

Love in the Time of Cholera as Narrative Gerontology: A Critique

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Abstract

Old age is regarded as an impending reality by and large and is understood in monolithic terms as the declining phase of life marked with non-agentiality, senility, inertia etc. that culminates in death. With the postmodern turn, there has been a nuanced and inclusive understanding of the advanced age. Narrative gerontology with humanistic gerontology has facilitated mapping of the individualized subjective experiences that are brought forth as fictionalised narratives in different genres. The paper foregrounds narrative gerontology as a non-scientific but significant medium that impacts the mind set through narrative transportation and contributes in bringing about an attitudinal shift towards old age by dismantling the 'normative'. The paper critiques *Love in the Time of Cholera* as narrative gerontology.

Keywords: Collective Human Condition; Critical Gerontology; Emancipatory Bent; Individualized Subjective Experience; Narrative Gerontology.

Aging is simultaneously a collective human condition
and an individualized subjective experience.
(Hepworth 1)

Literature sensitively reflects human concerns and has inclusively mapped the various thresholds of life in all hues. Old age, being an inevitable reality, has been pivotally problematized and addressed across disciplines and accordingly, occupies substantial space in different genres of literature. Traditionally, old age has been associated with grey hair, suffering, decline and mortality. It has been largely considered as a biological

or chronological process. Aristotle regards, "...youth...hot and moist and old age cold and dry" (Silverstein 6). Conventionally old age is associated with minimal productivity, senility, withdrawal and inadaptability. Old age has been considered as a static and homogeneous phenomenon which has been understood through a singular approach with disease, and decline as the normative. But old age cannot be narrated down to the biology, chronology or sociology of a human being. It has multiple perspectives: "the perspective of human aging is too rich to be reduced to chronological age, life expectancy, or mortality rates" (Silverstein 97).

Experiences of each human being vary according to the cultural, social and political situations of her or his times and they impact the process of aging accordingly. "...human development and ageing are the result of the continuous interaction between biological influences, sociocultural influences, and the decisions and the competencies as well as beliefs and attributions of the developing individual himself or herself. Thus, age is multidimensional" (Straudinger 188). Therefore, aging is an individualized, subjective experience that dawns upon a person's body and mind depending upon one's spirit, selfhood, attitude, constitution and financial security.

In the postmodern scenario, ageing is now being comprehended as a dynamic and multifaceted concept, rather than a fixed, monolithic concept. "...the process of growing older is something which is dynamic, interactive, subject to the twists and turns of life; chance, change and complication" (Spark 2). Critical gerontology is one such discipline that helps in unearthing the hitherto glossed over aspects of old age. It re-conceptualizes ageing by deconstructing the existing myths about old age. It dismantles "normative assumptions and unmasks ideologies that underlie our societies and ways of living" (Zeilig 8). The purpose of critical gerontology is to rebuild the concept of aging which is not about shirking but embracing the "ambiguities and complexities of later life and an interest in quizzing the cultural norms of aging via non-scientific forms of knowing" (9).

Narrative and literary gerontology, as sub-genres of humanistic gerontology, are the non-scientific forms that help critical gerontology in qualitatively recreating the meaning of aging by foregrounding the "value laden dimensions of human experience..." (Spickervii). The stereotypes framing old age have been questioned by critical gerontology and "...narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology, furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and re-configuring age" (Zeilig 7). Narrative gerontology is a

methodology through which the storyteller narrates either his own life story or his experiences of the old people. Drawing upon the theory of Narrative Transportation, a notion coined by Gerrig, where travel is a metaphor for reading, and the transportation of the reader/receiver takes place because of empathy and mental imagery, it can be said that "...stories (about old age) are a way of knowing, are a reflexive way of encouraging people to think critically about their habitual worlds, and can engage and move people emotionally and cognitively, in and through their bodies, stories may challenge and change over time negative views of ageing" (Spark 5). The storyteller's focus remains on her or his surroundings and she or he tries to blend narrative with fiction to provide a critical view of old age.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is an example of narrative gerontology in which Marquez has blended the incidents from his life and family members with the fictional elements of the novel. The novel deconstructs the cultural concepts of old age that treat all elderly persons in a uniform manner and unfolds the hidden truths about old age. Marquez draws the raw material of his fiction from his life and the people around him. Harold Bloom has pointed out that Marquez "invents nothing and merely describes the people and actions he beholds around him..." (17). In an interview with Marlise Simons, Marquez talks about *Love in the Time of Cholera* and states that "Basically my grandparents were the models for many of the people in my books because I knew how they talked, how they behaved. To make sure the characters were real, I would always use my grandfather as the reference point....I was trying to reflect the behaviour of my elders.... I had never seriously explored: old age, love and death... Sex...it is something I am dealing with in this book. As far as I am concerned, this tendency to see the sex life of the aged as repugnant is unjust... My parents in some way are a model for the book. ...many of the experiences are theirs. My parents were married for sixty years, they had sixteen children, my mother had a child after she was forty-two" (142-144).

