

Love in the Time of Cholera: A Reading from a Feministic Point of View

Author

Yousma Sajad, Student 7th semester, English Department, Amar Singh College, Cluster University Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to bring out the subtle objectification and sexualization of women in the critically acclaimed novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The novel was written by Nobel prize- winning Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Its third person narrator tells a love story that reconnects its lovers after fifty-one years, nine months, and four days, while giving a profound depiction of the historical and political background of its location. The book's major theme circles around three main characters: Florentino Ariza, the lover; Fermina Daza, the beloved; and her husband, Dr. Juvenal Urbino del Calle. It is a triangular love story in which love, sex, and lust are of significant importance. The article explores the status of women in the patriarchal society in terms of different code of conduct for different people in accordance to their gender. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* is replete with the instances where this gender duality and subalternity is palpable. In these conventional societies, women are considered as mere sex objects. Although the protagonist Florentino Ariza has been portrayed to be a love sick person who has "fallen in love" only once and with Fermina Daza only, and has supposedly vowed eternal fidelity to her, a lot of the text of the novel is filled with several sexual encounters of his with not one but many women. Undoubtedly, sexual statements might add attraction to the novel and it is a fact that they are actually part of why the book appeals to readers. However, these statements clearly objectify women as will be discussed in this article.

Keywords

Love, lust, women, objectification, sexual encounters, morality, chastity.

Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter, and journalist, known affectionately as Gabo or Gabito throughout Latin America. Considered one of the most significant authors of the 20th century, particularly in the Spanish language, he was awarded the 1972 Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature (NobelPrize.org). He pursued a self-directed education that resulted in leaving law school for a career in journalism. From early on he showed no inhibitions in his criticism of Colombian and foreign politics.

García Márquez started as a journalist and wrote many acclaimed non-fiction works and short stories, but is best known for his novels, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). His works have achieved significant critical acclaim and widespread commercial success, most notably for popularizing a literary style known as magic realism, which uses magical elements and events in otherwise ordinary and realistic situations. Some of his works are set in the fictional village of Macondo (mainly inspired by his birthplace, Aracataca), and most of them explore the theme of solitude.

Upon García Márquez's death in April 2014, Juan Manuel Santos, the president of Colombia, called him "the greatest Colombian who ever lived." (The Guardian)

The novel received significant critical acclaim. The literary critic Michiko Kakutani praised the book in a review for *The New York Times*. Katukani wrote, "Instead of using myths and dreams to illuminate the imaginative life of a people as he's done so often in the past, Mr. Garcia Marquez has revealed how the extraordinary is contained in the ordinary ... The result is a rich, commodious novel, a novel whose narrative power is matched only by its generosity of vision." (*The New York Times*). The writer Thomas Pynchon, also for the *New York Times*, argued that "This novel is also revolutionary in daring to suggest that vows of love made under a presumption of immortality – youthful idiocy, to some -may yet be honored, much later in life when we ought to know better, in the face of the undeniable. ... There is nothing I have read quite like this astonishing final chapter, symphonic, sure in its dynamics and tempo, moving like a riverboat too ... at the very best it results in works that can even return our worn souls to us, among which most certainly belongs *Love in the Time of Cholera*, this shining and heartbreaking novel." (*The New York Times*)

Love in the Time of Cholera (*El amor en los tiempos del cólera*) was first published Spanish in 1985. Alfred A. Knopf published an English translation in 1988. It is considered a non-traditional love story as "lovers find love in their 'golden years'—in their seventies, when death is all around them" (Pelayo, 11). The novel spans a period from the late 1870's to the early 1930's, and it is set in a South American community modeled after Cartagena, Colombia, and besieged by civil wars and plagues. The novel is based on the stories of two couples. The young love of Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza is based on the love affair of García Márquez's parents. But as García Márquez explained in an interview: "The only difference is [my parents] married. And as soon as they were married, they were no longer interesting as literary figures." (Bell-Villada, 156) The love of old people is based on a newspaper story about the death of two Americans, who were almost 80 years old, who met every year in Acapulco. They were out in a boat one day and were murdered by the boatman with his oars. García Márquez notes, "Through their death, the story of their secret romance became known. I was fascinated by them. They were each married to other people." (Bell-Villada, 157)

