victim to tyranny when societies react to the different or extraordinary with a combination of curiosity, superstition, exploitation, and fear. The townspeople's conniving villainy suggests how societies may react to outsiders or those who do not reconcile the mainstream expectations. The reactions of the townspeople oscillate among wonder, curiosity and profit all of which can be encapsulated by mistreatment and vileness. The sense of curiosity of the public leaves itself first to sensationalization of the experience of others and winged-man and the event and then to commodification of the 'unusual'. The story also addresses the issue of the treatment to others from a political perspective. Just as in the case of the winged old man, societies may respond to those who are outcasts in their views or who come from different cultural backgrounds and often subjecting them to scrutiny, discrimination and exploitation. The political perspective also encompasses the role of authorities in showing public how to deal with 'curious' cases. In Márquez's story, Father Gonzaga is the representation of religious authority. His response to or inability to interpret the circumstance emphasizes the complexities of governance and decision-making when encountered with anything considered unfamiliar. Above all, the old winged-man's burden —no matter how well he keeps his silence against all the coercion he has faced— epitomizes broader issues of social injustice and inequality. The mistreatment and the lack of empathy he has faced can be seen as a critique of how ignorance, superstition, tyranny, all of which are backed up by mediocre public morality and complacency, their thought patterns and unsound traditions, may bolster individual conditions and aggravate societal inequalities.

2. From Mild Offences to Relentless Conducts: *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*

As opposed to *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*, the setting of *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* is quite extraordinary. The incidents take place in (or more properly the narrative is related about) a purely imaginary and (dys)utopian country named Omelas where everything seems to be in perfect harmony and the residents, who live in this distant country, do not have any sense of guilt and are free to 'enjoy' themselves in every possible sense of the word. We are informed that the society is an exquisitely organized and prosperous one and the citizens are not less complex than us. While everything seems perfect with the blissful residents of Omelas, the second part of the narrative draws a stark contrast to what has been depicted earlier. Narrator informs that all the prosperity and the joy that Omelas provides depends on the misery of one little and supposedly mentally-retarded child who is locked obtrusively into a room and left there under an entirely abominable and deplorable situation. We are informed that:

"If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, [...] in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed. The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child" (Le Guin, 1991:4).

It becomes clear that complacent citizens of Omelas maintain their happy and peaceful existence at the cost of the misery and the solidly secured abuse and mistreatment of a single person. Both in literal and allegorical level, Le Guin's narrative addresses and connotes rich symbols and images illustrating truths and the ambiguity of human nature, moral complexity, suffering and inevitably the physical and spiritual exploitation. The complexity of human (im)morality can be better evaluated when the attitude of a very few minority, who leaves Omelas after witnessing the appalling conditions of the child, is juxtaposed with those who maintain ethical, traditional and juridical terms by conserving and cultivating the status quo both for their individual, selfish welfare and the cruel prosperity of their planet.

Although Fyodor Dostoyevsky narrates a similarly contingent and imaginary case in *Brothers Karamazov* (1880) when Ivan Karamazov converses with his brother Alyosha about the sufferings of children for the sake of the enjoyment of the rest (Dostoyevsky, 197:217-227), Le Guin declines the novel as the source of her inspiration and she claims that she was indeed intrigued by the renowned psychologist William James' study *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* (1891) in which he discusses a hypothetical case. In it, William argues that "[...] if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's Utopias should all be outdone and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture" (James, 1891:333). Acting on James' hypothetical case, Le Guin criticizes the complexity of human morality, ambiguity and contemporary civilization with its political and economic bases through fashioning her short story of 'Omelas', the word of which is indeed the anagram of Salem, Oregon; one of the state and city of the world's leading capitalist country. Le Guin also condemns pragmatism and its historical antecedent utilitarianism, which is associated with such social theorists as Jeremy Bentham (1747-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Through her thought-provoking and evocative fiction, Le Guin latently denounces the reliability of the above-mentioned social theories whose formulaic dictum is "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (Bentham, 1823:9). Le Guin argues that no single person can be sacrificed let alone giving up the rights of the great number of people for the interest of the majority or for the rest. She also tacitly

opposes Mill's premise of the principle of utility can be the "ultimate appeal on all ethical questions" (Mill, 1869:24) Le Guin suggests that maximization of the pleasure, wealth and their deployment to large masses on condition that a person or a group of persons must be ignored cannot be the measure of neither the good nor the ethical.

