
Love in the Time of Cholera: An Idealized Criticism of Latin American Patriarchy, Masculinity and Society's Limits on Heterosexual Love

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Abstract

The consequences of patriarchy have been studied and debated across many fields, including sociology, history, politics, psychology, and of course, literature, with many academics making strong arguments for the need to dismantle and replace traditional patriarchal constructs. Literature studies, however, have been limited in their scope of examining how Latin American patriarchy has shaped masculinity, and by extension, love. My paper tackles this topic through a close analysis of Gabriel García Márquez's novels, with a specific focus on Love in the Time of Cholera. "Love in the Time of Cholera: An Idealized Criticism of Latin American Patriarchy, Masculinity and Society's Limits on Heterosexual Love," discusses how patriarchal constructs are portrayed in the novel and the related repercussions on the romantic lives of the characters. I examine how García Márquez weaves a narrative of overly idealized romantic heterosexual love alongside a satirical criticism of the Latin American patriarchy and conventional Latin American masculinity. I present how in doing so, García Márquez challenges readers to read beyond his magical aesthetic to discover greater lessons—namely of the failings of the patriarchy in Latin America, and by extension, the toxic effects it has wrought on romantic love—that can be learned from his enchanting characters.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Latin American masculinity; Gabriel Márquez; Love in the Time of Cholera

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Publication Details:

Article Received: September 5, 2020

Article Published: December 15, 2020

Article DOI: 10.53057/irls/2020.2.2.3

Journal DOI: 10.53057/irls

Recommended citation:

Allman, A. (2020). Love in the Time of Cholera: An Idealized Criticism of Latin American Patriarchy, Masculinity and Society's Limits on Heterosexual Love. *International Review of Literary Studies*, 2(2), 24-31.

Retrieved from <https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls>

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Introduction

“You have to be careful not to fall into my trap.”—Gabriel García Márquez

Arguably the most influential societal construct of our human legacy, which continues to persist today, is the Western patriarchy, and as a result, a dangerous masculine ideal. A reverence of the patriarch’s body as a mythical and wondrous thing is a prominent feature of Latin American history and one that has continued to perpetuate a certain type of masculinity. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Gabriel García Márquez shines a glaring spotlight on how patriarchy—via political and other societal influences—affects the most sacred of human experiences: love. At once weaving a narrative of overly idealized romantic heterosexual love, satirical criticism of the Latin American patriarchy, and conventional Latin American masculinity, García Márquez challenges his readers to read beyond his magical aesthetic to discover the greater lessons—namely the failings of the patriarchy in Latin America, and by extension, the toxic effects it has wrought on romantic love, as well as the possibilities of idealized love—that can be learned from his characters.

When read as a critique of patriarchal systems, García Márquez’s characters in *Love in the Time of Cholera* embody pointed derision. Every woman in the story lives under varying degrees of servitude to men and struggles to find happiness until they are somehow freed from confinement. Florentino Ariza, seemingly a benign hopeless romantic, also lives with the fantasy that he is a gift to women and refuses rejection, however definitive. Dr. Juvenal Urbino, a man of power and stature, pursues his wife almost as a sport, and though he strives to achieve marital bliss, does so for status more than for love. Fermina Daza, indomitable as she may be, grapples with knowing what she wants in life. In choosing the path the patriarchy has led her to believe is the righteous one for a virtuous young woman, she moves from the oppressive house of her father into the margins of a passionless marriage.

The Characteristics of Latin American Patriarchy

An enduring, inflated elevation of man, of the powerful man’s body, are key characteristics of the patriarchy in Latin America. In “Theorizing Patriarchy,” sociologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as, “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (214). Eliza Burbano applies this definition to Latin America specifically in, “The Persistence of Patriarchy in Latin America: An Analysis of Negative and Positive Trends.” Burbano writes:

The definition provided by Walby is important to the case study of Latin America because the social structures that dominate in the region are very much focused on issues of class. Historically class was closely linked with machismo in Latin America. Machismo can be considered as a variant or a social expression of patriarchy that places the value of men over that of women in such a way that the male gender surpasses the female gender based on normalized social expectations of gender roles and makes men feel entitled to exert gendered power over women. In many cases, this behavior is expressed in the form of violence. Class and Machismo can be characterized as the two main drivers that allow for the concentration of wealth in social sectors comprised of powerful male heads of households. (16-17)

