

**SHARDS OF A GRUESOME MEMORY COMMEMORATED: AN  
ANALYSIS OF *CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD***

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**Abstract**

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is one of the most prominent writers from Latin America, who managed to capture the nuances of life in the sub-continent in a realistic yet magical fashion. His works have as their background, the throbbing, vital life of his native soil and this is best reflected in his 1981 work *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* which Fidel Castro, its first reader, compared to a clockwork in that “all the details work out beautifully, they are precise and to the point, and ...each and every detail are interlocked and interdependent, and if any one is missed or removed, the whole work would collapse” (Bandhopadhyay 2). It is a half-fictional, half-journalistic work based on a gruesome murder that occurred in a Colombian town called Sucre, in 1951. Marquez, who was an acquaintance of some of the people involved in this incident, made a novella out of it, almost three decades later. It talks about the murder of Santiago Nasar, in a style that resembles that of investigative journalism. This paper attempts a ‘re-analysis’ of Marquez’s work with regard to the themes as well as the style of writing.

“I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune”.

(Marquez, Nobel Acceptance Speech, Dec 8, 1982)

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is one of the most prominent writers from Latin America, who managed to capture the nuances of life in the sub-continent in a realistic yet magical fashion. His works have as their background, the throbbing, vital life of his native soil and this is best reflected in his 1981 work *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* which Fidel Castro, its first reader, compared to a clockwork in that “all the details work out beautifully, they are precise and to the point, and ...each and every detail are interlocked and interdependent, and if any one is missed or removed, the whole work would collapse” (Bandhopadhyay 2). It is a half-fictional, half-

journalistic work based on a gruesome murder that occurred in a Colombian town called Sucre, in 1951. Marquez, who was an acquaintance of some of the people involved in this incident, made a novella out of it, almost three decades later. It talks about the murder of Santiago Nasar, in a style that resembles that of investigative journalism.

The novel has as its characters, men and women of diverse personalities like Santiago Nasar, Placida Linero, his mother, the Vicario twins, Angela Vicario, Pura Vicario, Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, Father Amador, Colonel Aponte, the narrator (who is Marquez himself) etc. Among these Santiago Nasar, Angela Vicario and the narrator are perhaps the most crucial to the unfolding of the novella. Santiago Nasar, the protagonist of the story, is described as a happy go-lucky person, at peace with his life. Flirtatious, charming and rich, with all the vices of his class, he makes people realize that "...there couldn't have been a better catch than him. ...handsome, a man of his word, and with a fortune of his own at the age of twenty-one (17). His status as a rich man gives him an aura of invincibility. Yet, he is murdered in a brutal way, for something which he may or may not have committed. The author conveys in a subtle way his belief that Santiago may not have been the one who brought disrepute to Angela Vicario. In several ways, the author strikes a parallel between Santiago Nasar and Jesus Christ. Both of them were murdered brutally for sins that they may not have committed. Both had Semitic ancestry and just like Jesus Christ, Santiago was pinned onto a wooden door and stabbed and sent to a pathetic death without trial. Santiago is at times pictured as a victim by the narrator - the victim of a cowardly society obsessed with outdated gender codes and prejudices. Angela Vicario's plight symbolizes the plight of women in general. Brought up in a male-chauvinist society according to the patriarchal norms, her desires and dreams are suppressed by her mother/family. Going against her friends' advice, she did a decent thing in telling Bayarado San Roman, her husband, about her not being a virgin. The innate goodness of the young girl gets reflected in Angela. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, she is a round character in that she develops over the course of the novel. After her disgrace, she gradually gets out of the iron grip of her mother and becomes the "mistress of her fate"(94), ... "mistress of her own free will...and she recognized no other authority than her own, nor any other service than that of her obsession"(94). And finally, she manages to attain what she wished for- the love of Bayardo San Roman. Her life seems to find fulfillment the moment he comes to her house with all the unopened letters she had sent him. At the end of the novel, she is no longer the timid young girl she was, but a strong, independent woman with a free spirit. The narrator, who is Marquez himself, is also a character in the novel. He is the one trying to 'chronicle' the death of his close friend Santiago Nasar, "returning to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards" (5). He puts together the testimonies of various people regarding the crime twenty seven years after the incident and gives a quasi- journalistic account of his friend's death. He moves backward and forward in time. He not only gives us a picture of individual characters but also of the community.