Article

Love in the Time of Cholera examines the meaning of love through the intertwined lives of Fermina Daza, Florentino Ariza, and Dr. Juvenal Urbino de la Calle. Florentino Ariza, a telegraph operator and the illegitimate son of Tránsito Ariza, is considered an ideal suitor in his social circle. As an eighteen years old young man, though, he falls in love with the thirteen years old Fermina Daza, a young upper-middle-class girl who lives under the control of her tyrannical father Lorenzo Daza. Although the two of them have never spoken, Florentino is convinced of his love and, after many months of waiting, succeeds in handing her a declaration of love through her aunt and guardian, Escolástica. After a period of doubt, Fermina responds positively to his letter and ultimately agrees to marry him.

One day, Fermina is caught writing a secret letter to Florentino at her school, the Academy of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin. As punishment, School Superior Sister Franca de la Luz expels her. After learning this, Fermina's father requests a meeting with Florentino, although he is shocked to discover that Fermina knows little or nothing about her suitor. During this talk, Lorenzo Daza tells Florentino that his only goal in life is for his daughter to become an upper-class lady—and, therefore, that Fermina should not marry him. Florentino, however, refuses to give up on marrying Fermina, arguing that she should be the one to make this decision.

Furious, Lorenzo Daza takes his daughter on a long, dangerous trip through the countryside, hoping that this will make her forget Florentino. On the way, they come across scenes of death and violence, markers of the civil war between Conservatives and Liberals that has been devastating the countryside for half a century. They finally reach the residence of Fermina's mother's family, where her cousins live. There, Fermina begins a lifelong friendship with her energetic cousin Hildebranda Sánchez. Although Fermina is delighted to discover that Florentino has used his contacts in the telegraph system to send letters to her, her friendship with Hildebranda

also makes her realize that it is possible to feel content without romantic love. At the same time, she remains committed to marrying Florentino.

When Fermina finally returns to the city, Florentino does not initially recognize her since she has changed so much and has fully matured into a woman. When Fermina sees him, she is struck by an instant, overwhelming feeling of disappointment. In a split-second, she realizes that she does not love Florentino but merely pities him. She rejects him, refusing to see him anymore and eliminating him from her life without giving this decision a second thought. After this, she meets a famous doctor in the city, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, who becomes fascinated with her. In all aspects of his life, his actions seem driven by a powerful belief in progress and modernity.

Fermina is initially annoyed by Dr. Urbino's courtship. In particular, when Sister Franca de la Luz visits her to express her support of this marriage, Fermina realizes that most people, including members of the Church, are hypocritical and respond to social pressures more than sincere convictions. However, after Hildebranda visits Fermina and expresses admiration for Dr. Urbino, whom they have met in the street, Fermina ultimately realizes that she wants to marry him. After their wedding, the two of them embark on a honeymoon to Europe. During the trip, Fermina and Dr. Urbino also grasp that their marriage is not based on love but on the material security that Dr. Urbino is able to offer Fermina. Dr. Urbino optimistically believes that the two of them will nevertheless succeed in fostering love for each other. In the long run, it proves highly ambiguous whether true love, beyond mere companionship, ever exists between the two of them. Nevertheless, neither Fermina nor Dr. Urbino ever regret their decision.

When they return from Europe, Fermina gives birth to a son. She and her husband bring innovative ideas to the social world and feel happy about the positive role they are playing in society. At the same time, Fermina becomes increasingly frustrated with her role at home. Instead of achieving personal fulfillment and independence, Fermina realizes that marriage has forced her to become a servant to her husband. This brings her deep unhappiness, which Dr. Urbino is unable to understand. A period of marital strife ensues. Although the couple takes another trip to Europe, from which Fermina returns pregnant with a daughter, Fermina then discovers that her husband has been having an affair with an American woman, Miss Barbara Lynch. Unable to stand this situation any longer, Fermina leaves the house and finds refuge at Hildebranda's home in the countryside. After two years, Dr. Urbino realizes that Fermina has failed to return not because she is still angry, but because she is stubborn and suffers from wounded pride. As a result, he goes to fetch her and she agrees to return home.