One example is seen in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, regarding the water parasite-induced scrotal hernias that many of the men of the city experienced:

...Endured not only without embarrassment but with a certain patriotic insolence...men sitting in their doorways on hot afternoons, fanning their enormous testicle as if it were a child sleeping between their legs...but no one complained about those discomforts because a large, well-carried rupture was, more than anything else, a display of masculine honor. (110)

Another stark example is how aging diminishes masculinity and affects forms of love in numerous García Márquez novels. For example, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Fermina Daza has come to see her husband as, “a senile baby,” who she must care for and help dress (26). As she reflects upon these developments in their relationship, she is unsure if she continues to simultaneously care for and depend on her husband out of love, convenience, or something else. We see additional examples in which the vanity of the man, as he ages, overpowers his selflessness toward the woman he loves—starting with, but not confined to, the suicide that opens the novel.

The Women of Gabriel García Márquez

Love in the Time of Cholera is not the only novel in which García Márquez challenges the patriarchy's effects on women, and by extension, romantic love. Through his masterful application of magical realism, he walks a line between revealing the beauty and harsh political criticism. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez offers an alternative portrait of women, one that illustrates their potential power. In his paper, "The Dark Side of Magical Realism: Science, Oppression, and Apocalypse in "One Hundred Years of Solitude," Brian Conniff examines how the women in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can see the bigger picture, and realize the impact of their mistakes, in a way the men cannot. They can see the dangers of imperialism, the misfortunes caused by the excessive pursuit of prosperity, but the men remain largely blind to these realities (Imran 2019).

These things are revealing of García Márquez's views on Latin American gender norms and the limits of power women face. His writings and their political undertones across novels including *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera* suggest a need for dismantling the patriarchy. These novels also offer a glimpse at an idealized reality, in which breaking down toxic gender norms and roles may open the door for men and women to experience a more fulsome kind of love.

García Márquez's views of the power women can behold are seen in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, in giving a single woman, Fermina Daza, a great deal of importance in the lives of multiple men (Lorenzo Daza, Florentino Ariza, Dr. Juvenal Urbino). Mabel Moraña explains this through the symmetry present in the novel, in her paper, "Modernity and Marginality in *Love in the Time of Cholera*." Moraña cites the love triangle of the novel's primary characters as the most obvious example of women's repressed power, through Fermina Daza's subtle influence over the life choices and outcomes of Dr. Juvenal Urbino and Florentino Ariza. This power is seen even despite that Fermina Daza is confined to a patriarchal society in which she was raised under the control of her father and has been provided limited and difficult choices throughout her life:

Her "regulating function" rests on her capacity to control the laws that rule the lives of the other two people to such an extent that García Márquez himself was able to summarize her narrative function thus: "she is the strong one, Fermina Daza. She is the novel." (29)

Indeed, in placing Fermina Daza, a woman oppressed by society, her father, and her suitors, as the central figure of the novel, García Márquez is challenging his readers to consider the limitations placed on her, and the power she exerts despite these limitations. It begs the question: how much more powerful might Fermina Daza, and all women, be if freed from the patriarchal ties that bind them.

An Unsentimental Love Story

Many critics warn against a gullible reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. García Márquez himself has advised readers, "You have to be careful not to fall into my trap." In "The Dangers of Gullible Reading: Narrative as Seduction in García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*," Keith M. Booker reads between the lines of García Márquez's characters to closely examine the author's reflections on ambitious men, conceit, and power. These ideas help to surface García Márquez's position in *Love in the Time of Cholera* on patriarchy, masculinity, and love. Booker's examination of Fermina Daza's union with Dr. Juvenal Urbino—and the patriarchal influences that ultimately led her to marry a man who was a secondary choice of husband—is particularly poignant:

...Even the practical Fermina Daza buys massive amounts of commodities in an attempt (again echoing Emma Bovary) to fill the emptiness in her life. Most of these goods (like heavy European coats) simply get stored in trunks and closets when she returns to Colombia. And García Márquez indicates the dehumanizing impact of this invasion of commodities in Fermina's attitude: 'she was dismayed by the voracity with which objects kept invading living spaces, displacing the humans, forcing them back into corners... (2)

As this quote suggests, restlessness is evident in Fermina Daza throughout the novel, from her adolescence to her old age. She has never been truly free to ponder what it is that she wants from life,

what love means to her, and with whom she wishes to share a bed. The power of the patriarchy over her life has diminished her judgment, which is seen early on as a possible catalyst for her choosing to break off her secret engagement to Florentino Ariza and later, in her habits of filling emotional voids with material belongings.

