Study of Time in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985)

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Abstract:

Different interpretations of time have resulted in equally different understandings of life and literature. In this paper, Garcia’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) has been analyzed strictly on the basis of the concept of time it represents. Lilla Kopar’s concept of ‘figurative time’ and Genette’s concept of ‘achrony’ best represent the time and structure of the novel. The time in the novel is circular cyclic, repetitive. The reading of the novel makes us feel that the time is purely psychological phenomenon. Garcia in his novel displays that human reality has not changed since the beginning of human generation because humans are still subject to similar pains and pleasures of life. The novel is an instance of ‘iterative narrative’ using ‘achrony’ and ‘iterative syllepsis’ as the techniques of representing temporal structure of the novel. In this way the novel breaks away from the normal sense of time and reality simultaneously questioning the paradigms of modern constructs of time and reality.

Time has undergone several interpretations since beginning and has accordingly shaped life and literature. Lilla Kopar gave a concept of time which he calls ‘figurative time’ (7). It is based on natural human perception of time juxtaposing circular, cyclic and linear time. This ‘figurative time’ goes a long way in the understanding of the story of the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). Gerard Genette, in book *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in the Method* (1983) says: “I can very well tell a story without specifying the place where it happens; nevertheless, it is almost impossible for me not to locate the story in time with respect to my narrating act since I must necessarily tell the story in a past, present and future” (Genette 215). The relationship between the narrative’s representation of the story time “is basic to the narrative text, and suppressing this relationship by eliminating one of its members is not only sticking to the text, but is quite simply killing it” (Genette 35). A deeper reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera* reveals the temporal basis of the story that incorporates both the linear and the circular concepts of time. Based on the concept of figurative thinking, Lilla Kopar calls this understanding of time as ‘figurative time’ (7) which further stresses that patterns are repeated in history creating a coherence between events and people separated in time. It suggests an “Intertwined coexistence of past, present and future where the past becomes a melting pot of culturally different narratives” (Lilla Kopar 4). In such narratives events are not related to each other in time but connected figuratively and are “based on the natural human desire to compare and relate two events, people or phenomenon to well known things in order to understand them” (Lilla Kopar 4). Genette also coins a term ‘achrony’ which “entails the existence of temporally indefinite narrative sections” (79). Achrony deals with the events “that we cannot place
at all in relation to the events surrounding them” (Genette 83). According to Genette these ‘unplaceable’ events need not be attached to some other events “which would require the narrative to define them as being earlier or later” (ibid). An achrony is a form of anachrony “deprived of every temporal connection” and ultimately is “dateless and ageless” (84). The narrative having ‘achronic structure’ disengages its arrangement of events from all dependence, “even inverse dependence, on the chronological sequence of the story it tells” (84). Genette’s another term ‘syllepsis’ resembles Kopar’s ‘figurative time’ in its entirety. Syllepsis takes the events together both temporal or other and forms achronic grouping governed by one or another kinship (spatial, temporal, or other). Syllepsis (geographical or thematic) is a principle on the basis of which many narratives are put together having a particular theme or background by inserting numerous stories justified by relations of analogy or contrast. In such narratives the duration of the events narrated remains elusive and subject to the readers’ interpretations. Such narratives fall under the category of ‘iterative narrative’ as they represent events as scenes or as narrative moments “where action is almost completely obliterated in favor of psychological and social characterization” (Genette 111). These narrative moments form a sort of descriptive-discursive magma very different and remote from the usual criteria of “scenic” temporality and even from all narrative temporality.