Omelas is the place where everything seems to work totally well and all the citizens are overjoyed but the second half of the narrative reveals that its peace and perfection depend on the misery of a child who is imprisoned into a windowless and narrow space and awfully abused:

"The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes —the child has no understanding of time or interval— sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up [...] The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer [...] It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually" (Le Guin, 1991:4).

It is clear that the miserable child is chosen as a scapegoat of the society so that its members can enjoy a life of happiness and prosperity. Apart from the images and the symbols used to represent the universal truths about human morality and life, Le Guin also adeptly illustrates an allegory of dualities such as chaos against order. Le Guin provides the critique of economic and political life mixed with religious justifications commonly referred as the theodicy (problem) arguing evidently or in a concealed way that the current world is the best possible order together with its vices and follies and the defiance of it is a violation of religious faith —ensnared with cultural, political and economic system— and ultimately the transgression of a supremely benign Being's order.

While Le Guin criticizes the reasons why people assent to the terms of a bargain at the cost of the misery of another person in denying individual and societal moral responsibilities, she also suggests that it is never enough to correct the ills of any society just by walking away as it is related in the narrative when a minority group of people renounces to perpetuate the existing conditions after having witnessed the misery of the child. Although the narrator tells nothing directly about the benefits of the abandonment, deserting such a dystopian order is evidently precarious as the act itself would not amend neither the morality underlying such a political and socio-cultural system nor the mindset of those living in and under the conditions in question. Abandonment will at best turn out to be a selfish act to stop one's remorse or guilt which is often bypassed in contemporary culture just as it is not permitted within the walls of Omelas.

One of the pervasive implications of *Omelas* can be claimed to the life-long drudgery that lower class people have to handle in capitalist hegemony. The child represents the sacrifice of unimaginably great quantity of people at the cost of their lives for the prosperity of the few. Le Guin not only problematizes but she also exposes the moral (ir)responsibility of countless societies and their (im)moral order buttressed through politics, tradition and religion which disregard the rights of the downtrodden majority and promote the privileges of the powerful minority. In a way, although no reader is consciously eager to consent to such a degradation and exploitation, Le Guin skillfully enables to make readers to question themselves if they are complicit in such an *enforced* —and out of her dystopian narrative— and a *subtle* form of abasement of the others in a vast socio-economic array, which they do not even happen to think about let alone leaving such structures altogether.

No matter how much the sacrifice of a single person for the good of the whole society initially seems at odds with sound morality and rationality, when Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* is read as a religious allegory, the child becomes a Christ-like figure sacrificed so that the rest (of the humanity) can thrive. Le Guin forces readers to re-evaluate the health of grand narratives, their socio-political implications entangled with complacency, mediocre morality and the possible justifications from which the excuses have been fabricated and used to manipulate themselves to ease their conscious. Even though Le Guin's narrative seems to probe into the considerations of morality and happiness dilemma and the choice made between them when it is assumed to be necessary, the story with its theological underpinnings suggests more than its literal sense and it proves absolutely rich in allegorical subtexts. One of these allegorical interpretations can be both religious and a sort of insinuated political theodicy. With regard to the concept of theodicy, complacency, mediocrity, public morality and all other levelling thought patterns relate and may peculiarly originate from distilled forms of philosophies, the fact of which inevitably calls for the discussion of the related notions and the justifications of German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's ideas on the subject. Theodicy is first used by Leibniz who published a treatise in 1710 under the same titular term discussing the nature of evil in the world and its contradictory coexistence with an omniscient and an all-benevolent God. Basically, it is a philosophical and theological endeavor to "reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and loving God with the occurrence of evil and suffering in the world. Why does a supposedly loving and all-powerful God create a world in which creatures suffer horrendous evil?" (Davie, Grass, Holmes et al 2016:897). In this context, Le Guin's narrative presents a theodicy of misery, whose implications out of the story are indeed seductively entangled with socio-cultural, political and financial justifications or—in the most pejorative sense of the word—pretexts or lies. Just as the child—and of his/her mistreatment—has to be disregarded for the interest of the rest, so does Occidental capitalist theodicy convinces people into a deep-seated idea or a taken for granted feeling that the suffering of the majority for the prosperity of the rest of the humanity is an inevitable necessity and there is nothing to be done for it. It is evident that the complicity among contrived socio-political conditions and maliciously interpreted religious and philosophical doctrines in deteriorating human condition is more systematic and more atrocious in *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* than that of *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* in which wickedness is brought about by haphazard thought patterns and public morality.

