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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Magic Realism and the Theme of Love in *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Raj Gaurav Verma

Research Scholar

Department of English & Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow.

Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Marquez produces the theme of love in an unconventional way. The novel exhibits magic realism. As far as *Love in the Time of Cholera* is concerned, Marquez has not used supernatural elements to develop the plot but the way characters move and are plotted produces unexpected results. It is a story of two lovers Fermina and Florentino who are separated throughout their lives and are able to meet only when they are old. He shows that without love all is futile, for neither Fermina in her loveless marriage nor Florentino in his loveless sex could find essence, an essence which could give meaning to their acts. At the end both of them accept each other. That's where the life begins.

Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Marquez produces the theme of love in an unconventional way. The novel exhibits magic realism which is characterized by two conflicting perspectives—"one based on the rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of supernatural as prosaic reality. It challenges the polar opposites like life and death, the precolonial past and the post industrial present." ("Magic Realism: A Problem") As far as *Love in the Time of Cholera* is concerned, Marquez has not used supernatural elements to develop the plot but the way characters move and are plotted produces unexpected results and "shatters the expectation of horizon of readers."(Jauss 20)

Magic realism has been defined and applied variously. Anglo-American critics have defined the term as "a mixture of the quotidian and the fantastic, both in terms of content and technique. The problem here is that anything which seems uncanny or unfamiliar to Western eyes becomes "magic", while to a native of that culture the events or ways of thinking so described are "real"." (MR) Thus we have a reality of love produced as a literal illness, a disease that is as afflicting as cholera. The novel begins with investigation by Dr. Juvenal Urbino of Jeremiah Saint-Amour's quietus, who has killed himself at the age of sixty for the fear of growing old. Marquez has adopted a non-linear narration so that we have two plots running together and that complicates the understanding of the readers initially. At the very inception it appears that novel poses certain mysteries and secrets which are to be revealed and are disclosed by the end.

When Dr. Urbino dies trying to save his parrot Florentino comes and professes his love to Fermina Daza: "Fermina I have waited for this opportunity for more than half a century, to repeat to you my vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love." (Marquez 50) It appears quite odd that a man, an old man comes to a woman on the death of her husband and proposes her for marriage. Consequently Fermina Daza becomes furious. The plot moves through past and present. And in chapter 2 we are shown the encounter of Fermina and Florentino when they were young. Fermina was then in school and Florentino had first viewed her when he has gone to deliver the telegram to Lorenzo Daza, Fermina's father. After watching Fermina, always accompanied by her Aunt Escolástica, walk to school each day from the Park of the Evangels, Florentino works up the courage to approach her one day. He asks that she accept a letter from

him, but she refuses because she is obligated to get her father's permission. He demands that she "get it," which she does the following week. Florentino decides to give her a subdued note (instead of the sixt y-page letter he had originally written) in which he resolutely declares his love for her. He is in agony as he awaits her reply, but is overjoyed when Fermina finally answers approvingly. Florentino falls sick and it becomes apparent that illness was no different from the suffering of love. Florentino's illness transcends the physical to psychological. He wrote innumerable letters to Fermina and confessed his love: "In that day's letter Florentino Ariza confirmed that he had played the serenade, that he had composed the waltz and that it bore the name Fermina Daza in his heart: "The Crown Goddess." (Marquez 70)

"Authorial Reticence" is one of the characteristic of "magical realism." It implies the lack of accuracy of events and incredibility of the world views expressed by characters. When Lorenzo Daza comes to know about this he tries to coax Fermina to ignore Florentino. But: He tried to seduce her with all kind of flattery. He tried to make her understand that love at her age was an illusion, he tried to convince her to send back the letters and return to the academy and beg forgiveness on her knees, and he gave his word of honour that he would be the first to help her find happiness with a worthy suitor. But it was like talking to a corpse. Defeated, he at last lost his temper ... and while he choked back insults and blasphemies and was about to explode, she put the meat knife to her throat, without dramatics but with a steady hand and eyes so aghast that he did not dare to challenge her.(Marquez 79)

Similarly Lorenzo Daza tries to scare Florentino Ariza with pistol. Florentino was scared initially but then he gained courage and said: "Shoot me ... There is no greater glory than to die for love." (Marquez 82) Once he sees the passion enkindled in both Fermina and Florentino he arranges for Fermina's journey to send her far from Florentino. The journey has profound significance in this novel too, for it not only separates the two lovers but also makes there meeting impossible for rest of their live. However Florentino assumes the waiting. The separation of Florentino and Fermina can be equated with that of Voss and Laura in Patrick Whites' *Voss* . While Voss goes on the expedition, Laura keeps on waiting for Voss to return and always remained in love with him.