A remarkable thing about *Chronicle of A Death Foretold* is the names of the characters. Almost all the characters have names that either mean or signify something. Santiago is the patron saint of Spain, also known as 'Matamoros' or 'moor slayer' while Nasar is a name with Moorish connotations. There is a unification of contraries through this name- we are reminded of Spain's Reconquista of territories from the Moors. Also, in the story, Santiago's father is an Arab while his mother has Hispanic ancestry, and hence his name. 'Poncio' is the Spanish counterpart of the Roman name 'Pontius'. Thus, Angela's father, Poncio Vicario, is equated to Pontius Pilate, the Biblical character responsible for Jesus' crucifixion in that he made his daughter a

sacrificial lamb by forcing her to marry Bayardo. Again, the name Angela stands for purity. By giving this name to her, Marquez accomplishes two things- he brings an element of irony into the text, as Angela was not chaste, and also, he stresses on her inner purity of mind. Maria Alejandrina Cervantes, a prostitute, is given the name of Mother Mary, again, the symbol of purity. Here too the effect is the same as that of Angela's name. 'Pedro' and 'Pablo' are the Spanish counterparts of the names 'Peter' and 'Paul', the apostles. In this case the names serve as means through which the author makes allusions to Christianity.

In *Chronicle of A Death Foretold*, Marquez deals with diverse themes. One of the most important themes in the work is that of honor and sexual morality. The entire action of the novel unfolds because of the sully of the honor of Angela and her brothers' responsibility to avenge it. The honor of the woman is considered something to be protected at any cost. Hence, the entire community and even the legal system support the Vicario brothers for their outrageous act. "The lawyer stood by the thesis of homicide in legitimate defense of honor, which was upheld by the court of good faith, and the twins declared at the end of the trial that they would have done it again a thousand times over for the same reason" (48). As the narrator's mother says: "Honor is love" (98).

Linked to this is the theme of machismo. The avenging of Angela's honor is her brothers' duty. Only then will they be considered 'men'. Marquez writes about the murder through which "the brothers Vicario had proved their status as men" (84). Prudencia Cotes goes to the extent of saying that she would not have married Pablo Vicario "if he hadn't done what a man should do" (63). Also, Santiago is given a macho image when the author talks about his dealings with women: "...he was a chicken hawk. He went about alone...nipping the bud of any wayward virgin..." (90), and his comment to Divina Flor "The time has come for you to be tamed" (8). Bayardo San Roman is depicted as another macho man. He doesn't hesitate to send Angela back when he gets to know that she is not a virgin. His so-called masculine pride is hurt.

The extreme importance accorded to appearances and the hypocrisy it entailed is seen when the narrator says about the mourning ceremony held for the dead daughter of the Vicarios: "...they were still observing a mourning that was relaxed inside the house but rigorous on the street", and also when Angela says: "I would have been happy even if he hadn't come, but never if he abandoned me dressed up"...Her caution seemed natural, because there was no public misfortune more shameful than for a woman to be jilted in her bridal gown" (41). Bayardo's lavish spending on the wedding was also an attempt to keep up appearances. Again, when Colonel Aponte comes to know about Angela's disgrace and the death threat to Santiago, what bothers him is not Angela's or Santiago's pathetic plight, but "What will the bishop think!" (56).