Claudette Kemper Columbus raises additional arguments against the gullible reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera* in, “Faint Echoes and Faded Reflections: Love and Justice in the Time of Cholera.” Kemper Columbus writes:

The reader who accepts sentimental values promoted on the manifest level misses the novel’s savage satiric thrust. As sentimentality blunts the perspicacity of the characters, of their understanding of the historical moment in which they fail to find themselves or read themselves, it reveals similar blundering and missing of the spirit of the letter on the part of a sentimental reader. (89-90)

Kemper Columbus’s assertions that, “Cholera is a metaphor for a diseased society, for social irresponsibility, and for relationships that pass as ‘love’ relationships,” (90); and that, “...by keeping ourselves the objects of our sentimental gaze, we remain out of time and out of touch, like the characters in *Love*, distanced from the historical events of which they are the components,” (91) align with the criticisms García Márquez has made of the patriarchy in *Love in the Time of Cholera* and other aforementioned works. García Márquez was an “open partisan of the far left,” (91), and *Love in the Time of Cholera* appears as his examination and criticism of deep social issues that implicate love in several ways. García Márquez is a Nobel Prize-winning author. He did not deliver a love story merely for the sake of a love story.

Another important element in understanding García Márquez’s intentions with this novel is the debate around postmodernism in his work. In “The Mourning After García Márquez, Fuentes and the Meaning of Postmodernity in Spanish America,” Carlos J. Alonso cites a “staggering number” (253) of studies from Latin America between the late 1980s and mid-1990s that delve into the role of a postmodernism in the region. Alonso writes:

This is not to say that postmodernity and postmodernism have not been the topic of intellectual and scholarly discussions in Europe and the United States as well, but the force and unanimity with which the topic has monopolized recent cultural deliberations in Latin America is truly a remarkable circumstance. It is also true that in hegemonic circles the discussion has centered on the specificity of the postmodern, whereas in Latin America the debate has been joined regarding the desirability of *embracing* the postmodern, a discussion that assumes a fairly homogeneous definition of the phenomenon. (253)

García Márquez’s writing has been widely credited as providing a platform for revealing the positive and negative outcomes of the “end of modernity and Latin American cultural discourse” (254). These points provide a foundation for understanding Latin American society at the time of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and the interplay between the patriarchy, cultural masculinity, and romantic love. In looking closer at García Márquez’s writings about Columbian patriarchs, such as *The General In His Labyrinth* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, these themes are further illuminated. Particularly in the way powerful male figures are reflected as losing relevance and authority—impotent—simply as a natural result of aging.

This is seen in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, as studied in Sarah Driscoll’s paper, “Bodily Remains Body Optics and the Reverse Panopticon in Gabriel García Márquez’s ‘The Autumn of the Patriarch,’” when the patriarch sees his body double before him at the funeral. He equates the experience to something as traumatic as sexual assault, “...he felt raped and diminished by the inclemency of death toward the majesty of power, he saw life without him, he saw without a certain compassion how men were bereft of his authority” (88). Driscoll also cites Patricia Molen’s writing, “Just as male potency comes to represent the Patriarch’s political power, the inability to control eliminatory functions becomes an ingenious symbol for political incontinence” (95). I’ll add, perhaps also “incontinence” in other areas of life, such as love.

The slow death of aging is reflected as gruesome and akin to suffering in many of García Márquez's novels, raising the question of how the culture's reverence for a certain type of masculinity, and the patriarchy, affects the perceived value and importance of human life (and in turn, human love).