Waiting of Voss and Laura introduces cogitation about love, life and their separation. But journey in *LTC* shatters Fermina's notion of love and the separation compels Florentino to break his vow. Fermina realized that she was not in love with Florentino but in love with the romanticized idea of him. While on one hand Fermina yields to her father's pestering and marries Dr. Urbino, Florentino begins his sex expeditions with other women. Fermina marries Urbino but not willingly and that is revealed when she is scared of losing her virginity. She has noticed her husband's aging mind and body, though she sees these changes as a reversion to childhood, rather than decay. The couple's morning routine has for years been a source of contention between them. Every morning Urbino rises at dawn, dresses in darkness, and wakes his wife in the process. She feigns sleep, furious that she has been awakened, though he is aware that she is angry and not truly asleep. They continue to play this game until it nearly ends their thirty years of marriage. At the end of the novel Fermina realizes: " It is incredible how one can be happy for so many years in the midst of squabbles, so many problems, damn it, and not really know if it was love or not." (Marquez 329)

On the other hand Urbino had married Fermina not because he loved her but because she was haughty and serious unlike other women who can be easily persuaded. In spite of their contrary attitudes they continue to live together. Fermina has also caught her husband's scandalous love affair with Barbara Lynch. The unhappy but stable marriage is rocked though he

ends it when Fermina confronts him with her knowledge of it. Infuriated by her husband's infidelity, Fermina goes to live with Hildebranda on her ranch. The Doctor later arrives at the ranch unannounced to take Fermina, who is overjoyed by his arrival. She returns to her home with him. But all this simply indicates the unwanted relation that Urbino and Fermina were carrying on.

Florentino's isolated encounter with Rosalba changes his thoughts on love and sex. He was adamant to lose his virginity with Fermina but fails. According to Ray Verzasconi: "an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America." Thus we are confronted with two realities of life: sex and love. In the absence of beloved the primitive need of sex usurps the place of love. Florentino, therefore, uses sex to get rid of his heartache. Florentino's sexual escapades reminds of Moor Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie. Moor was affected with age disorder and grew twice the normal age. He grew old and had affairs with his teacher, Uma and finally the air hostess on the plane. He says: "Could I face my life alone without a lover by my side? What mattered more: love or truth?" (Rushdie 267) Similarly Florentino ends having an affair with Widow Nazaret, Ausencia Santender, Sora Noriega, Prudencia Pitre and America Vicuna. Florentino also resembles Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders as far as the amorous side of his personality is concerned. Moll ended in sexual encounters for the sheer need of sustaining herself. In case of Moll the reason turns out to be economic, in case of Florentino its psychological and physical. However, Moll too unites with her Lancashire husband with whom she had been in love: "Thus all the difficulties were made easy, and we lived together with the greatest kindness and comfort imaginable. We are now grown old; I ... being almost seventy years of age, my husband sixty-eight." (Defoe 288)

Other significant aspect of magic realism is that time is shown as cyclic not as linear event. What has happened once is destined to happen again. Florentino whether consciously or not, aims at ameliorating himself as he feels extremely inferior to Dr. Urbino. Florentino is not malicious in thinking of Urbino's death. He is simply conscious of the fact that he must wait for Urbino to die to claim his love for Fermina. Everything appears as if already happened, besides the plot of the novel too makes things appear in cyclic event. Florentino falls sick, Fermina falls sick and Urbino's father had died of sickness. Florentino proposes Fermina, Urbino proposes Fermina and at the end again Florentino proposes Fermina.

When Florentino encounters the couple who married because of his love letters, he is stunned by his old age because he sees a baby with them: "The truth is that by the standards of time, Florentino Ariza had crossed the line into the old age. He was fifty six years old, and he thought them well lived because they were the years of love." (Marquez 259) After a long gap Florentino meets Fermina on the day of funeral of her husband and he repeats his oath. Florentino had suffered in absence of his beloved. Their fate turns out like that of Voss and Laura, as Patrick White writes:

So they growing together, and loving. No sore was so scrofulous on his body that she would not touch it with her kindness. He would kiss her wounds, even the deepest ones, That he had inflicted himself and left to suppurate.