Describing her narrative as a psychom myth, Le Guin justifiably suggests her story as "the dilemma of American conscious [...] should be read as a contemporary representation of ethical and political predicaments" (Sardo, 2018:146). Le Guin's moralistic motives are plainly instructive and since achieving such a goal would be blatant if done through a priggish manner, she presents her thesis through a fictionalized argument by which she points out the causes and effects and the rationalizations of Western theodicy. In the narrative those who do not reject the narrative theodicy (the necessity and the inevitability of the suffering of the disregarded child) rationalize that:

"[...] even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it" (Le Guin, 1991:5).

In line with the Omelasians' rationalization of the plight of the miserable child, Nicholas Unwin, who discusses moral complacency and its adjacent concept relativism in his study, points out that one is prone to legitimize one's deep-seated convictions by their strong belief in infallibility of their moral views (Unwin, 1985: 205). This situation expresses itself by means of a collective moral entropy surrounding a large part of the Omelasians' society. The narrative provides a remarkable evidence that complacency entraps people into "the disposition to inaction" (Brennan and McCord, 2021: 2374) no matter how well people understand the pitfall of apathy they have been enmeshed. Le Guin ingeniously indicates that the degree of moral lapse is tremendously escalated by the complacency-inducing social and cultural milieux. In a larger scheme, Le Guin's fiction becomes the allegory of Western hegemony whose effect on political power and decision-making permeates all levels of global society by creating, perpetuating and above all rationalizing the historical, colonial, racial, economic, physical and geographical inequalities. If Le Guin's narrative cannot debunk Western-capitalist theodicy and change the conscious of the 'oppressors', the reason —among others— hinges upon both secular and theological theodicies which are extremely ingrained and canonized in the mental and physical life of people and they are structurally and ferociously similar with the myriad of other theodicy variations and herd mentality. No matter how admirable Le Guin's effort is or in the words of Kenneth Roemer, her "call for active participation and her meta-frankness" (Roemer, 1991:9) can be honorable, the result of the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed remains as the axis of evil which only gives an erratic 'chance' for the abolition of the roles, dichotomies and contradictions.

Marquez is lenient in critical/narrative punishment of revealing the obtuseness of the public in their superstitious folk wisdom and his seriousness and playfulness are at *work* at the same time. Nevertheless, Le Guin is harsh when hurling criticism at the morality of Omelas' citizens and condemns their inauthentic behavior and collective demeanour in deceiving themselves as what Jean-Paul Sartre calls as *mauvaise foi* or to put it simply, bad faith. It is necessary to refer to Sartre's concept of bad faith, which is related to the conceptual framework of this study, and the negative individual and social consciousness that the concept indicates. Sartre introduces his formulation in his work *Being and Nothingness* (2018:87-113) and the concept —alongside with the other allied concept of in/authenticity—permeates other fictional and nonfictional works of him. By bad faith, Sartre argues that individuals engage in self-deception when they escape their responsibilities for making free choices and evade taking the possible outcomes of their choices. Individuals with bad faith therefore deceive themselves into adopting roles and reconciling to social rules and expectations instead of authentically living according to their own values and belief systems. Accordingly, in Sartre's philosophy, authenticity becomes the opposite of this type of self-deception as authentic individuals welcome their freedom and have responsibility of their own actions. (Sartre, 2018:191, 336, 390-392, 737, 777). Instead of denying their free will and avoiding the responsibility of their choices, those with authentic selves choose to think and act in accordance with their own values by making deliberate free choices rather than depending on societal expectations, predetermined roles and unquestioned perennial thought patterns ingrained in traditional practices resulted in the emergence and solidification of complacency and mediocre public morality. Sartre argues that people must challenge the anxiety and uncertainty accompanied by freedom and decision-making and individuals must create their own values rather than succumb to societal pressures which limit their true potentials. In the context of Le Guin's narrative, Omelasian not only turn their back to the misery of the child and betray their natural role of moral citizens but worse than that they also rationalize the anguish of the child, necessitate it and exchange it for the happiness and prosperity of the rest; thus, falling victim into the prison

of bad faith and inauthenticity while enjoying seemingly the fruits of living in a utopian and prosperous land and leading a life of ostensible freedom which is profoundly inauthentic that Sartre expounds and criticizes rigorously. While the complacency of the people in *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* is at best partly due to their ignorance, that of *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* arises from their conscious choice to secure their comfort intertwined with the mutually inclusive 'narratives' of tradition, religion, politics and economics.

