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Erotic Bodies: Bildungsroman of Love in *Love in the Time of Cholera*

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Abstract

‘Love’ in *Love in the Time of Cholera* is eponymous that grows, develops, matures and ages in the plot with the development of main characters, Fermina Daza, Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino and their love-affairs. The narrative invokes eroticism while it gives description to the subdued bodies, unexplored sexualities and instable liaisons of Fermina. Bildungsroman of love in Marquez makes this study interesting where patriarchal construct of ‘love’ is personified that remains predominantly assertive throughout the novel in its chameleon like fluid existence changing from first sight love to fixation, from staring gaze to marriage, from its macho character to aging love, and from widowhood to revival of love in old age.

Keywords: Love, Eroticism, Feminism, Sexuality.

Introduction

‘Love’ in Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* narrates the saga of an aphrodisiac lover Florentino who fails to marry his love of first sight because of her father’s intervention. The love stays on until it consummates itself on a love voyage after the death of Dr. Juvenal Urbino, Fermina’s husband. The love in the novel entails the patriarchal construct of sexuality that is set aside by Fermina in secret before her marriage and by her cousins who enjoy exploration of their bodies and share their experiences that give them empowerment and control over their bodies. Fermina loses control over her body when Dr. Urbino wins her body like a patient colonial

master. Erotica is both source of empowerment as well as weakness for both women and Dr. Urbino.

The narrative firstly establishes Florentino as a potential lover for Fermina by glorifying him as “the most sought-after young man in his social circle” and the criteria for such a person is a man who knows how to “dance the latest dances, recite sentimental poetry by heart, and who was always willing to play violin serenades to his friends’ sweethearts. [. . .] the girls in his circle held secret lotteries to determine who would spend time with him, and he gambled on spending time with them until the day he met Fermina Daza and his innocence came to an end” (Marquez 54). The standardized lover for a girl is a fashion plate. His masculinity is highly inflated and tastes are extremely fastidious. This macho man with his aphrodisiac appearance is shown “innocent” unless he finds a girl of his soul. His fixation with Fermina Daza was love in first sight that took years for its fruition and consummation as it is narrated that “the girl raised her eyes to see who was passing by the window, and that casual glance was the beginning of a cataclysm of love that still had not ended half a century later” (55).

Morana finds the novel a depiction of “all possible stages of love-in youth and old age, Platonic and erotic, lawful and unlawful, ephemeral and eternal, childlike yet sublime” (28). Where Fermina-Florentino’s affair is “love-in-youth,” Florentino is born out of an “unlawful” and “erotic” liaison. Florentino Ariza, the only child of Tránsito Ariza, was a product of her “occasional alliance” with a shipowner Don Pius V Loayza (53). Though his fatherhood was an open secret yet his father never admitted Florentino’s ‘unlawful’ parentage publicly that made his son use his mother’s name. Therefore, Florentino remains mother-born in the society. The narrative has given many accounts of Florentino’s occasional ‘erotic’ and ‘ephemeral’ alliances

with numerous women. It has remained biased in not giving account of any child born out of these escapades.

Flotentino—Fermina's first love with an unworthy fellow is interpreted as an "illusion" by her father Lorenzo Daza who wants her daughter to be betrothed with "a worthy suitor." However, "it was like talking to a corpse" (Marquez 79). The visualized corpse confronts her father's claim when she talks back and tells him that "she is the one who has to decide" (81). Her father exclaims "This is a matter for men and it will be decided by men" (82), and it is decided. He sends her on a forced trip to the relatives with the motive to erode her fixation on Florentino, and it works.

Before the trip, even the intercession and mediation of Sister Franca de la Luz, Superior of the Academy of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, fails. Her argument that Dr. Urbino is "a gift from Divine Providence" (127) generates an interesting discussion when Fermina Daza retorts, "I do not understand how you can lend yourself to this," she said, "if you think that love is a sin." She proves resilient to her intimidations and evades nun's "masculine eyes" filled with tears and the nun talks in her father's language and names her "a mule" (127). Updike finds love in Marquez's works "as a doom, a demonic possession, a disease that, once contracted, cannot be easily cured ("Dying for Love"). In Fermina's case, it is temporarily cured by her father's mechanization of a trip away from her home.