**Story:** Tranzito Ariza and his daughter Fermina Daza migrated to Macondo where Fermina secretly fell in love with Florentino. Her father put her under the care and guardianship of his sister, Aunt Escolastica who became soft towards her niece becoming an accomplice in her secret love affair. Tranzito discovered all this and banished Aunt Escolastica from the town and sent her to a far off village. He decided to take her daughter to a far off village where Fermina’s maternal parents lived. Fermina’s mother had married against the wishes of her family. Similarly Fermina’s love was against the wishes of her father. Tranzito Ariza felt his own past repeating in Fermina and Florentino’s love relation. He felt haunted by his own past. Finally Fermina chose to marry a wealthy doctor Urbino. Florentino was devastated and whiled away almost fifty years of his life in 622 affairs, yet he reserved his heart for Fermina with a hope that one day her husband will surely die to enable him to purpose to her one more time. Fermina’s husband did die at last. After fifty-one years, nine months and four days later, he repeated his vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love on Fermina’s first night as a widow. At the pretext of the love story the narrator has given us many glimpses of civil war, the structure of society that was changing at a great pace at the advent of modernism.

**Analysis:** Narratological understanding of time enhances the final understanding of story of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Time in the novel is not linear, nor it is purely fantastic as some critics and scholars might claim. Memory is central to the theme and structure of the novel. It is the subjective time and figurative time that marks the basic tenet of the temporal analysis of the
narrative. Genette has also opined that “the narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading” (Genette 34). It is the natural tendency of human mind that it tends to forget order, duration and frequency of events in life. It, however, does not forget the central experiences of those events which is called qualitative time as an opposite of linear time that is more quantitative in nature. The meaning of life is determined by memory against historical and logical notions of meaning and identity. Garcia has narrated his text on the premise that, “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it”, a statement that occurs in the epigraph of Garcia’s living to Tell the Tale. Kopar’s concept of time is similar to time of the novel. It is objective, psychological, cyclic, circular and the repetitive that is represented in the text through the technique of ‘syllepsis’ which is thematic, characteristic, climatic, and experience centric making the novel look like ‘a mental hodgepodge’. The ‘iterative syllepsis’ destroys the concepts of duration, speed and frequency making story time like a constant figure not passing but recycling endlessly to make it appear stagnant. Genette uses the term ‘achrony’ to designate a text with “unplaceable events” (79). ‘Prolepsis’ and ‘analepsis’ in the narrative do not remain mere technical terms of narrative analysis rather they become here and now of the realistic experiences of the characters. Kopar also suggests that such narratives are based on the concept of ‘figurative time’, i.e., time as experienced by people in pre-modern times. In those times, says Kopar, it was experimental time that was at the heart of the way civilizations existed. Similarly, Garcia also raises the concerns of Latin American countries by fictionally locating them in the time which preceded modernism. It is through the way of telling the stories that the writer has been able to recreate the native world free from the so called slogans of progress, development, fraternity, equality and justice. The meanings and priorities of life were different following natural human perception of time. Garcia’s fiction represents a shift from pre-modern to the modern, giving precedence to the former through memory and in memory to tell and represent what is natural, human, indigenous and original. Modernism represents dehumanization where false and artificial was preached as real; history is fictional and fiction is history as well. The narrative highlights how in modern times reality is intrinsically artificial and manipulated by those in power. The following extract is quoted to illustrate the argument:

It was a brief and bitter visit. Sister Franca de la Luz, wasting no time on formalities, offered honorable reinstatement to Fermina Daza. The reason for her expulsion would be erased not only from the records but also from the memory of the Community, and this would allow her to finish her studies and receive her baccalaureate degree. Fermina Daza was perplexed and wanted to know why. “It is the request of someone who deserves everything he desires and whose only wish is to make you happy,” said the nun. “Do you know who that is?” (LITC 126).
Sometimes, the fiction and reality overlap and coincide, creating confusion of identities. The novel deals in different events of different time periods put in one bolus by linking them in terms of theme, character, space, climate and geography etc. Genette categorizes such stories under the term ‘achrony’ having similar features like that of Kopar’s concept of figurative perception of time. The narrative refers to the memory and vice versa. The events are not narrated in the order of linear time rather they are figuratively narrated ‘in the order of knowledge’ (Kopar 6). Let us read the following extract which can also be taken to be representing the ‘achronic structure’ of the whole novel:

**IT was Inevitable:** the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love. Dr. Juvenal Urbino noticed it as soon as he entered the still darkened house where he had hurried on an urgent call to attend a case that for him had lost all urgency many years before. The Antillean refugee Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, disabled war veteran, photographer of children, and his most sympathetic opponent in chess, had escaped the torments of memory with the aromatic fumes of gold cyanide (*LITC* 1).