Just after the birth, Marquez was left in the company of his grandparents who were his companions till he reached the age of eight. His grandparents were in their old age but had been living quite satisfactorily in Aracataca. His grandfather was a strong man who had fought so many wars and was a man of pride but after falling from the ladder in an attempt to catch a parrot he went into a physical decline. He had started walking with a cane and needed help from his daughter and son-in-law in collecting money from the town. "From that moment the old man, who was still

enjoying good health, went into a sharp physical decline...after his fall the old warrior was never the same again" (Martin 86). After his grandfather's inability to provide money, the family had to face poverty with so many aunts and servants to feed. "...Nicolas and Tranquilina, pension less, began to stare poverty in the face as they entered an uncertain and intimidating old age" (86). After the death of his grandfather, at the age of seventy-two, his grandmother had to depend on her son for money. Being a widow, his grandmother became inconsolable and lost her eyesight as well. For Marquez, "it was the end of an entire world" (76). After the loss of maternal grandparents Marquez was taken away by his parents and he met his paternal grandmother who was pregnant in her forties and Marquez's father was outraged to learn about this but the grandmother was quite unperturbed, unapologetic, carefree and assertive. When Marquez's father died at the age of eighty-three, he vicariously experienced his mother's loneliness and suffering that compounded due to her old age and this made him ponder about the old age and its complications. Marquez's strong emotional bond with his grandparents, made him sensitive and empathetic towards their old age experiences and his own growing age also made him ponder and write about old age that culminated in *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

The novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* revolves around aspects like youth, unrequited love, sex, marriage and acceptability, adjustment, companionship and dependability of the husband and wife over the period of time. The novel delineates the finer nuances and varied/subjective experiences of old age and moves beyond the normative by portraying sex and fulfillment of love outside marriage in old age. The novel revolves around Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza who fall in love with each other in youth but their love does not materialize in marriage because Fermina's father does not approve of the relationship as Florentino is an illegitimate child. To distract Fermina from the infatuation, she is sent to a distant family relation. By the time she returns to her town, she has got over her infatuation and marries Juvenal Urbino, a doctor from a reputed wealthy family. This news shatters Florentino from within and he suffers loneliness but vows eternal fidelity to Fermina and keeps on waiting for the day when she will be a widow again:

He did not even stop to think about the obstacle of her being married, because at the same time he decided, as if it depended on him alone, that Dr. Juvenal Urbino had to die. He did not know when or how, but considered it an ineluctable event that he was resolved to wait for without impatience or violence, even till the

end of time. (LTC165)

The day arrives, but he is seventy-six years old by then. Dr. Juvenal Urbino dies at the age of eighty-one while trying to catch a parrot from the mango tree and falls from the ladder. Then Florentino, after waiting for “fifty-one years and nine months and four days” (103), proposes to Fermina but she refuses. However, phoenix-like, the embers are sparked again through the philosophical letters of Florentino that help her in recovering from the loneliness; a friendship again kindles between the two. To change the melancholic mood of Fermina, Florentino arranges a sea voyage for her and accompanies her too. On the ship “the amour is restored and indeed consummated only when the twosome are in their seventies” (Martin 91-92). Then, they reach a station where Fermina sees the people from her family and friends and she fears disgrace because of her husband’s death. To save Fermina from disgrace Florentino tells the captain of the ship to hoist the yellow flag indicating the effect of cholera on the ship. By hoisting the flag they cannot stop at any other harbour and the journey goes on for the two lovers and this accounts for the title of the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

The novel critically analyses the perceptions regarding old age through the old characters in the novel. The novel opens up with the death of Saint Jeremiah, a friend of Dr. Urbino, who commits suicide by taking cyanide. The reason for his death is unfolded by his mistress which was the fear of being old. “She interpreted this as a heroic determination to struggle without quarter against the ravages of time, but he was more specific: he had made the irrevocable decision to take his life when he was sixty year old” (LTC 15). Jeremiah represents old age as the part of life which brings suffering and decay. Thus he ends his life before he grows old. When Dr. Urbino is asked the reason of suicide by Archbishop, he says it is “gerontophobia” (37). Marquez remembers the incident from his childhood when Don Emilio, a Belgian, came to Aracataca with whom Marquez’s grandfather played cards or chess and one day he committed suicide writing a brief note about nobody to blame. He had become useless (Martin 98). Saint Jeremiah is a reflection of Don Emilio who, like the latter in real life, could not face the limitations of advanced life.