At her return from her forced trip planned by her father, she finds herself independent and mature enough to declare her erstwhile lover "My God, poor man! . . . "Forget it" and "what is between us is nothing more than an illusion" (Marquez 102). Thus, the saga and avowal of eternal fidelity and everlasting love is truncated by her father's mediation and punctuated with

her marriage with Dr. Juvenal Urbino manipulated “by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism” (Cixous 875).

Dr. Juvenal Urbino with modest good fortune is depicted as “the most desirable of bachelors” among the girls (Marquez 105). He succumbs to “the plebeian charms of Fermina Daza” (105), and diagnoses his newly found love as a result of “a clinical error” (105) when he calls on his eighteen-year-old patient who refuses to be examined in the absence of her papa. On the following Tuesday, he examines her: “At last Dr. Juvenal Urbino asked the patient to sit up, and with exquisite care he opened her nightdress down to the waist; her pure high breasts with the childish nipples shone for an instant in the darkness of the bedroom, like a flash of gunpowder, before she hurried to cover them with crossed arms” (117). Benjamin ascertains that “the cult of breasts indicates the role of woman as an object of man’s pleasure” (139). His examination of the subject on the next visit describes a man’s visualization and observation of a nubile female body that carries “pure high breasts,” radiant “childish nipples” which are meant to be “covered.” She as “a new-sprung rose” (Marquez 118) is ready to be plucked by a man of his fortune and “gunpowder” to be ignited by a potential tinder.

The narrative focus during medical examination is on the erogenous areas and on breast fetishism—feast for Dr. Urbino’s eyes permitted by her father. Fermina expresses her harassment through “rage” at being called “a new-sprung rose” by the Doctor but her father makes her to apologize, “I give you my most heartfelt apologies, sir” (119). Though the father knows about Doctor’s staring and comment, the text proposes a daughter’s rage is undesirable if it is tolerated by the father. The daughter is to submit to the will of father even if it is justified and leads to gaze-molestation.

Cixous finds that women have been driven away “violently” from writing and “their bodies” (875). The novel naturalizes the masturbation among girls and labels it as “solitary love” that includes “sprawling on the bathroom floor [. . .]. She always did it with certain pangs of conscience [. . .] although her cousins boasted to each other not only about the number of orgasms they had in one day but even about their form and size. But despite those bewitching first rites, she was still burdened by the belief that the loss of virginity was a bloody sacrifice (Marquez 153-54). Her cousins swallowed their shame and fear (Cixous 875). Bellver finds that erotic experiences are a form of “a self-defense, an escape from frustration, and an avenue of self-discovery (13). Unlike her cousins who enjoy talking about their body and feel empowered in its orgasms, Fermina, however, takes it a matter of shame to talk in public about her body secrets though she practices the rites of autoeroticism. She cannot brave the shame to talk about her body. Cixous supports women for “a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity” (875). She is filled with the horror of “bloody sacrifice” as nobody prepares and educates her. On the wedding night, Dr. Urbino gives the “classic representations of women” (Cixous 878) and feels her “a startled little animal [. . .] Dr. Urbino continued talking very slowly as he won her body’s confidence millimeter by millimeter (Marquez 156). Like a colonial master, he conquers her body slowly but steadily:

As he spoke in the darkness he caressed the curve of her neck with his fingertips, he caressed the fine silky hair on her arms, her evasive belly [. . .] he wet the tip of his forefinger with his tongue and grazed her nipple when it was caught off guard, and she felt a mortal explosion as if he had touched a raw nerve [. . .] But he did not allow their fingers to intertwine; instead he grasped her by the wrist and moved her hand along his

body with an invisible but well-directed strength until she felt the ardent breath of a naked animal without bodily form, but eager and erect. (157)