As Dr. Urbino ages, Fermina takes care of him as if he were a baby. One day, Dr. Urbino discovers that his close friend Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, an Antillean refugee, has committed suicide at the age of 60 to avoid aging. On the very same day as Jeremiah's suicide, Dr. Urbino falls from a ladder while trying to catch his parrot, which has escaped to high branches of a mango tree. The fall proves fatal, and before dying, he tells Fermina "Only God knows how much I loved you." (Marquiz, 32). At the age of 72, Fermina is devastated by her husband's death. At the funeral, Fermina sees Florentino Ariza, who is now 76. That evening, t, as she is about to lock her house, she notices Florentino standing before her. He tells her that his love and fidelity for her are as strong as before. Furious, Fermina shuts the door.

Florentino Ariza has indeed never forgotten Fermina Daza. Committed to this adolescent love, he decided to center his entire life around the possibility of winning her back. As a result, he worked hard to become President of the River Company of the Caribbean, the firm that his father and uncles founded. This allows him to achieve a high social status and thus, in his mind, to prove worthy of Fermina's love. He resolves to wait for Dr. Urbino's death before resuming his courtship. In the meantime, Florentino takes part in sexual relationships with over 600 women. He believes that this does not compromise his love for Fermina, since he does not marry or start serious relationships with any of them.

Furious at Florentino's shocking admission of love on the day of her husband's funeral, Fermina writes him an angry letter. He takes this as an opportunity to write back to her, so he begins to write letters which are impersonal musings on life, love, aging, and death, unlike anything he has written before. Fermina is moved by them, so she does not send them back. When she sees him at the memorial Mass on the anniversary of her husband's death,

she thanks him for being there. Over the next year, Florentino and Fermina slowly build a friendship via weekly visits and frequent letters. Both of Fermina's children find the idea of a romantic relationship between two old people revolting, but Fermina is not affected by their criticism. Desirous to leave the oppressive atmosphere of the city, Fermina goes on a boat trip, accompanied by Florentino. There, over 53 years since the end of their youthful adventure, the two of them begin a romantic relationship. They appreciate the quality of a love separate from marital difficulties and societal obligations—a love that is rendered all the more intense by its proximity to death. When the boat reaches its last stop, Fermina is dismayed to recognize old friends boarding the boat. She is desperate not to be seen, so Florentino speaks to the captain, and they decide to fly a yellow flag that warns of cholera on board—this will make them free to travel home in peace. The trip back is wonderful, but when Fermina and Florentino approach the city, the two of them realize that going back to shore means facing the reality of old age and the likelihood of death. Florentino is focused on life, not death. Hoping to retain the joy and peace they currently feel, he suggests that they stay on the river instead of putting an end to their journey. Both Fermina and the boat's captain, Captain Samaritano, are impressed by this idea and decide to follow it. At the end of the novel, the captain asks Florentino how long he thinks they can keep going up and down the river, and Florentino responds, "Forever." (Marquiz, 225)

As one reads *Love in the Time of Cholera* from the feminist point of view, one can clearly see the duality that lies within it. It is the height of duality that a man has no moral yardstick and he could sleep with as many women as he likes but if a woman indulges in the same outside her marriage, they are humiliated in the society. When fifty year old Ausencia Santander starts sleeping with Florentino, somebody burglarizes her home and before leaving writes a message on the wall saying: "This is what you get for fucking around" (Marquiz, 117)

Although Florentino believes that sex is entirely separate from morality, he fails to recognize that some sexual relationships are influenced by harmful power dynamics. His lasting love for Fermina appeals to many as it is sentimental, persistent and an admirable passion but Florentino himself is not an admirable character. The influence of love has made him obsessed with sex; he is selfish and callous. His love has blinded him to all others; he indulges in love affairs with teenage girls and married women. Florentino is more attracted to widows for the fulfilment of his desires, because in his mind, he has already assumed Dr. Urbino's death and Fermina as his widow. Prudencia Pitre is one of many examples of widows with whom he seeks the comfort of love.