Once García Márquez's masterful prose is embraced with an appreciation for his storytelling, and an understanding of his political leanings and views on Latin American society, his message of failing patriarchy and how it poisons human love become clear. One of the prime examples is early on in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, after Fermina Daza's father Lorenzo Daza has discovered his daughter's secret love affair with Florentino Ariza. Believing Florentino Ariza to be undeserving, Lorenzo Daza forbids the relationship. In a meeting between father and lover, Lorenzo Daza, a mule trader, exercises his patriarchal power over Fermina Daza, in comparing her to, "a mule worth her weight in gold," (81), and insists that Florentino Ariza end the relationship. In the novel's first major demonstration of contrast between the power structures of conventional patriarchy (represented in this scene by Lorenzo Daza) and an idealized view of the world (in Florentino Ariza), Florentino protests simply. He asks whether Fermina Daza has been consulted in the matter, saying, "...it seems to me that she is the one who has to decide" (81). Lorenzo Daza responds, "...This is a matter for men and it will be decided by men" (82).

Lorenzo Daza then takes his daughter on an extended journey to break her away from her lover. Fermina Daza's helplessness in the matter is striking, and evokes an experience to which arguably all women can relate:

She asked him where they were going, and he answered: "To our death." Frightened by a response that seemed too close to the truth, she tried to face him with the courage of a few days before, but he took off his belt with its hammered copper buckle, twisted it around his fist, and hit the table with a blow that resounded through the house like a rifle shot. Fermina Daza very well the extent and occasion of her strength, and so she packed a bedroll with two straw mats and a hammock, and two large trunks with all her clothes, certain that this was a trip from which she would never return...It was a demented trip...All her baggage plunged over the side with the mules, but in the centuries-long instant of the fall, until the scream of terror was extinguished at the bottom, she did not think of the poor dead mule driver or his mangled pack but of how unfortunate it was that the mule she was riding had not been tied to the others as well. (82-83)

In also reading romanticized analysis of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, I have found further validation of the belief that García Márquez is criticizing the patriarchy. Eliana Garzón-Duarte, in, "Love in the Time of Cholera: Latent Love Depictions within a Treatise of Courtly Love," takes an overly romanticized view of the characters in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and thus dilutes the key point that García Márquez's is trying to reveal. For example, Garzón-Duarte offers the complicity of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour's mistress, who acts as an accomplice to his suicide, as a sign of her, "devotion and obedience," (98), and thus a representation of her love style. This is surely one way of viewing the mistress's actions. I'm inclined to look at it another way, though. Rather her complicity had more to do with the conventions of the Latin American culture of the time, the expectation that women be submissive than with her unyielding love for her partner. This example is also incomplete without acknowledging the fact that Jeremiah de Saint-Amour is acting in total selfishness in his plan to commit suicide, with his reason being his distaste foraging, his masculine vanity: "I will never be old'...he had made the irrevocable decision to take his own life when he was sixty years old" (15). He premeditates this act without any thought for how it will leave his mistress isolated and alone after his death. This is a further suggestion that *Love in the Time of Cholera* is much more than a magical love story, and any purely romantic reading of the story risks ignorance to the sheer power of the author's underlying message.

Alan Sheardown, in "Love and Disease: the Humanism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*," asserts that the novel's two principal male characters, Dr. Juvenal Urbino and Florentino Ariza, "represent two distinct modes of interaction with the world" (1). I take this one step further, that they represent opposing forces in their culture—the rigidity and formality of patriarchal

society in the distinguished Dr. Juvenal Urbino and idealized freedom in the romantic Florentino Ariza.

Through this lens, we can see Dr. Juvenal Urbino not as the hero as he may be interpreted on the surface, but rather a fool in many ways, and a symbol of the failings of the formal, patriarchal society (and conventional masculinity) he holds so dearly. His, “struggle to build and achieve love with Fermina, despite their marriage of fifty years,” (2) is provided as evidence of this.

This paper also discusses the presence of a humanist view in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Sheardown writes, “Knowing that our inner self is forever in a state of becoming, we also understand that this must also be the case for the other” (4). This is an interesting philosophical view to consider when analyzing the varying expressions of love within *Love in the Time of Cholera*. This fluid nature of self, and reliance on others to help define it, plays a role in how Fermina Daza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino become so reliant upon each other as a part of their identities. Still, they both question whether they are truly in love. Likewise, Florentino Ariza’s unrequited love for Fermina Daza persists as the primary characteristic of his identity.