On the other hand, there is Dr. Juvenal Urbino who is eighty one year old but does not want to stay inert at home and he believes that “I’ll have plenty of time to rest when I die, but this eventuality is not yet part of my plans” (LTC 4). Though physically he is declining, has become forgetful, disoriented and hard of hearing, he tries to cope up with his health by

taking medicines; makes small notes to remember things and visits the patients' house to care for them. He gets ready wearing the linen suit "with a gold watch chain across his chest as smartly as he had in his younger years" (4). Except for the health issues, he remains busy with some or the other social work with "easy going manner and festive spirit" (9). Dr. Juvenal Urbino, in this way, is a reflection of Marquez's grandfather who had always cared for his family and friends and attended to all their needs. Dr.Urbino exemplifies the graceful transition to old age by accepting the inevitable physical frailties, yet spiritedly evolving ways to cope with them in the best possible way.

Dr.Urbino gradually becomes dependent on his wife Fermina. He needs her support to dress up. He accepts the fact that he needs his wife everywhere, whether at home or in social gatherings, and Fermina helps him in every situation. "FerminaDaza sat next to her husband, as she always did for years, he would fall asleep during the meal or spill soup on his lapel" (35). Fermina, also has health issues due to old age but she does not suffer from memory lapse or loss of hearing. She is instead plagued with sleeplessness. However, she still looks beautiful in her stylish attire. She still has that "clear almond eyes" and her characteristic haughtiness. But she has nothing much to do in her own home because the children are grown up and she and her husband and a few servants are there in the house.

Dr.Urbino and Fermina have a normal husband-wife relationship with ups and downs. They once quarrel on a very trivial issue of missing soap in the washroom and that leads to the "most serious argument in fifty years of living together but the reason alone has made them abandon their responsibilities and begin a new life" (29). But Fermina considered herself as "destiny's darling: the happiest woman in the world" (125) as Urbino's wife and mother of his children. In later years of life, after celebrating their golden jubilee, both Dr.Urbino and Fermina realise that "they were not capable of living even an instant without the other..." (26). However, the two are separated as Dr.Urbino dies and Fermina suffers the pangs of loneliness. Widow Fermina is a reflection of Marquez's mother and grandmother who intensely suffered the loss of their respective spouses as widows:

She was a ghost in a strange house that overnight had become immense and solitary and through which she wandered without purpose, asking herself in anguish which of them was deader: the man who had died or the woman he had left behind.(279)

She remembers what her husband had said to her once when she expressed her unhappiness: "Always remember that the most important thing in a good marriage is not happiness but stability" (300) and during the initial loneliness of her widowhood she realizes that it "was the lodestone that had given them both so many happy hours" (300). However, while coming to terms with her changed situation, she does realize that she wanted to be herself again- not just Widow Urbino: "...to recover all that she had been obliged to give up in half a century of servitude that had doubtless made her happy but which, once her husband was dead, did not leave her even with the vestiges of her identity" (278).

Florentino Ariza, despite severe aches in his bones for the last thirty five years is able to live happily as a spirited man because he has a strong will power to live longer just to be with his love Fermina. He is conscious of his baldness and takes medicines to prevent further hair loss. "He had spent a great deal of money, ingenuity, and will power to disguise the seventy six years he had completed in March..." (48). Florentino becomes very careful regarding his health. "The truth is that by the standards of his time, Florentino Ariza had crossed the line into old age" (169) but for Florentino age has never been a limitation for preventing him from pursuing his interests. "...Chronological age becomes less and less informative regarding the capabilities, attitudes and typical behaviours characterizing a given older adult" (Straudinger 190). Florentino, at the age of seventy-six, indulges in a sexual relationship with a fourteen year old girl, America Vicuna and she feels the same pleasure being with him though the difference of age is like of a grandfather and a daughter. The normative view is that the elderly become sexually inert and are even expected to refrain from sex and love. But this is not the case with Florentino Ariza who involves in a sexual relationship in his later years with a much younger girl and moreover the girl readily accepts Florentino as her lover. "...after their first encounters they had both lost awareness of their ages, and they treated each other with the familiarity of a husband and wife..." (LTC 275).