Conclusion

Márquez's *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* and Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* are gripping fictions offering the discussion of such themes as complacency, mediocrity, (im)morality and ultimately the critique of society in several aspects. While *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* delves into the medley of curiosity, indifference, degradation and exploitation of an elderly man with mysterious wings and how the townspeople readily overlook his humanity, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* explores the ethics of societal prosperity when it is (tried to be) realized at the expense of the sacrifice of a person (or allegorically of an unfortunate minority/majority). Le Guin's story suggests that happiness of the majority can be hardly realized without ethical compromises which impinge upon economic and political inequities backed up by unsound public morality, thought-patterns, folk wisdom and complacency. Although *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* belong to distinct genres, follow different trajectories in terms of their ends and Márquez's tone is unquestionably more light-hearted than that of Le Guin, both narratives serve as critiques of societies' values and priorities and how the members of a society can be impatient in exploiting and disregarding the humanity of others whom they perceive as different, outlandish and/or weak. Where Márquez critiques mediocrity through the absurdity of superstition, Le Guin condemns complacency as a capitalist theodicy. Both authors, however, converge on a singular truth: societal 'progress' built on exploitation is not progress at all, but a collective failure of moral imagination. Whether in gentle and jovial or in an austere manner, both Márquez and Le Guin—in their own ways through the fantastical/(dys)utopian underpinnings and the undertones of magic(al) realism—accentuate the moral cost of the societal complacency of the majority in the face of the suffering of a few (or only of a single person).

While Márquez's story navigates through the motif of the confrontation of the unknown by an insular community and its superstitious and heartless response to it, Le Guin's story criticizes the complacency of people and their consent to a heartless bargain. As it is discussed, thematic paths of the two distinct stories converge on their far-reaching and meta-textual interpretations. Just as how the townspeople are first fascinated and then lose interest in the winged-man, the majority of the Omelasian are first horrified by the abject condition under which the child is forced to live and then they comfortably come to terms with the obnoxious condition. Both the townspeople and Omelasian's observance of 'the rules of the game' reveals the morality of the majority and their tendency to comply with the terms of mediocrity and complacency. Although there is a minority in Omelas rejecting living in a perfect but unjust society, which suggests that the complacency and mediocrity are not universal traits of or rigidly ingrained human morality and there is still a hope that conscience can prevail and cynicism can be overcome, the act of abandonment still cannot be a higher moral standard, a proper way to fight back and correct the iniquity and corruption. A similar attitude can be observed in the doctor who treats the winged-old man when he visits the sick children. He admits that there is nothing surprising in the winged-old man's condition, that there is nothing to be feared or no 'need' for ostracization of the

unexpected and unfortunate visitor (and therefore, that he does not deserve to be mistreated under any circumstances). However, just like those who leave Omelas and do nothing to reverse the conditions of the dire iniquity of the child in Le Guin's fiction, the doctor also does not initiate into preventing the evil in Márquez's narrative.

The townspeople's inability to recognize the winged man's humanity reflects a systemic devaluation of difference as their mindset are conditioned to value familiar and commonplace when they come across the extraordinary. As for those living in Omelas, their mediocrity arises from their ethos of favoring prosperity and happiness over ethics and all else in tolerating a monstrous suffering of a helpless child. Neither Márquez nor Le Guin's narratives have been able to transform the conscious of people or at least eliminate the complacency, mediocrity and immorality of people, of customs and of taken for granted societal acceptances and rules and the narratives and they seem they can only pose derisions and showcase indignations that dumfound and relieve, the fact of which is also underlined by Laurence Davis in the *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Davis argues "Le Guin is simply acknowledging the fact that even the most emancipatory utopian vision[s] may bring hope and renewed promise, but no guarantee of immediate revolutionary change [...] The utopian imagination cannot dictate social change (Davis, 2005: 23). Although they are incapable of eliminating the mediocrity, complacency and cruelty, both canonical stories still have the power to invite readers to ponder over and warn the implications beyond their textual/literal references of tradition, religion, politics, economics and their reciprocal relationships and correlative formal/informal regulations. Although the narratives by Márquez and Le Guin are debatable in achieving the transformation of societies, their practices, the conscience and morality of the people to eradicate cynicism, mediocrity and complacency, both *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* are argued to and hence proposed to be calling attention to and warning us against the possible scenarios which can be rampant in every society, including ours. Both texts challenge readers to confront their complicity in systems of exploitation—whether through complacent silence (Márquez) or passive acceptance (Le Guin)—urging a rejection of mediocrity in favor of radical empathy.

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