The lamentable plight of women in the society is also depicted in *Chronicle of A Death Foretold*. They are considered as objects for transaction. Flaunting his richness and splendor, he convinces Angela's parents that he is a "prize of destiny" for their family of "modest means". The sentiments of Angela are not taken into consideration. She is virtually sold out to Bayardo. And then she is "returned", as if she were some object to be sold and returned. Again, women were brought up with the sole purpose of serving their husbands and children and bearing suffering. This attitude is manifested when the narrator says: "Purissima del Carmen...devoted herself with such spirit of sacrifice to the care of her husband and the rearing of her children that at times one forgot she still existed. ...The girls had been reared to get married. They knew how to do screen embroidery, sew by machine, ...and write engagement announcements...." Any man will be happy with them because they've been raised to suffer" (30-31). What Clotilde Armenta said ("...I realized how alone we women are in the world!") portrays the pathetic plight of

women, who are often given the status of secondary citizens in the society. In a way, Maria Cervantes, a sex worker, is depicted as living a more dignified life than the so-called dignified women of the village. She is independent and strong, and at the same time sincere in her own way. Her revolutionary verve is depicted by the author when he says: “It was she who did away with my generation’s virginity” (65). She is a foil to Purisima del Carmen in that she is liberal, non-conformist and most of all, unbothered about the society’s opinion of her. The patriarchal ideology gets reflected when the author writes about Angel finding fulfillment when Bayardo comes back to her. Thus we see that the author too, in a way, subscribes to the traditional, patriarchal notion that a woman finds happiness only with her husband.

The concept of marriage as just a matter of convenience and utility and a venue to showcase one’s money-power is seen throughout the novel. About the marriage of Santiago and Flora Miguel, the narrator says: “Santiago Nasar accepted the engagement ...perhaps because he had the same utilitarian concept of matrimony as his father” (113). Angela marries Bayardo, only because her parents forced her into it, as Bayardo was from a rich family, and not out of love. Her mother’s attitude is interesting: “Love can be learned too” (34). The marriage of Bayardo and Angela becomes a public affair with the entire town invited. The cost of the wedding crossed expectations, and Bayardo is highly pleased. The general notion of marriage is reflected here.

Religion comes under severe criticism in the novel. The hypocrisy of religious authorities is brought to the spotlight. Santiago’s murder takes place on the same day as the arrival of the Bishop. The so-called sacred and the profane occur on the same day. The author seems to say that the presence of spiritual authorities does not make any significant change to the lives of the common man. This becomes evident when the Bishop doesn’t bother even to get off the boat to greet the villagers who had gathered to seek his blessings. “Church pomp” (6) also comes under criticism. Also, the disdain of the men of science for traditional religion is shown when Dr Dionisio Iguaran says about Father Amador: “Only a priest could be so dumb”(76). Father Amador is the representative of the Church, which accords great importance to rituals and pomp, but not to the life of a human being. He goes to greet the Bishop at the dock, with the items for mass, and conveniently forgets his job as priest to save Santiago. The Church’s lack of social commitment is seen when he says: “My first thought was that it wasn’t any business of mine but something for the civil authorities...”(70).

Fatal coincidences mark the action of the novel. Going against his usual habit of leaving the house through the rear door, on the day of his death, he goes via the front door to receive the Bishop. But he fails to see the note warning him of his death, and containing information about the place, the motive behind the twins’ action etc, that was lying on the floor. Again, Placida Linero, ignorant of the fact that her son was trying to get in through that door, shuts and bars it with the intention of saving him. “Santiago Nasar only lacked a few seconds to get in when the door closed” (119). It was his impulsive visit to his fiancée’s house that prevented his friends from informing him about the danger, as it was a known fact that her family didn’t receive any visitor before noon. And despite the fact that people were observing him very closely that day, nobody saw him enter Flora’s house. As the investigating magistrate wrote in his folio: “Fatality makes us invisible” (114).