This is how the novel begins foregrounding almost everything it is going to narrate. The phrase “IT WAS INEVITABLE” tells us silently about the deterministic nature of time in the story. The passage represents a mental hodgepodge of several temporalities ‘sylleptically’ narrating a large tract of story or memory itself. The passage is a remembering activity like “an event we must ultimately take to be dateless and ageless: to be an achrony” (Genette 84). Different events are not located in times which are temporally dateless and ageless like theme of love and death in the passage. The narrative makes silently abrupt shifts from one temporal level to another. The sensually triggered memory is indicated by ‘the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him the fate of unrequited love’ (*LITC* 1). Time is not merely figurative and psychological rather it is subject to be predicted as well. For example, “Dr. Juvenal Urbino … hurried on an urgent call to attend a case that for him had lost all urgency many years before” (*LITC* 3). At the micro narrative level the telling is ordered as “The Antillean refugee Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, disabled war veteran, photographer of children, and his most sympathetic opponent in chess, had escaped the torments of memory with the aromatic fumes of gold cyanide” (*ibid*). The chronology of the above quoted passage is achronical telling first what happened later in the story and vice versa. The narrator exhibits a tendency towards grouping together events that are connected by “spatial proximity, by climatic identity or by thematic kinship; he thus made clear, the narrative’s capacity for temporal autonomy” (Genette 85). Such an accumulation of narrative events defies chronology, and distorts speed which according to Genette “contribute to emancipation from narrative temporality quite as much as transgressions of chronological order do” (Genette 85). The concept of ‘figurative time’ explained by Kopar, therefore, becomes synonymous with memory time or the time of achronical time structure of a narrative. The
‘sylleptical’ condensation abolishes duration and succession. Similar to the above passage the whole of the narrative is like a collage representing, at a same level, several temporalities melting into each other, unbreakable and continuous.

The events of each of the six sections of the novel are repeatedly narrated to make them appear circular. The events from different periods of life of the characters’ are visited and revisited in a series of overlapping temporal segments throughout the text. Before the love story of Fermina and Florentino begins, the narrator shows Fermina happily married to Urbino. Following the achronical way of storytelling, for instance, in the first section of the novel the narrative firstly reveals the religious beliefs of the couple Urbino and Fermina, informs us about Fermina’s and Dr. Urbino’s twenty years of married life. At the same time we are also told about Urbino’s another past and his relationship with his parrot. Next, the narrative simultaneously focalizes the past and present of the life of Urbino and his wife. In the past he was a well-respected man of great wealth and power and in the present, is forced by his age and debilitated physical condition to use the toilet as a woman does. He is humiliated by his wife and by his own morose maturity. The passage of time is reflected by the contrast between the time of fifty years ago when Urbino was so capable, so authoritative, and so intimidating that the mere sound of his urine stream was enough to frighten his newlywed-wife, and after fifty years he is now pathetic and dependent, enfeebled by old age and its merciless attack on his body and mind. The next passage is about his realization that life is a ‘permanent probability’ and his being upset by Saint-Amour’s deceit in keeping from him the secrets of his life, his knowledge that he has grown old. There is no sense of chronology and duration making several events of life look simultaneous. These collage-like narrative segments form a whole thematic interconnectedness.

The novel begins in ultima res manner. Almost all the characters are now in their old age and in a position to look back at their respective lives. This creates a situation in which they find the whole of their past in their present moment. The last days of the lives of the characters, then, become a cauldron and a melting pot of life from childhood till date. Years ago Saint Jeremiah had vowed to committed suicide to escape the torment of aging and that of ‘memories’ (LITC 3). Without any conspicuous shift, the narration jumps forward in story time to narrate Urbino’s and Fermina’s married life together after they have become old and live in the memories of their golden days of honeymoon and newlyweds. The achronic structure of the novel eludes “all analysis and even all definition” (Genette 144) and the temporal analysis ‘results in an inextricable confusion’ (Genette 147). The novel is a hodgepodge of several narratives having distinct themes wherein narratives pass from one aspect to the other without worrying about their reciprocal functions, and even apparently without noticing them.