Given time, the man and woman might have healed each other. That time is not given was their sadness. But time itself is a wound that will not heal up. (White 383) Though Fermina gets annoyed at Florentino and asks him to leave her she was not, perhaps never had been detached from Florentino: "That while she slept, sobbing, she thought more of Florentino than her dead husband." (Marquez 51) So she could not escape from the

clutches of love. The novel evokes the unmentioned conclusion initiated by John Donne's poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." Donne shows the parting of two lovers and compares them to twin compass:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
The soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but both, if the other doe.

.....
Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like the other foot, obliquely runne;
Thy firmness draws my circle just,
And make me end, where I begunne.

We see that ultimately Florentino and Fermina unite like twin compass.

The title of the novel itself points towards the contradictions of polar opposites- love which is essential for life and cholera which symbolizes death. As far as magic realism is concerned in regards of love it may surely be incredulous to a European eye but when we talk of love legends in east there is profoundness of great love stories. Stories of love, like that of Heer-Ranjha, Soni-Mahiwal, Shiri-Farhad and Laila Majnu, count on more austere and penalizing side of love where the lovers had to die. Here the suffering shifts to waiting and wanting. "Can anyone wait for so long?" –is the question that one can ask rationally. But when love turns into a plague, into a disease, into a mental obsession, then lovers wait for their love as the victims of cholera wait for death.

The novel also contradicts popular belief that old people can't marry. The ending of the novel is reminiscent of "Veer Zara", movie directed by Yash Chopra. The protagonists Veer and Zara meet in their old age; they had never expected to meet but lived their entire life for one other and sacrificed their own interests. "On one side is Veer who had spent twenty-two years of his life in jail to save Zara's honour, and on the other is Zara who lived fulfilling the dream of Veer's parents." says Samya Sidiqi, one of the characters in the movie. Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza too had waited and Florentino too had to go to jail but he suffers it as the part of his love. When finally they are on ship:

Contrary to what Captain and Zenaida supposed, they no longer felt like newlyweds, and And even less like belated lovers. It was as if they had leapt over the arduous cavalry of conjugal life and gone straight to the heart of love. They were together in silence like an old married couple wary of life, beyond the pitfalls of passion, beyond the brutal mockery of hope and the phantoms of disillusion beyond love. For they had lived together long enough to know that love was always love, anytime and anyplace, but it was more solid the closer it came to death. (Marquez 345)

The question is whether time has anything to do with love? And the best answer is provided by Shakespeare in his sonnet "True Love":

*Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom. (8)*

Therefore the waiting gives way to meeting whether with presence of lovers or metaphysically.

When Florentino and Fermina unites on ship the world mattered the least. As the ship reaches its last port, Fermina sees people whom she knows and frets that if they see her with

Florentino, it will cause scandal. Florentino orders the Captain to raise the yellow flag of cholera, which he does and asks captain to declare that there is atleast one man sick on ship and infected with cholera. Metaphorically, here cholera becomes synonymous with love and one person affected with lovesickness is Florentino himself. There remain no passengers on aboard but Fermina, Florentino, the Captain, and his lover. When the Captain asks Florentino, he answers that he is sure of hi decision: “The captain looked at Fermina Daza and saw on her eyelashes the first glimmer of wintry frost. Then he looked at Florentino Ariza, his invincible power, his intrepid love, and he was overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limits.” (Marquez 348) When captain asks him how long can they carry like this, Florentino replies he answer he has kept prepared for “fifty three years, seven months, and eleven days and nights: “Forever”.

Thomas Pynchon writes:

There is nothing I have read quite like this astonishing final chapter, symphonic, sure in its dynamics and tempo, moving like a riverboat too, its author and pilot, with a lifetime's experience steering us unerringly among hazards of skepticism and mercy, on this river we all know, without whose navigation there is no love and against whose flow the effort to return is never worth a less honorable name than remembrance -- 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.

But then Marquez explains: “If such things were done for so many immoral, even contemptible reasons, Florentino Ariza could not see why it would not be legitimate to do them for love.” (Marquez 343) The plot is twisted and made cyclic by making it like a puzzle. The “magical” is the waiting and what’s “real” is the love. The novel shows that its love that guides our life and gives meaning to it. Thinking of marrying a widow is unconventional, especially, waiting for a married woman to become a widow. Marquez has made old men and women his protagonists- like Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay- which is unconventional in itself. Marquez has drawn parallel portrayal of married life devoid of love, and a sex life devoid of love. He shows that without love all is futile, for neither Fermina in her loveless marriage nor Florentino in his loveless sex could find essence, an essence which could give meaning to their acts. At the end both of them accept each other: “It suggests that true love is not blind, but sees all the faults and does not mind.” --That’s where the life begins.

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