

# The Interplay of Class Struggle and Human Relationships in G. G Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Dr. Khagendra Neupane\*

## Abstract

*Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his Love in the Time of Cholera explores complex themes of social injustice, class struggle, and alienation in a Spanish colonial town located along the Caribbean coast of Colombia. He uses a masterful blend of magical realism, vivid imagery, and insightful prose to offer a poignant portrayal of the societal inequalities that plague the town and its inhabitants. At the centre of the novel's narrative are the two young lovers, Florentino and Fermina, who are separated by their social classes. Fermina's father expects her to marry Urbino, a man who can elevate their family's social status.*

*Marquez illustrates how Florentino, despite his deep love for Fermina, is confined by his lower social class and thus must work tirelessly to amass wealth with the help of his uncle. This struggle for social mobility is a powerful commentary on the constraints that exist within the town's social hierarchy. Throughout the novel, Marquez aptly captures the complex interplay between social classes and the effects they have on individuals. He shows how societal expectations and constraints can tear individuals apart and how class consciousness can have a devastating impact on human relationships. The power dynamics in the society are portrayed with great sensitivity, and the author offers a stark reminder of the injustices that exist in the society.*

*The novel is also rich in symbolism, which adds another layer of meaning to the narrative. The image of cholera, which permeates the novel, serves as a metaphor for the moral decay and sickness that exist within the town's social hierarchy. The character of Fermina also serves as an embodiment of the struggle against social conventions and the desire for personal freedom. The text offers a profound commentary on the human condition. Marquez's insightful understanding of social inequality and the effects of class consciousness on individuals is masterfully portrayed in the novel.*

**Key Words :** Social injustice, class divide, patriarchy and capitalist

The text illuminates the societal constraints and economic determinants that shape the lives of individuals in Latin American society. Through the experiences of the main characters, Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza, Marquez highlights the impact of class

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\* Asst. Professor of English,  
Patan Multiple Campus, TU, Lalitpur, Nepal  
Email: [kpsharma26@gmail.com](mailto:kpsharma26@gmail.com)

stratification on personal choices and overall existence. As Abraham and Morgan argue, "Classes are determined on the basis of the relationship of the individual to the means of production. It is not a man's occupation but his position in relation to the instruments of production that determines his class" (37).

The narrative depicts people divided based on the distribution of power, prestige, and wealth in society. This reflects local community incidents and goes beyond the local community, portraying their conflicts. Dow argues that "Not entirely convincingly, that, unlike other anti-enclosure disturbances, these incidents went beyond the confines of the local community to become more generalised protests in which social conflict was explicitly articulated" (367). The unequal distributions of wealth and power generate social stratification in society, and people in the lower classes are dominated by the higher classes. As Marquez writes, "They were nothing more than the struggles of the poor, driven like oxen by the landowners, against barefoot soldiers who were driven in turn by the government" (73). Marquez further depicts how the conditions of decadence and civil war, following the independence from Spain and the abolition of slavery, have led to the creation of classes in society. The struggle for power between the conservative and liberal parties is a significant factor in shaping the social hierarchy, and it is evident that this struggle is rooted in deeper social and political issues. As Marquez writes, "In the civil wars which had bloodied the country since independence, this thought joined with enthusiasm the liberals, especially the youngest, who had succeeded in making elect a president for their party after 45 years of conservative hegemony" (35). Marquez's portrayal of the civil war as a social fight highlights the interconnectedness of political and social struggles. The struggle for power between the conservative and liberal parties is not only a political conflict but also a manifestation of the class struggle that has existed since the beginning of history. The upper class has maintained its dominant position throughout history, and this has had a profound impact on the social and political systems in the country. Robert T. Connolly argues that the novel "offers a powerful critique of class relations in Latin America, highlighting the ways in which the capitalist system perpetuates inequality and social injustice."

During their childhood, Florentino and Fermina develop an attraction towards each other, but their class differences prevent them from being together. Throughout the novel, Florentino is subject to the hegemony of the ruling class, leading to his exclusion from agency and authority. He is subordinated, exploited, abused, and living in poverty, drifting along at the mercy of chance and accident. As his mother observes, "It is the eternal damnation of his bastard son, a child of streets" (169), highlighting the societal stigma that accompanies illegitimacy and lower-class status. Florentino's disadvantaged position is further reinforced by his residence in the lower-class neighbourhoods of the city, and his vulnerable appearance serves as a symbol of his social condition.

In contrast to the dignified persona of Urbino, Florentino is "bony and erect, his skin dark and clean-shaven, his eyes avid behind round spectacles in silver frames" (44).

Thus, Marquez uses vivid imagery to depict the stark contrast between the privileged and the disadvantaged members of society, highlighting how class differences can create and perpetuate inequality and social hierarchies. Despite this, Florentino remains steadfast in his pursuit of Fermina, even as he confronts numerous obstacles that threaten to keep them apart.