The author dissimulates “this chronological and psychological confusion and tries to disguise single actions as repeated actions
and slyly daubs his verbs with a whitewash of imperfects” (Genette 144). According to Dujardin, such type of narrative representation is called ‘mental hodgepodge”’ (qtd. in Genette 180).

Garcia goes a step ahead of what Genette and Kopar would mean by ‘iterative narrative’ and ‘figurative time’ respectively. Garcia renders the time metaphysical and deterministic. For instance, the future of Jeremiah, the future of Florentino’s love, and the end of Urbino’s life is already destined by the mysterious circumstances on which the characters seem to have no control. The narrative reflects that the future is prefigured in the past as in the following lines from the novel: “Jeremiah de Saint-Amour loved life with a senseless passion, he loved the sea and love, he loved his dog and her, and as the date approached he had gradually succumbed to despair as if his death had been not his own decision but an inexorable destiny” (LITC 15). Garcia throws into doubt the notions of reality, identity and self based on the concept of linear time. Even well educated and well travelled Urbino also “came to suppose that perhaps its disorder”, i.e., the disorder in the room where Jeremiah committed suicide, “obeyed an obscure determination of Divine Providence” (LITC 31).

Moreover, Florentino and Fermina’s love story is doomed and portended from the very beginning, when bird droppings fall and splatter onto Fermina’s embroidery work. These omens are instances of ‘predictive narrative’ i.e., the narrative of ‘oracular’ nature.

At one stage in the fourth section of the novel the narrative jumps back and forth throughout the period of Urbino’s married life i.e., a span of twenty-eight years. The non-linear and jumping chronology often leaves the reader unsure of the age of the characters in each narrative segment. The passage of time goes unnoticed and suddenly, by the end of the section, the reader learns, to his surprise, that thirty years have passed. To readers, as to Florentino, it seems that the characters have gone from their twenties to their fifties in a moment of narrative time. All this time, despite his other escapades, Florentino has been waiting for Fermina. All the love-stories of Florentino seem to be the same with slight alterations. This pattern makes it seem that the same events keep happening over and over again as though time is not moving forward but has been stalled or going in a circle. The narrative structure highlights as to that how easy it is for time to pass without realizing it. People age gradually until the physical decay of aging makes clear the passage of a great deal of time.

The structure of the memory, as it is, also describes the structure of the novel. The identity of the people is not structural rather it is historically determined and carried from generation to generation. That is why Fermina, towards the end of her life, saw the exact copy of herself in her daughter: “a daughter so much like her when she was her age that at times she was disturbed by the impression of feeling herself duplicated” (LITC 219). The everyday human reality is as it was since the time immemorial. The memories of
past are like stills re-experienced and relived in the present time as if they are real and an integral part of everyday reality. What goes inside the mind of the characters effects their view of what is outside and, therefore, there is nothing external in the experience and the way life is lived. In this way the novel teaches the reader its own temporal paradigm. The novel is replete with events of such sort to the extent it seems that time has not changed through centuries, years, weeks, and days. García’s fiction focuses on the timeless i.e., the essence from within the perishable bodies of the human beings. In *Love in the Time of Cholera* García writes,

> Age has no reality except in the physical world. The essence of a human being is resistant to the passage of time. Our inner lives are eternal, which is to say that our spirits remain as youthful and vigorous as when we were in full bloom. Think of love as a state of grace, not the means to anything, but the alpha and omega. An end in itself (*LITC* 293).

By using hyperbolic language and making real look magical, the writer transforms what is most commonplace into something prodigious. The inescapability of characters from nostalgia signals the unconscious desire of human beings to transcend the boundaries of normal time thereby redefining what is real.

**Abbreviations**

*LITC*- Love in the Time of Cholera

**Works Cited**

