

Fermina daza: a strong independent woman



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The idea of equality of the sexes in Latin America is a relatively new phenomena. Until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the time period of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, women were predominantly treated as the inferior sex. Therefore, women were also often excluded from taking part in public life like their male counterparts in areas such as those pertaining to politics, economics, and education. Although women of the time period do not enjoy the same social freedom of their male counterparts, Gabriel García Márquez in his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* does not portray women as oppressed. Rather, Márquez portrays several of his female characters as strong, resourceful, and independent individuals. This is particularly evident in how the novel presents Fermina Daza in her marriage to Dr. Juvenal Urbino as a strong, independent woman who is the intellectual equal of her husband.

Despite not having received the same level of education as her husband, Fermina demonstrates that she is still the intellectual equal of her husband by outsmarting his rules. Unlike Fermina, who never finishes her studies nor receives her baccalaureate degree, Urbino “ had completed advanced studies in medicine and surgery” to the point that “ none of his contemporaries seemed as rigorous and as learned as he in his science” (Márquez 105). Yet, Urbino comes to appreciate his wife’s abundant domestic knowledge and skills after she becomes “ tired of his lack of understanding” and “ asked him for an unusual birthday gift: that for one day he would take care of the domestic chores” (Márquez 222). Through the course of her birthday, Urbino demonstrates himself to be completely helpless regarding domestic knowledge and skills so that Fermina must

resume command of the house prior to lunch. Regardless of his claims that Fermina would equally struggle to cure the sick, both Urbino and Fermina learn from this experience that each must appreciate the other's unique knowledge and skills. Similarly, after discovering a discrepancy in Urbino's proclamation that "nothing that does not speak will come into [their] house", resourcefully Fermina discovers and then buys a royal Paramaribo parrot, who speaks in a voice seemingly human (Márquez 23). Thus, Urbino "bowed to the ingenuity of his wife" and recognizes that she is capable of outsmarting him and his rules (Márquez 23). Therefore, by outsmarting Urbino's rules Fermina demonstrates that despite her lacking as advanced tutelage as her husband received, she is still his intellectual equal and he should appreciate her as such.

Fermina's strong character and resolve is most evident in her determination and refusal to let others, particularly her husband, influence her choices or make decisions for her. This is clearly seen when she decides to leave and go live with her cousin Hildebranda after she becomes aware that Urbino is having an affair. Since Urbino "knew the strength of her character very well", he simply "accepted her decision with humility" (Márquez 235). However, this does not prevent Urbino from seeking to persuade Fermina in her decisions, especially using the intervention of religious authority figures. However, instead of swaying her in favor of Urbino and his ideas, the involvement of religious authority figures in Urbino's and Fermina's relationship makes her even more adamant in her own opinions and choices. This is particularly evident prior to their courtship, when Urbino's last resort in wooing Fermina "was the mediation of Sister Franca de la Luz, Superior of

the Academy” (Márquez 125). Since Fermina hates her, she becomes outraged and becomes increasingly more vehement in her refusal to speak with Urbino. Similarly, this occurs when Urbino sends the Bishop of Riohacha “ on a pastoral visit” to Fermina while she is living with Hildebranda in order to convince her to return home to him (Márquez 236). Rather than give Urbino the satisfaction of her giving in to his request, Fermina “ refused in an amiable but firm manner” when the Bishop asks to hear her confession “ with the explicit argument that she had nothing to repent of” (Márquez 236). She does not allow her decision to be influenced by the Bishop, but does leave with Urbino when he visits only because “ she would be happy to leave with him” (Márquez 254). This can also be seen during their honeymoon in how, although Fermina wanted to turn on the light in their suite, “ she wanted to be the one to do it, without anyone’s ordering her to, and she had her way” (Márquez 158). Overall, Fermina is a strong character who does not allow others, especially her husband, to persuade her or make decisions for her, instead choosing what she wants or what is most beneficial to her.

Although Fermina Daza is dependent upon her husband like most women of her time, her husband is equally if not more dependent upon her. This is particularly evident after their golden wedding anniversary, when both “ were not capable of living for an instant without the other... and that capacity diminished as their age increased” (Márquez 26). However, neither Fermina nor Urbino “ could have said if their mutual dependence was based on love or convenience” (Márquez 26). Urbino’s dependence on Fermina is best illustrated through his need for her to care for him in his old age. Since Urbino is ten years older than Fermina, as he grows older he continually

becomes weaker leaving Fermina as the strongest of the pair. At first, Fermina simply assists her husband with tasks such as bathing and dressing out of love, but for the last five years of Urbino's life " she had been obliged to do it regardless of the reason because he could not dress himself" (Márquez 26). As Urbino declines in health with his increasing age, he increasingly comes to depend upon Fermina in order to live. Basically, Urbino depends on Fermina more than Fermina depends on him.

Despite Fermina's seeming dependence on Urbino for stability and companionship, she is still very independent minded. Unlike many other women of her time, she is independent in how she does not necessarily rely on her husband for a place to live. This can be seen in how Fermina " threatened to move back to her father's old house, which still belonged to her" during the escalating argument between herself & Urbino over whether or not there is any soap in the bath (Márquez 29). This is also demonstrated when she leaves and goes to live with her cousin Hildebranda after she becomes aware that Urbino is having an affair. However, her independence is most clearly illustrated in how Fermina continues living after Urbino's sudden death. Despite his fear of any possible pain associated with death, " what worried Dr. Urbino most about dying was the solitary life Fermina Daza would lead without him" (Márquez 45). However, Urbino's fear is unfounded because " from her first moment as a widow, it was obvious that Fermina Daza was not as helpless as her husband had feared" (Márquez 46). When Fermina's son suggests his wife should accompany her on her riverboat journey, Fermina says that she is " too big to have anyone take care of [her]"

(Márquez 325). Unlike her husband, Fermina is independent and does not need anyone to take care of nor provide for her.

Fermina's marriage to Urbino reveals that she is a strong, independent woman who is the intellectual equal of her husband. Urbino depends on Fermina more than Fermina depends on him since she does not need anyone to take care of nor provide for her. Despite her lack of as advanced tutelage as her husband received, by outsmarting Urbino's rules Fermina demonstrates she is still his intellectual equal and that he should appreciate her as such. In addition, Fermina is a strong character since she does not allow others, especially her husband, to persuade her or make decisions for her, instead choosing what she wants or what is most beneficial to her. Overall, by presenting Fermina Daza in her marriage to Dr. Juvenal Urbino as a strong, independent woman who is the intellectual equal of her husband, Márquez in his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* does not portray women as oppressed but rather as quite equal to their male counterparts.