Despite their childhood attraction, their different social classes pose a significant obstacle to their relationship. Florentino's illegitimacy and lower-class background, symbolised by his sombre appearance and lack of agency, make him vulnerable to the hegemony of the ruling classes. In contrast, Fermina's father Lorenzo Daza, a wealthy merchant, aims to elevate his daughter's social status by making her a "great lady" (81). As Verghese notes, "Social class can be defined as a portion of population that is regarded by itself and others as differing from other portions of that population in prestige, appropriate social contacts, activities possessions and value orientations" (223). The pervasive influence of class in their society is reflected in Lorenzo's class-based objections to Florentino as a potential partner for Fermina. Furthermore, Lorenzo's patriarchal beliefs reinforce the societal norms that limit women's agency in matters of love and marriage. He asserts that "this is a matter for men and it will be decided by men" (82), reducing Fermina's autonomy in choosing her partner. The intersections of class and gender roles in the novel illustrate how social hierarchies operate to restrict the agency of individuals based on their social position.

In her rejection of Florentino, Fermina is influenced by her father's words, "Imagine how your mother would feel if she knew you were courted by an Urbino de la Calle" (122). Fermina comes to the realisation that what she thought was love with Florentino is nothing more than an adolescent illusion: "She just managed to think: My God, poor thing! Florentino smiled, tried to say something, tried to follow her, but she erased him from her life with a wave of her hand" (102). Fermina also writes in a letter to Florentino: "Today, when I saw you, I realised that what is between us is nothing more than an illusion" (102). Fermina's rejection of Florentino is due to his class not aligning with hers, as he is of a lower class. When cholera breaks out, Fermina is chased out of town by her father, and the two continue to exchange letters until the relationship is finally broken when Fermina returns home and marries Dr. Juvenal Urbino.

Urbino belongs to the upper class and is the standard bearer of modernization, having studied in Paris and defining himself as someone who bridges the gap between liberals and conservatives. However, his attempts to do so are met with criticism and ridicule: "the liberals considered him a gothic troglodyte, the conservatives said he was almost a mason. . . His less fierce detractors thought he was just an aristocrat delighted in the delights of the Poetic Feast as the nation bled to death in endless civil war" (44). Urbino's expeditions to Paris further reaffirm his elite role at the time. He marries Fermina despite her being far below his social class to gain leverage and dominate her: "Fermina is a useful adornment, as befits the wife of a man like Urbino" (McNerney 82).

Urbino dedicates his life to raising public health standards by instituting cholera control policies in the city. He claims knowledge "without scientific basis other than his own experience" that "most fatal diseases had their own specific smell" (40). He is a perfectionist who every morning "tweezes his moustache in an atmosphere saturated with real cologne" (90), never leaves the house without being "cleanly shaved and perfumed with lotions from his hairdresser" (48) committed to the eradication of cholera and the promotion of public works.

Urbino, despite his noble work, reflects the temperament of the bourgeois class. He takes pleasure in brutalising the parrot that symbolically represents the lower class. The parrot escapes from Urbino's cage. Seeing it in the mango tree, he shouts: "You villain! the parrot replies in an identical voice: "You are even more of a scoundrel, doctor" (Marquez 41). The conflict between Urbino and the parrot represents the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat based on Marxism as Terry Eagleton notes, "Class struggle is the motor of history" (4).

Fermina wants to turn herself into a leading lady, therefore, she consolidates her social status by marrying Dr. Urbino. However, she is not accepted by the social elite who impose their conventions on her. Her social rank after her marriage to Urbino did not prevent her rejection by bourgeois families and her feeling "of always being with someone else" (Marquez 207), nor her awareness of the fact that "she had been overtaken faster than she had believed in the tangle of conventions and prejudices of her new world" (Marquez 208). Fermina's struggle to fit into the upper-class society represents the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the nouveau riche. Fredric Jameson writes, "The cultural struggle is always also a class struggle" (36).

Although Fermina shares Urbino's way of life and is loyal, she is "an irrational idolater of tropical flowers and domestic animals" (Marquez 21), and up to the end rejects the oppressiveness of city life. Fermina's love for nature represents her desire to escape from the capitalist system. Louis Althusser argues, "Nature is a constant reminder of the nonhuman, noncapitalist world" (55).

Fermina falls prey to the patriarchy with her marriage to Doctor Urbino who treats her like a commodity. She wishes her husband dead: "That night, on the contrary, she wished him dead with all her heart" (Marquez 249). She wants the same rights as her husband. Urbino represents the patriarchy, and in this connection, a Marxist feminist critic, Nancy Hartsock writes, "Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists on gender differences and hierarchies" (14). Pelayo Ruben sees women subjugated in patriarchy, and they suffer discrimination in terms of age, race and class: "Love in the Time of Cholera does well in a feminist reading because it asserts the possibilities of women to overcome the prejudices of age, race and social class" (161).