Though Florentino realized that one could be in love with several people at the same time "... and not betray any of them" (270) he knew that Fermina was irreplaceable (271) and his ardent passion and unwavering love for her makes him desire for her physically even at the age of seventy. Florentino Ariza is a reflection of Marquez's grandfather and father. Marquez's grandfather had a mistress when he was in his sixties and Marquez's father was of that same nature and always lived away from family on the excuse of business.

That old age is a subjective experience and it is never too late to learn anything new if the individual desires, is exemplified by Florentino who learns to use a typewriter at the age of seventy. It takes him only a week to write a letter and send it to Fermina. As Lindauer in his book *Aging, Creativity and Art: A Positive Perspective on Late-Life Development* says that those who have worth of old age believe in their capabilities and losses are interpreted as independency in old age and with the help of exercise or practice they can resist the decay of their age (7). Florentino wants to combat the limitations which are brought with old age and he continues to follow his routine life and goes to River Company of the Caribbean which is found by his father and his two brothers. The owner, Uncle Leo XII is ninety-two years old and is still not willing to retire from the company. But due to ill health, at last he unwillingly retires and gives his presidency to his nephew. In a way he suffers from role loss where Florentino looks after River Company. But Florentino does not retire even though he is on the verge of old age. For him "it was the rust of routine, which he had despised and feared so much, but which protected him from an awareness of his age" (218).

Florentino's determined and reckless love for Fermina, makes him await Dr.Urbino's death from the very moment he learns about Fermina's marriage with him: "For her sake he had won fame and fortune...had cared for his health and personal appearance" and after Dr.Urbino's death, he writes to Fermina typed letters that help her to reconcile to her situation and get over it. She reads those letters furtively and finds them to be "meditations on life, love, old age, death: ideas that had often fluttered around her head like nocturnal birds but dissolved into a trickle of feathers when she tried to catch hold of them" (299). When she learns about the stories in *Justice* about the infidelity of her husband with his childhood friend, Lucrecia del Real and the defamation of her father by the newspaper regarding many illegal deals made by her father, she feels betrayed and it appears that she has lost the will to live. But Florentino harbours "hope amidst the ruins of disaster" (321) and he is proved right when Fermina receives him with renewed affection after his accident.

The rumours of this strange friendship alarms Fermina's daughter, Ofelia who reacts thus: "Love is ridiculous at our age...but at theirs it is revolting" (323) and America Vicuna also, on learning that Florentino intends to get married, says "That's a lie. Old men don't marry" (289). Fermina snubs her daughter and confides in her daughter-in-law: "A century ago, life screwed that poor man and me because we were too young, and now they want to do the same thing because we are too old" (323). Her experiences

as a widow transform her and she says: "What I would like is to walk out of this house, keep going, going, going, and never come back" (324) and subsequently, she accepts Florentino's invitation to take a pleasure cruise along the river. She boards *New Fidelity*, the boat that was to take her on her first river voyage and Florentino accompanies her. On board, she realizes that she has lost hearing in her left ear but she accepts it as one of irremediable aspects of old age. Both, Florentino and Fermina, accept each other as they are, make love and enjoy each other's company. Their imminent return makes her anxious. She says: "It is going to be like dying" (340). Florentino asks the Captain to display the yellow flag, indicating cholera on the boat and says "Let us keep going, going, going, back to La Dorado" (348). The Captain is awed by Florentino's invincible power, his intrepid love and the realization that "it is life, more than death that has no limits" (348). When the Captain asks for how long can they keep going like this, "Florentino had kept his answer ready for fifty-three years, seven months and eleven days and nights-Forever" (348) and the novel ends. Marquez while talking of the novel in the interview says "The first image I had for this book is that of an old couple fleeing by boat. An old couple, happy on a boat, dancing on the deck" (Simons142)

Thus, the novel delineates the plurality of the experiences of old age as they are subjective and experiential. The narrative portrays "the complexities and contradictions that are embedded with the experience of growing older, along with the construction of different selves and identities over the life course" (Spark 5). Marquez, through his personal experiences and observations, brings forth the multidimensionality and dynamism of old age. The novel is a fictionalised narrative of how his family members and acquaintances face challenges of old age and it is their individuality, surroundings and their circumstances that enable them to adapt, embrace or shirk the complications of declining years. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Dr. Urbino and Florentino find ways to cope up with the problems of ageing, while Saint Jeremiah evades old age by committing suicide. Florentino and Fermina decide to live life anew at the far end as lovers, throwing the 'normative' to winds. Thus, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, drawing upon Marquez's biographical dimensions and subjective experiences, is a fine example of narrative gerontology that foregrounds nuanced experiences of old age and calls for a humanistic understanding of the elderly, dismantling the stereotypical and lending an emancipatory bent.

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