Enduring Constructs and Idealized Alternatives

Notable to how the patriarchy continues to impact society is the mixed reception of *Love in the Time of Cholera* in Columbia. There, in the author’s native country, the novel was not as widely celebrated as it was throughout the rest of Western society. This is telling of the persistence of the patriarchy and other Latin American constructs. Michael Palencia-Roth wrote of this in, “Gabriel García Márquez: Labyrinths of Love and History.” Upon the release of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, newspaper writer Francisco Lenos Arboleda had such a negative reaction to the novel that he called it “pornographic” (54) and argued that it was, “not worthy of being compared with ‘the immortal *María*,’ a nineteenth-century Columbian novel,” (54) that emulated French romances. I believe there is more to read between the lines of Arboleda’s reaction to *Love in the Time of Cholera* and his avid preference for the work of a purely romantic writer (who did not call Columbian society and values into question). This disdainful response to a novel critical of Columbian society reveals just how pervasively the Latin American patriarchy (and perhaps toxic masculinity) persists in the modern-day (Imran et al. 2020).

García Márquez has confirmed in interviews that his characters and the manifestation of love in *Love in the Time of Cholera* are intentionally idealized. He is a master of crossing between various modes of narrative, language, and symbolism to convey meaning. Palencia-Roth also applauds García Márquez’s ability to portray, “life as he has observed it and as he believes it to be” (54). More pointedly, *Love in the Time of Cholera* reveals how García Márquez *wants* life to be as an alternative to the traditional constructs. This is evidenced by the image that García Márquez cites as his inspiration for writing *Love in the Time of Cholera*:

...An elderly couple, very much in love, happily dancing on the deck of a ship, oblivious to their surroundings...From that image of the dancing couple, García Márquez created a story about passion eventually reciprocated, a reflection on old age much in the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1970 work *La vieillesse* and the manner of Tolstoy’s reflections on death and dying in *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, and a meditation on the art of love. (55)

This refusal to portray love in the same way as romantics is García Márquez’s way of reminding the world that the pain of love (love as an illness) is worsened by the burdens of a patriarchal society. García Márquez himself confirms this in an interview with Raymond Leslie Williams in, “The Visual Arts, the Poetization of Space and Writing: An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez.” Early in the interview, when speaking about *Love in the Time of Cholera*, García Márquez discusses Florentino Ariza’s idealized view of love. He explains that Florentino Ariza developed his conceptualization of love through reading the “bad poets.” He goes on to explain that one must read the bad poets to appreciate the good ones. The fact that Florentino Ariza’s study of love stops with the bad poets, rather than broadening his world view through more sophisticated writing, and that the author has intentionally idealized the character’s view on love, indicates that García Márquez wants to limit Florentino Ariza in some way. That by keeping him somewhat simplistic, García Márquez is undercutting the societal conventions to which Florentino Ariza is confined.

In “Escape from the Time of Cholera: Liebestod Ideology Revealed by Gabriel García Márquez,” David M. Koeninger examines Gabriel García Márquez’s rebellion against the ideology of the love-death or Liebestod. I believe García Márquez has chosen to depict infinite love in a way other than the traditional love-death ending to further demonstrate the beauty and progress of rebelling against conventions. That by pushing back against, or breaking free from, norms—as the reader may wish to see Fermina Daza, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, and Florentino Ariza do throughout the novel—a more hopeful ending than believed possible can indeed be achieved.

Drawing on Koeninger’s views, I believe the river voyage that Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza eventually take together in *Love in the Time of Cholera* is a culmination of a lifetime’s struggle between conforming to and rebelling against a repressive society that has for generations placed powerful men in a superior position over every other person, ideal and pursuit. Koeninger writes, “Leaving behind cargo, passengers and their itinerary, Ariza and García Márquez strive here to completely sever ties between the lovers and their universe” (304).

Indeed, so much about this novel, and these characters, insists on breaking free of oppressive societal constructs. And in having the bravery to do so, something ideal, and beautiful, is possible. For all the ugliness García Márquez reveals to us about patriarchal Latin American masculinity—how it spreads like a disease throughout society—he also reminds us that hope can endure.

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