

**Chronicling Memory and History in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold***

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**Abstract**

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was first published in Spanish in 1981 and its English translation appeared in 1982. It was translated into English by Gregory Rabassa, and it is one of the shorter novels of Marquez, but it is indeed a masterpiece in the scope of its artistic magnitude and excellence. The *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a fantastic blending of dream, illusion, allegory and reality. It endows pseudo-journalistic and historical dimension to the investigation of facts twenty-seven years after the murder. Garcia Marquez who himself was a well-known journalist insists that the facts of this novella are historical and based on a true incident. The novel employs manifold narrators, the story is narrated in a non-linear style and employs magic-realism and irony to endow depth to this story. The marvellous combination of the historical and quasi journalistic mode of narrative investigation in recreating the magical reality of this small Columbian town, makes *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* one of its kind of literary masterpieces.

**Keywords:** Chronicle, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Magic-Realism, Santiago Nasar, Angela Vicario

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was first published in Spanish in 1981 and its English translation appeared in 1982. It was translated into English by Gregory Rabassa, and it is one of the shorter novels of Marquez, but it is indeed a masterpiece in the scope of its artistic magnitude and excellence. Marquez also won the Nobel prize for his contribution to literature in 1982. Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* published in 1967 had already brought him international fame as a novelist of magic realism within Latin American literature. The narrator in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* narrates in the first person a crime that happened nearly twenty-seven years ago. He interviews a number of people in connection with the episode of the murder of a young man Santiago Nasar, who is

just twenty-one-year-old, when he is butchered to death in the small Columbian town by the twins, Pedro and Pablo Vicario. The underlying theme of a returned bride on the first night of the wedding, and male honour is extremely significant for this Columbian society that is extremely patriarchal.

The *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a fantastic blending of dream, illusion, allegory and reality. It endows pseudo-journalistic and historical dimension to the investigation of facts twenty-seven years after the murder. The novel opens with the narrator investigating and reconstructing the events leading to Santiago's murder. As the narrator puts it: "I returned to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards." (Marquez 5) The

plot of the story is simple: Santiago Nasar is presented as good-looking and youthful Colombian of Arab descent. He is admired and loved by most and at the same time disliked by a few, for he is not only good-looking, but rich as well, and he has very swiftly expanded upon his father's business after his early death. Santiago is massacred by the twin brothers of Angela Vicario, who names him to protect her lover, when she is returned by her husband on the first night of her wedding to her parents' home for she is not a virgin. She blames Nasar, and the twins cry out for Nasar's blood, almost everybody in the town is aware of the intentions of the twins to murder Santiago, but with the exception of one or two, no one tries to prevent this tragedy from taking place. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that the twins are pardoned at their trial, and Bayardo San Roman returns seventeen years after abandoning his bride to live with her.

The central action of this novel takes place in a lesser-known Columbian town, the murder of Santiago Nasar is upheld by the lawcourt as "a legitimate defence of honour of Angela Vicario." The chronicler/narrator and the friend of the victim is visiting the town twenty-three years after the murder, and the text itself is presented as a collection of interview reports that the author has collected while investigating upon the events that led to the murder. Woven into this plot structure are the general beliefs of the people of the town, including dreams and predictions. The intricate plot structure makes it even more difficult for understanding the nature of the murder and how poor Santiago Nasar got involved in this affair. The instances quoted by the author from the perceptions of the people who knew

Santiago Nasar, acquit him in the minds of the readers as the perpetrator of Angela Vicario. The multiple versions question the motif of murder, and the text problematises the true nature of truth and reality and therefore questions the ethics of narrating a chronicle.

Interestingly, regarding the chronicle, White observes that it, "possesses none of the attributes which we normally think of as story; no central subject, no well-marked beginning, middle, and end, no peripeteia..." (White 10) Marquez adopting the chronicle mode, allows the scope for manifold perceptions, and the narrator inquiries from several characters about the circumstances leading to Santiago's murder. This allows the narrator to introduce multiple perspectives in the story, giving the novel an intricate structure incorporating a multifaced reality, with each character presenting their own version of reality. The narrator himself is the friend of the victim, but at the same time he has returned to the town several years later to interview various characters about the murder of Santiago Nasar that continues to perturb the conscience of this town. Therefore, this account relies increasingly upon the collective memory of the people of this town, and woven into this narration is a vivid description of their beliefs and cultural traditions, that imparts this novel the form of a chronicle.