He is responsible for the death of two women, one commits suicide while other is killed by her husband. Olimpia Zuleta, is killed by her husband after he discovers her adulterous relationship with Florentino. Later, Florentino starts a relationship with a 14-year-old girl, América Vicuña who was entrusted to his guardianship due to recognized blood relation:

"She was still a child in every sense of the word, with braces on her teeth and the scrapes of elementary school on her knees, but he saw right away the kind of woman she was soon going to be, and he cultivated her during a slow year of Saturdays at the circus, Sundays in the park with ice cream, childish late afternoons, and he won her confidence, he won her affection, he led her by the hand, with the gentle astuteness of a kind grandfather, toward his secret slaughterhouse." (Marquiz, 179)

He understood neither that she should be protected as a child, nor that she is capable of strong romantic and sexual feelings toward him. As a result, he put an end to their relationship to focus on his romantic pursuit of Fermina Daza without realizing that this would devastate América. At 17, the young girl commits suicide out of despair. He is a selfish lovesick man with no conscience and morality. He only wants to satisfy his craving as after her death; there is no traces of remorse in him:

"Florentino Ariza knew in the depths of his soul that the story was incomplete. But no: América Vicuña had left no explanatory note that would have allowed anyone to be blamed for her decision. The family, informed by Leona Cassiani, was arriving now from Puerto Padre, and the funeral would take place that afternoon at five o'clock. Florentino Ariza took a breath. The only thing he could do to stay alive was not to allow himself the anguish of that memory. He erased it from his mind, although from time to time in the years that were left to him he would feel it revive, with no warning and for no reason, like the sudden pang of an old scar." (Marquiz, 217)

He has had least affairs with at least 622 women during all these years just for providing solace to his aching heart. During all these years he had been waiting for Dr. Urbino's death:

“Florentino Ariza managed to make his way to the master bedroom, peered on tiptoe over the groups of people blocking the door, and saw Juvenal Urbino in the conjugal bed as he had wanted to see him since he had first heard of him--wallowing in the indignity of death.” (Marquiz, 179)

In fact, he even heartlessly tells the mourning Fermina about this long wait of his, at the funeral of her husband:

“Fermina,” he said, “I have waited for this opportunity for more than half a century, to repeat to you once again my vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love.” (Marquiz, 39)

As far as Fermina is concerned, she was a faithful and virtuous wife. However, violating the marriage vows, Dr. Juvenal Urbino did embark on an extramarital affair. Contrary to his impeccable correctness at home, in public, and in his profession, Dr. Urbino broke social and racial codes and, after thirty years of marriage, fell in love with Barbara Lynch. Thirty years younger, the beautiful twenty-eight-year old caused the marriage to crumble. Dr. Urbino's desire for Barbara Lynch was out of control; he thought of her all day. However, incapable of stopping his passion, he did feel the torment of guilt and ended the affair after six months. However, Fermina left him and stayed away for two years. This break of two years, however does not justify her husband's unfaithfulness. In the novel, men have control over their lives and do what they want. They are independent, self-willed and autonomous in their decisions and actions. But a woman is put under strict patriarchal rules, customs and rituals which restrict their self-will, movement and decisions, and choices in life. The mission of a woman's life seems to be submission- submission to the male desires and needs. A woman's life is considered fulfilled if she must have been of use to a male's desires and wishes. Indeed societies like this “deny woman a personhood” (Indian Feminisms) They lack individuality, agency and identity. Women are rendered speechless and silent. It is this silence suffering that gives testimony to their subaltern and unsavory position in the society. Spivak's famous negative answer to the question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” implies that silence is a critical component of subaltern identity. She is of the view that subaltern is a person or a group of people that have been excluded from society. They do not have a voice, and are lost in the world due to assimilation and colonialism. Implicit in the term are related questions of power, agency and representation. In different historical contexts, the subaltern has been understood as synonymous with women, children, colonial subjects, the poor, the illiterate, the proletariat, or the religious or ethnic minority. Today's subalternity scholars, however, do not intend for the term to be reduced to any single oppressed group or minority (The Criterion).