Dr. Urbino like a colonial master, carefully explores the fruits and enriches of the newly acquired land. He encroaches on the curve of neck, silky hair, evasive belly in order to finally graze the nipples and to assert his authority exemplified by the eager and erect naked animal. Laguertha defines postcolonial love as “a type of love or romance that shares the same psychology as the topics addressed in postcolonialism— highlighting overlapping concepts such as a desire to forget, a desire to remember, a passion to conquer, and insatiable longing (2). Here, Dr. Urbino is filled with the passion to conquer the evasive, terrified body taken as a “dark continent” (Cixous 877). Like a submissive pupil on discovery spree, she is led by her mentor in sexuality to examine his organ to the revelation “How ugly it is, even uglier than a woman’s thing” (Marquez 158). Solomon determines that certain body parts become cause and source of attraction and love like “more celebrated cases of foot fetishism, breast fetishism and penis envy (217). Uglier than a woman’s thing deconstructs the idea of phallocentrism as Cixous has praised the “beauty” of the “rupture” (876). She finds the phallus taken as symbol of man’s potency and domination uglier than her thing.

The narrator defines and traces Dr. Urbino-Fermina relationship after marriage that grows into a strong association and finally changes to love, “they were not capable of living for even an instant without the other, or without thinking about the other, and that capacity diminished as their age increased” (Marquez 26). The “capacity” to love has been the measure for bonding and attachment between the newly-wed couple. Fermina’s post-marriage obsession with her husband reveals how their intimate relationship overrides her erstwhile lover Florentino’s memories overrode by. However, the transition from youth to age results into aging and “diminished”

capacity to gratify passions of the body that negatively affects the coexistence between the wanton lovers.

The description of their wedding night is highly sensual and sultry. Fermina Daza's first time hearing of her husband's pee sound is quite revealing of her timidity and induced terror on their wedding night, "the sound of his stallion's stream seemed so potent, so replete with authority, that it increased her terror of the devastation to come. That memory often returned to her as the years weakened the stream, for she never could resign herself to his wetting the rim of the toilet bowl each time he used it [. . .] .On the eve of old age this physical difficulty inspired Dr. Urbino with the ultimate solution: he urinated sitting down, as she did, which kept the bowl clean and him in a state of grace (30). The endurance of their affinity has been equated with the strength of his urine stream. Flaccid stream leads to jolted and uneven relationship. However, his aging turns his wife into a babysitter who bathes him, dresses him up, sprinkles talcum powder between his legs and smooths cocoa butter on his rashes (31). Fermina's "stallion" and "terror" of youth becomes docile and a baby to be nursed in the end. His dissipating energies run parallel to his withering masculinity showing the vulnerability of a man in childhood and old age to a woman unlike the time of youth when a woman is exposed to a man's aggression.

Fermina Daza is shown distressed at Dr. Urbino's accidental death. She keeps crying and wailing for "she had rarely slept alone in that bed since the loss of her virginity" (50). However, the narrative itself contradicts that her crying is more about loneliness as "she had thought more about Florentino Ariza than about her dead husband" (51). Florentino-Ariza love story starts with a glance and remains narrateable and sellable till it finds its physical expression on a love voyage after the stopover of Urbino-Ariza marriage that ends on Urbino's accidental death.

Conclusion

‘Love’ in *Love in the Time of Cholera* is purely based on erotica and sexualized bodies as visualized by patriarchy. Fermina is directed by church and father whom to love. Her love is guided later by her husband who is enamored by her body that shivers in face of the potency of phallocentrism. The narrative gives no other description of the bodies than promoted by the traditional patriarchy. The consumption of erotic bodies by the internal audience and the normative reader makes the novel readable and sellable. Love in its phallic image is occasionally contested by Fermina and her cousins to the extent of defying church but their conquerable bodies are finally tamed by invincible father’s mechanization and good fortune of husband.

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