Religion also acts as a tool to dominate people's lives in the novel. The powerful group in society uses it to control the dominated group with its consent and thus pursue its hegemony. Sara Castro-Klaren contends that "Love in the Time of Cholera" illustrates how the system of oppression and domination is maintained through cultural and ideological mechanisms that justify the status quo. Fermina fights against the nun who claims to be a mediator between God and ordinary people. People go to the nun to be redeemed from their sins. However, Fermina defies the nun's rule: "I prefer direct communication with God" (Marquez 156). In this regard Karl Marx notes, "Religion is the opium of the people" (15).

Fermina Daza resists becoming the bourgeois woman her father desires her to be and feels alienated from the bourgeois community. For instance, Michael Wood argues that Fermina "comes to understand that her husband's society and the narrow bourgeois society she has herself grown up in have no room for women who think for themselves" (187). Similarly, John Beverley comments on the novel's portrayal of the "failure of bourgeois morality" and argues that "Fermina's rejection of Urbino's extramarital affair is a rejection of bourgeois morality." (225)

Urbino's affair with Mrs. Barbara Lynch further complicates Fermina's life and reinforces her feeling of being trapped in a life that belongs more to her husband than to herself. As Beverly points out, Fermina's reaction to Urbino's infidelity shows that she "recognizes the lack of autonomy her bourgeois marriage has afforded her and seeks to define herself independently" (225). She acknowledges that she is a slave to Urbino's empire of happiness and seeks to become free from his possession. Fermina's personal quest to liberate herself from the patriarchal bourgeoisie is highlighted in the novel. Wood notes that Fermina "refuses the role assigned to her and instead creates a space for herself" (187). By rejecting the traditional female design and living in the same house with self-exploitation, Fermina breaks the paradigm of the bourgeois woman.

The love story of Fermina and Florentino is also a significant aspect of the novel. H. Luis describes it as "exceptional love" and highlights Marquez's skill in portraying their relationship (5). Thomas Pynchon notes the theme of love and the impact of social pressures on the couple's youthful idyll. As Pynchon comments, "It tells the story of a youthful idyll which, cut short first by social pressures and then by the young woman's sudden change of heart, is finally renewed and consummated more than half a century later" (205).

Florentino, an octogenarian, reunites with Fermina after the death of her husband Urbino. During a riverboat trip, Florentino kisses Fermina for the first time in fifty-three years, sensing that she has "the sour smell of old age" (Marquez 335). Florentino's marginality allows him to succeed in the elite-dominated system on his own terms, becoming an example of defiant vitality in asserting his rights: "it is life, more than death, which has no limits" (Marquez 348). Through his eternal love and fidelity, Florentino breaks societal norms to consummate his passion with Fermina on the infinitive Bateau-Mouche ride.

The text clearly shows how true love overpowers hierarchy. Roland Walter suggests that the novel is an example of "class struggle with a happy ending" (91). He argues that the novel's resolution is unrealistic and fails to challenge the existing social hierarchy. In contrast, Srinivas Aravamudan's article, "Garcia Marquez and the Marxist Imagination," explores the novel's Marxist themes, suggesting that Marquez critiques the bourgeoisie's obsession with materialism and portrays Florentino as a revolutionary figure who resists the constraints of the dominant class (Aravamudan 116). Similarly, in her article "Class, Gender, and Culture in *Love in the Time of Cholera*," Carol Clark discusses how the novel portrays the limitations of traditional gender roles in the patriarchal society, emphasising Fermina's struggle to escape the constraints of the bourgeois community (Clark 47). John D. Blanco in his article "Love and Violence in *Love in the Time of Cholera*," analyses the novel's portrayal of violence and power struggles in romantic relationships, suggesting that the novel's ending reinforces the existing social order (Blanco 123).

Thus, the novel reflects the social injustice, oppression and hierarchical condition of Latin American society. The class hierarchy is consolidated by the concept of social oppression. It exists where the voice of the voiceless is not heard. Fermina is dehumanising as her determination to ensure the well-being of her individual life becomes volatile. Florentino and Fermina rebel against a world where history displaces the importance of human effort. They come together when they put their guts together to challenge bourgeois society and overcome the class hierarchy that initially hindered their love.

The novel demonstrates the importance of human agency and the power of rebellion against a society that values material wealth over human relationships. Florentino and Fermina's defiance against societal norms, particularly the class hierarchy that initially kept them apart, is a testament to their unwavering commitment to each other and their rejection of the values of bourgeois society. The novel suggests that genuine love and human connection are capable of overcoming even the most entrenched social hierarchies and oppressive systems. Angela Perez-Mejia analyses the novel's portrayal of love as a form of resistance against the capitalist system that prioritises material wealth over human connection.

*Love in the Time of Cholera* is a complex and multifaceted work that engages with important themes related to class consciousness, Marxism, and the class hierarchy. Through the characters of Fermina and Florentino, the novel explores the power dynamics and social inequalities that pervade Latin American society. By emphasising the importance of human agency and the potential for rebellion against oppressive systems, the novel offers a powerful critique of the social and economic inequalities that continue to plague societies around the world.

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