It is quite ironic that the woman who is addressed as the “Crowned Goddess” has no right to decide whom she would like to marry. Her husband cheats on her, even when she remained devoted and committed to him entirely. It seems as though chastity and virginity are demanded from women only, as though men are exempt from all moral obligations which a woman is bound to oblige with. Unfortunately, one has to accept the fact that a woman is not regarded as an “autonomous being” and “appears essentially to the male as a sexual being” (Behaviour) which has been exemplified in the following lines:

“Her name was Sara Noriega...She had had several occasional lovers, but none with intentions of matrimony, because it was difficult for a man of her time and place to marry a woman he had taken to bed. Nor did she cherish that dream again after her first formal fiancé, whom she loved with the almost demented passion of which one is capable at the age of eighteen, broke the engagement one week before the date they had set for the wedding, and left her to wander the limbo of abandoned brides. Or of used goods, as they used to say in those days.” (Marquiz, 128)

The status of women seems to be reduced to that of a sex object whose service is to provide sexual pleasure and fulfillment to the male who owns her. It is quite convenient for a man to live with his mistresses, to have sex with prostitutes who are referred to as by the quite derogatory term - “little birds”, to have clandestine love-affairs or to profess his love in front of the world

In the case of Florentino and Fermina, the number of women and the number of times he has slept with them in the time period he was waiting for her because she doesn't even question him about anything and accepts him wholeheartedly. It is because after her husband's death, she is again unsafe and vulnerable and only a man, no matter of what moral stature, will "provide her the security she needs to face life". This phrase is taken from Tansito Ariza's words, which reinforce the ideas of a patriarchal system, as in the following line:

"She reminded him that the weak would never enter the kingdom of love, which is a harsh and ungenerous kingdom, and that women give themselves only to men of resolute spirit, who provide the security they need in order to face life." (Marquiz, 45)

Rajakumar has rightly remarked that women's bodies have become emblems of familial honor. Women were required to keep their sexuality for their husbands alone. Their bodies became the boundary marker between public life and the private cultural values defined by their nation. The privileges of men in family hierarchy allowed husbands, fathers, and brothers to exert social and sexual control over female family members in the hope of fashioning them into chaste and pure women at the family's center (Rajakumar)

The novel projects a very narrow line of discrimination between love and lust, and as can be seen in the following line, it is again a woman who gives in to the misogynistic system that objectifies and sexualizes women willingly:

"Sara Noriega calmed him with the simple argument that love was everything they did naked" (Marquiz, 129)

One of many Florentino's lovers is The Widow Nazaret. In giving the title of a widow to a woman who loses her husband, 'a dead man' lives while a living woman dies because she has no identity of her own and her husband's identity still lives within her even when he is dead. This is clearly an example of gender discrimination and patriarchy within the society.

Conclusion

The novel is a celebration of life over death, love over despair, and health over sickness. The novel opens on the day of Dr. Juvenal Urbino's death. The novel narrates the story of Florentino Ariza who is obsessed with two things – Love and Sex. Florentino Ariza is a typical intransigent lover who yearns for his ladylove Fermina Daza and after being rejected for the first time, he waits for fifty-one years, nine months and four days to take the vow of "eternal fidelity and everlasting love". His rejection for the first time leads him to become a sex-maniac which he considers a way "to have the feeling of love without the problems of love". Florentino begins to keep a notebook which describes his encounters with women and these descriptions were so many that he completes twenty-five notebooks with descriptions of six hundred, twenty two, serious relationships without adding the non-serious ones. His sex partners are simply outlets to appease his desire and ward off his desperate solitude.

The final chapter of the novel describes the love affair of Florentino and Fermina on a ship that took them to eternity. The narrative makes it clear that there is not a unique definition of love but many kinds of complicated and unpredictable ones, some of which are based on sex or lust. The end of the novel determines that age and time do not put an end to love, or lust. In this novel, the cultural morals are not based on ethical principles, and the lack of faith leads the people to seek temporary pleasures. Love or more aptly lust is implicitly compared with the epidemic disease of Cholera, that may make the people forget their frustrations.

Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* advocates a society which may have a single standard of 'sex freedom' permissible to all, regardless of gender. Providing and permitting liberty and freedom on the basis of gender is wrong and one needs to give women the identity that has been denied to them. Gender should not be a deciding factor of somebody's freedom, one needs to think beyond the biological and physical aspect of woman and let them be a person they are without making them conscious about their gender (Wadood).

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