Pointing out the significance of the chronicle to Latin Americans, Radolph D Pope writes: *Our Latin American history does not exist as its origin but as a chronicle, seamless web of truth and fiction tied together by a slender and incoherent lace of interpretation.* (Pope 184) The narrator while chronicling, rather

than narrating a story, or presenting the accounts of different characters as a journalistic piece, is relieving himself from narrating in a sequential mode the obscure incidents in the past that led to the murder. This helps him let the readers visualise and re-create for themselves this incident that was a grave burden in the mind of the community. By chronicling the reports and accounts of the towns people, his mode of fiction writing becomes more powerful and has more of an impact than a simple journalistic piece or a story would have had.

The novel is recounted from multiple perspectives, and the narrator gives the account of all the characters, directly or indirectly associated with the episode of Santiago Nasar's murder, and also the sequence of events that led to this murder. Different characters narrate their own version of the events leading to this murder. This technique permits the author to investigate the story from multiple perspectives, this in turn, bestows the novel with an intricate and complex structure. This technique also illustrates how truth is subjective, and that every individual has their own version of reality.

The marvellous combination of the historical and quasi journalistic mode of narrative investigation in recreating the magical reality of this small Columbian town, makes *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* one of its kind of literary masterpieces. Garcia Marquez who himself was a well-known journalist insists that the facts of this novella are historical and based on a true incident. The novel employs manifold narrators, the story is narrated in a non-linear style and employs magic-realism and irony to endow depth to this story. A sense of suspense and

ambiguity permeates the novel, while the use of magical realism, symbolism, irony and repetition imbues the story with a sense of gravity and significance. The complex portrayal of the themes of providence, legitimacy and justice, and how this small town and its people reflect upon these issues, makes it the most outstanding works of literature of in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the murder is the autopsy, and the wounds are described dramatically and picturesquely, not only during the course of the murder but during the autopsy as well. Ultimate fatality of the fact is that it appears, that Santiago Nasar is killed by more than one person and in many more ways than one.

In the Nobel prize accepting speech Marquez mentions five wars, seventeen coups, and the rise of dangerous dictators who led Latin America to the first genocide of their time. We have a glimpse into the life of a prominent General in office of the Latin American politics in the image of the Bayardo's father, General Petronio San Roman. He in this novel is shown as a prominent hero of the past civil wars, and his pictures are regularly splashed in the newspapers because of his political affiliations. We are told that "he was the one who had given orders for Gerineldo Marquez to be shot in the back". (Marquez 33) The Vicario family think that it is their good fortune that such a match has come their way, and they literally force Angela to accept Bayardo. Kumkum Sangari has given an interesting analysis of the structure of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and likens this to an unsolved enigma, this according to her is often the distinguishing genre of a post-colonial narrative, to quote Sangari:

“*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is also structured as an unsolved enigma: the whole town is shown trying to understand why Santiago Nasar is murdered after the virtual complicity of the entire town in not preventing the murder has been previously established. People gather in strange surrender to witness a murder that has been announced; though the murderers wish to be prevented even the priest does not stop them. Guilt is collective.....

At another level, the text exploits, for local ends, the colonial notion of the enigmatic ‘native’. The enigmatic native is a familiar orientalising trope that encodes, first, the incapacity of most colonisers to apprehend the ‘native’, as alterity, and second, the reserve, resistance, interested information, or the secrecy that colonizers repeatedly encountered and that probably indicated both a recalcitrance and a conscious strategy on the part of ‘natives.’ The stereotype of enigma – in its origin, if not in its use -is at bottom dialogic. Again. The colonizers’ notations of the enigmatic ‘other’ were systematically accompanied by vigorous attempts (by missionaries, anthropologists, ethnographers and administrators) to penetrate into the substratum of truth and material resources. So, the political, institutional, and discursive links between the female (powerless and the colonized), chastity, (the hitherto unconquered and unknown), enigma (the

impenetrable object of scrutiny), and colonisation are deep historical ones. The very form of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is gendered: structured as female, the form becomes a critique of the content, (the subjection of women to the violating codes of a chauvinist society), and functions to protect the already violated woman from further violation or further surveillance.” (Sangari,167-170)