Confusion and uncertainty are also themes in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The author creates an aura of uncertainty throughout the novel. This is done primarily by giving the accounts of different people regarding the incidents of that day. There are conflicting views regarding the climate. While some like Colonel Aponte and Placida Linero assert that it was a rainy day, others like Pedro and Pablo Vicario report that it was not. In the very beginning of the novel, we can

see the author bringing out an element of uncertainty explicitly: “No one was certain if he was referring to the state of the weather. Many people coincided in recalling that it was a radiant morning with a sea breeze coming in....But most agreed that the weather was funereal , with a cloudy, low sky and the thick smell of still waters...”(2). Also, the author talks about the conversation between Bayardo and the landlady of the bachelors’ boarding house: “Three people ...confirmed that the episode had taken place, but four others weren’t sure”(28). Again, Placida Linero thinks that her son got the days “mixed up”(6). Such ‘mixing ups’ and contradictions can be seen in many places in the novel. The ultimate uncertainty is that of the real man behind Angela’s misfortune. In the novel, it is never made clear if it really was Santiago Nasar or somebody else whom Angela wanted to protect. The villagers themselves are not sure about this. This confusion is transferred on to the readers as well. Confusion arises as to the genre of the work. It resembles several genres at once - novel, journalistic writing, detective story etc. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact category to which *Chronicle of A Death Foretold* belongs.

The class question comes to the forefront in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The prominent factor that makes Santiago Nasar stand out is his status as an upper middle class man. His class position gives him the aura of invincibility and thus invites the hostility of the villagers as is proved when Polo Carillo says: “He thought that his money made him untouchable” (102). On the other hand, the Vicarios are a family of “scant resources”(30). Yet the twins managed to murder Santiago, that too, in a brutal way. This in a way symbolizes the class struggle which the Marxists uphold. The proletariat (symbolized by the Vicarios) reacts against the injustice of the bourgeoisie (symbolized by Santiago Nasar) and dismantle the latter. The hostility of the proletariat towards the bourgeoisie is seen when a villager asks Pablo Vicario “why they had to kill Santiago Nasar since there were so many other rich people who deserved dying first” (53). Bayardo’s class status is also given much importance, and Angela is married off to him because of his upper class status. He spends lavishly on the wedding, just to reinforce his image as a rich man in the villagers’ minds. All these show the utmost importance accorded to class in the Latin American society.

Irony characterizes *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. This feature is evident from the title itself. A chronicle is a true record of facts, arranged in chronological order. But the novel is not a record of facts, but rather a collection of opinions and individual perceptions about an incident, arranged in a random order. The story is not recorded chronologically either. Again, although on the surface it seems like a detective story, the conventions of this genre are subverted in Marquez’s work. From the beginning we know who committed the crime, for what reason, when and where. The only mystery to be solved is that of the person who violated Angela. And it remains a mystery till the end, unlike in a detective story. An element of irony can be seen in the marriage of Bayardo and Angela, celebrated with much pomp and show ending up in disaster within hours. There is irony when Santiago, ignorant of his impending doom, speaks about his marriage and also his funeral to his friends. Again, we see irony when the very religious authorities who preach love, compassion and mercy, turn a blind eye to Santiago’s plight.

The narrator highlights the society’s role in Santiago’s death. In a way, the real perpetrator of the crime is the society, which stood by , doing nothing to save a fellow human being. Despite knowing that Santiago was about to be killed, most of the people did not bother to warn him. Caught up in the web of their routine lives, they took Santiago’s murder as a melodramatic occurrence, bringing in some dram in their lives. Even Father Amador and Colonel Aponte, people with the responsibility to maintain order in the society, conveniently forgot to help Santiago. About the colonel, the author says: “He promised to take care of it at once, but he