Marquez’s use of the genre of magic-realism recreates a distorted reality that is surreal, and the readers find it difficult to grasp the truth. The story of Santiago’s murder is reconstructed in a journalistic style of reporting. The novel at the same time alludes to the everyday life of this small town, like celebration of the wedding rituals or their enthusiasm at the visit of the bishop. We see old and ailing people waiting at the banks to receive the bishops’ blessings when the bishop is passing by, hoping for a miracle cure to their ailments. Their pastimes include their love for fire guns, horses, demonstration of the falconry, their dancing and singing at the charity bazaar or at a wedding. Church is significant for it’s a predominantly a Christian society, but at a same time there is a small minority of Arab tradesmen. Santiago’s mother belongs to this majoritarian Christian group and she speaks Spanish, whereas his father Ibrahim Nasar comes from this community of Arab settlers, and knows both Spanish and Arabic. He speaks in Arabic with his son Santiago, but they converse in Spanish when Santiago’s mother Placida Linero is with them.

The murder of Santiago Nasar had taken place in a closely bound Columbian society that abides by the strict social codes that have been respected over generations. It seems that none of the people in the town are vocal against the murder that has just taken place, in fact they empathise with Bayardo for meeting with such a fate. The Vicario family subsequently flees the town following the disgrace caused by Angela. The Vicario twins, are under immense societal pressure to avenge the family honour, as Clotilde Armenta justifiably puts it: “No one is able to spare those poor boys from the horrible duty that’s fallen on them.” (Marquez 65) For years Santiago’s murder continues to be a subject of discussion in the town. This also prompted the narrator to reinvestigate this case, for this murder appears to haunt the psyche of people of this town, even after the Vicario twins are acquitted in the court plea of homicide, as a legitimate defence of honour of their sister.

The Angela and Bayardo affair have all the fascination of a popular romance. She comes from a lower middle-class family, and it appears that she has been elevated by the attention and love of the handsomest bachelor in the town, belonging to a respectable, wealthy and well-known family. Every aspect of Bayardo courting Angela has been sketched with such vigour, like Bayardo falling in love with her at first sight, remembering her birthday, or buying the complete raffle tickets, or the splendid house of widower Zeus for their honeymoon abode, but sadly this affair ends in a tragedy very soon. The landlady of the inn where Bayardo was staying recalls, that Bayardo had been napping in the parlour, when he woke up to see

Angela Vicario passing by, and inquired about her from the landlady, and said at the same moment, that she should “remind him that he wants to marry her when he wakes up.” (Marquez 16) Angela on the other hand felt that “Bayardo San Roman never courted her, rather he had bewitched the family with his charm.” (Marquez 20) As the author puts it; Bayardo San Roman, for his part “got married with the illusion of buying happiness with the huge weight of his power and fortune” (Marquez 38). Her family of modest means compels her to accept him as a prize of destiny. At the same time, it is difficult for the readers to comprehend the ease with which he discards her, on the very night of the wedding not even waiting for the day to dawn. Even more shocking is how conveniently the town normalizes his action without questioning him for his conduct.

Angela’s brothers are summoned by her parents when she is returned by her husband from the brothel of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, where they are relaxing after the wedding. About Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, the author drops a nonchalant comment; “it was she who did away with my generations virginity,” (Marquez 39) since her brothel is frequented by all the men in her town. Whereas, Angela’s conduct is questioned by the town when her husband returns her, and she has to bear the ill-repute of a spurned bride in this grimly patriarchal society. Pura Vicario, Angela’s mother compliments herself for raising her daughters “to suffer,” a quality that she thinks would make them ideal wives in this society. She ruthlessly beats Angela when she is returned by her husband, and her twin brothers in-turn question her

regarding her perpetrator on their return from the brothel.

An observation of reports reveals the irony of both the circumstances, and the ruthlessness of the townsfolk, who out of jealousy of Santiago allow him to be killed. Divina Flor's mother, Victoria Guzman, knew that there was a threat to Santiago's life, for Clotilde Armenta had sent a messenger to warn the family, but she keeps this information to herself and does nothing to save Santiago's life. The irony of circumstances is brilliantly captured in this novel using the magic realism style. Santiago Nasar's mother is known in the town as the best interpreter of dreams, but she fails to interpret Santiago's dream. The novel opens with Santiago narrating to his mother a dream that he has had, of flying through the grove of trees when a gentle rain is falling, but then he wakes up with a feeling of being splattered with bird droppings. His mother sees nothing harmful in a dream about the trees and birds. She misses the danger in dreaming of the inevitable stab wounds that the bird droppings foretell.

Marquez narrative style of a Chronicle also delves into the rituals of the Latin American society. He describes the marriage of Angela, where the Vicario's choose their humble abode even to wed into a rich, and politically well-connected family. The family does not accept Bayardo, until he brings his family and they consent to this alliance between their families. Angela's family also does not accept the costly gift sent to her on her birthday, of a musical box inlaid with the mother of pearls by Bayardo. When the brothers return this gift, Bayardo somehow manages to win them over with his courteousness. Love is explained in terms

of honour, and for the same reason Angela's family forces her to accept the proposal of Bayardo, saying that 'love can be learnt'. Marquez familiarizes us with the customs of the society where women are objectified, and men control the subjective agency. Marquez explores the themes of justice, ethics and the human predicament through the use of his narrative technique.

The magistrate investigating this crime after twelve days of this offence, begins his investigation at the town that appears like an 'open wound' (Marquez 99) at the point of investigation. At the same time, even when the author starts his own investigation about this crime twenty-three years later, trying to draw some conclusions about the crime that has haunted the townsfolk. The memories of the people still recall vividly the events of the Monday morning when Santiago was murdered. The narrator himself along with most of the people in the town feels that Santiago is innocent and that "he died without understanding his death" (Marquez 23). The fact that this murder continues to haunt the town over a period of twenty-seven years is a proof of the fact that Santiago was not to blame. Santiago Nasar is described in a highly cheerful mood on the day of the wedding. A few hours before the murder, we see Santiago Nasar, Vicario brothers along with the narrator and his brother Louis Enrique and their friend Cristo Bedoya at brothel of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, where the Vicario brothers are singing along with Santiago Nasar. The Vicario brothers return home from the brothel only when they are summoned home by their mother. Whereas Santiago continues to narrate to his interested listeners, very

enthusiastically, the details of the wedding that he has just attended, and how much he is going to invest upon his own wedding. The author's recollection of the details of Santiago association with Angela and Bayardo, acquits him in the mind of the readers of any involvement with Angela. He is seen cheerfully joking with Bayardo San Roman, on his wedding day, and later Santiago Nasar is seen dreaming aloud: "That's what my wedding's going to be like, he said. Life will be too short for people to tell about it." (Marquez 25) When Angela Vicario was returned home after her wedding, author's sister recalls "no matter how much they tossed the story back and forth, no one could explain to me how poor Santiago Nasar ended up being involved in such a mix up." (Marquez 13)

Santiago Nasar, the same day visits his fiancé Flora Miguel's home, and they decided that they should get married soon. These incongruously confused statements, remove Santiago Nasar as the central offender of the tragedy being unfolded. All the above incidents point out that Santiago Nasar has been falsely accused of this murder. The town after the murder of Santiago is also fearful of a backlash from the community of Arab's, who are described as hard-working and catholic. They are a minority of peaceful immigrants who have settled in the Caribbean towns as traders, and they sold their product at the local cloth bazaars. The town is quiet but expecting some retaliation from the Arab community over the murder of Santiago. But then the Arabs being in a minority remain stoical, probably fearing persecution by the Christian society that is in a majority.

This tragedy culminates with Angela writing thousands of love letters to

Bayardo, she has no second chances of finding a mate or settling down in marriage again. However, Bayardo appears before Angela and all her workshop friends, again dressed exactly in the same manner as she had first seen him. He was also carrying the same saddle bag and his suitcase was full of all her unopened letters. Bayardo's return seem to be an answer to her passionate love letters. Angela recognises him immediately, "but it was him, God damn it, it was him" (Marquez 96). In his suitcase, were the passionate love letters written by Angela, and they were all organised by their dates in bundles, knotted with the coloured ribbons, as Angela had sent them, and they were all unopened.

Bayardo with his advantage of class and gender thinks of Angela as a terrain of conquest, whereas her family cannot think of more than social respectability that a marriage should bring, and the constant scrutiny of a girl's honour becomes the objective of this society. In the character of Angela Vicario, Marquez represents the subtleties of societal obligation, and exploitation of the basic sovereignty of women. Angela desperation is captured in the lines: "The only thing I prayed to God for was to give me the courage to kill myself." (Marquez 37) Angela knows that no one, not even her parents, would stand by her. Marquez draws the attention of the readers to the superficiality of men's honour in this society. This petty insistence on rescuing a woman's honour, was merely an urge associated with the image of men in this society, and displays the shallowness of the society. The eagerness with which Bayardo initially insists on having Angela, and tries to buy happiness with his power

and fortune, and later discards her with equal ease, shows the regularization of an ideology convenient to males. John H Christie looks at the central narrative question of investigation: who is responsible for Angela's loss of virginity and why does she blame Santiago; "Angela cannot reveal the identity of the man responsible because the revelation would entirely destroy the family's honour. Acting as all towns people do, basing her action upon gossip and prejudice, she pins the blame on a man with a reputation as a rich playboy." (Christie, Pg 22)

The narrator of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* recounts the events within the story through a first-person point of view, at the same time exposes the hurdles of uncovering the facts in his story. Marquez places his narrator at the centre of the story. He gains a knowledge of all that the towns people experienced, during the events that led to the murder of Santiago Naser, twenty-seven years prior to his effort at retelling the story. The narrators' own doubts regarding the murder, compel him to return to the town where the murder had taken place, and then attempt to piece everything together, bit by bit, to sustain the element of uncertainty.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez recreates the murder using a vivid imagery, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* constantly fluctuates in time, and uses the technique of flash backs and flash-forward. The opening lines of the story reveal to the readers the most significant event of the story; the murder of Santiago Naser "On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Naser got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on." (Marquez1) The author

clearly states the clear motive of murder in the text, but still manages to sustain the curiosity of the readers, for everyone wishes to know the reason of the murder and the outcome of the events as they reveal in the story. The constant change in tone of the novel from disinterested to anguished, helps the readers to deal with the massacre of Santiago Naser. The author has recreated the murder so vividly, that the readers can visualize everything in the text including the scene, the smell, the touch and it seems that the readers are reliving the details of this murder in reality. In describing the most dreadful scenes of the novel, Marquez uses picturesqueness to make it appear absolutely real to the reader. The twins are shown attacking Santiago with their knives, and Marquez elucidates the ferocity of this crime when he shows Santiago Naser trying to hold his intestines from falling out.

By using time manipulation, Marquez effectively copes with the horrific murder of Santiago Naser in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The narrative of this novel constantly moves back and forth in time, that is, twenty-seven years back when the murder happened, and to the time when the author is investigating this murder. The remanences of characters about this murder and the events leading up to this murder endows a sense of perspective to the text. The vivid description of the events and the imagery used by the author to reconstruct the brutality of the murder, recreates for the readers a clear comprehension of the story. At the same time, since this novel is on the sensitive topic of a murder, so this novel also probes and in turn chronicles how legal and moral



sanction is interpreted by the people of this small town.

As a character in his own novel, Marquez interviews people who can reminisce the murder, and he also looks at the legal documents assembled by the court pertaining to this murder. This novel eventually turns out to be an interesting amalgamation of various sorts of data's, dreams, gossip, weather reports and philosophical speculation- that sketches out a documentary record of the events that culminated in the murder. Marquez's writing is so intricate, and knotted up with surreal impressions that it has virtually delineated the genre of Magical realism. This genre of magical realism in this novel

helps the readers in focussing upon the life's reality that is so fragmented, and surreal that one is always striving to grapple with the truth. This mode of narration helps the chronicler in exemplifying the uncertain reality of life. Marquez intricately binds the literary techniques of perception and point of view in his novel that validates the fact that there is no one reality but it fluctuates with each and every character. Marquez's brilliant use of magic realism and a fantastic blend of diction, imagery and time manipulation helps the readers in gaining a perspective not only of this murder, but also of the life of the people of this small town while navigating through this chronicle.

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