went into the social club to check on a date for dominoes that night and when he came out again the crime had already been committed”(111). How brutal a situation! Again, there were people observing Santiago very closely on that day. But they kept themselves at a distance and didn't come forward to help him even when he was being stabbed to death. Also, the Vicario brothers kept on telling all the people about their intention to murder Santiago with the hope that somebody would try to prevent them. But nobody did, thereby compelling the brothers to kill Santiago. The narrator is fully aware of the role of the society, including himself, in Santiago's murder. He says that it was a death for which “we all could have been to blame” (82). Again, he highlights the brutality of the society when he says: “But most of those who could have done something to prevent the crime and still didn't do it consoled themselves with the pretext that affairs of honor are sacred monopolies...”(98). The attitude of the masses is made clear when he writes “For years we couldn't talk about anything else” (97), and “the crowd that was pouring in to testify without having been summoned, anxious to show off their own important parts in the drama” (99). By chronicling the murder, the narrator is trying to purge himself of his guilt of not having done anything to save his friend. He seems to attain a cathartic relief by writing about it for an audience.

The question of truth and reality also become themes in *Chronicle of A Death Foretold*. By giving multiple, and often contradicting perspectives on Santiago's murder, Marquez dismantles the concept of absolute truth. He seems to say that there is nothing called absolute truth or absolute reality. These are entities whose essence varies from person to person. Magical realism, an important feature of almost all of Marquez's works can also be found here. The supernatural is depicted as part of reality. Realistic descriptions of fantastic events are given. Dreams, omens and visions take on special import in the work. At the very beginning of the work, we see the weird dream of Santiago Nasar, his mother's skills in dream interpretation and later, the spiritualistic séance, Xius's vision of the bird etc. Divina Flor sees a vision of Santiago going up the stairs with a bouquet of roses in his hand. A magical atmosphere is created when Pura Vicario says about Bayardo : “He had that green colour of dreams” (46), “Things looked like they were under water” (85) and also when Santiago, holding his innards in his hands walks to his home, brushes off the dust from them and tells his aunt: “ “They've killed me, Wene child””(122). All this is depicted as if it were normal everyday occurrences and not something supernatural. The grotesque is portrayed in all its gruesomeness when describing the death of Santiago. The disemboweling of the rabbits by Victoria Guzman, the violent murder, Santiago walking with his innards in his hands, the autopsy, all are presented in graphic detail...the grotesqueness intact.

The question of identity is treated adeptly by Marquez. He depicts it as something that can be manipulated easily. This is the message that he conveys when he talks about Santiago confusing the identity of mulatto girls by changing their costumes. “...his favorite sport was to confuse the identities of the mulatto girls. He would rifle the wardrobe of some to disguise the others, so that they all ended up feeling different from themselves and like the ones they weren't” (66). Again, the narrator says, after the autopsy, Santiago's face “ended up losing its identity”(76). Through all this Marquez is questioning the notion of a fixed, single identity.

The pathetic plight of the old and the infirm also finds space in the novella. The ignored state of the blind Poncio Vicario during his daughter's wedding is an example of the way Marquez depicts this theme with all its pathos. The distrust (by the natives of a country) of outsiders is shown in the attitude of the villagers towards the Arabs. Despite them being there for generations, the people still consider them as outsiders, as arrogant “Turks”. They are not

considered as ‘belonging’ to the place, despite their adoption of Spanish as their language and their assimilation in the Hispanic society. The Arabs got so much assimilated into the Latin-American culture that the younger generation began to gradually discard Arabic, their mother tongue. “... The older ones continued speaking the rustic Arabic they had brought from their homeland, and they maintained it intact in the family down to the second generation, but those of the third, with the exception of Santiago Nasar, listened to their parents in Arabic and answered them in Spanish” (82). Thus, the hostility of the villagers towards Santiago Nasar can also be read as the suspicion of the people towards an outsider who still held on to his roots.

Disillusionment also becomes a theme in Marquez’s work. Bayardo’s plight stands for the disillusionment of the modern man, a theme in most modernist works. Literature itself comes as a theme in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, in that Marquez subtly writes about the connection between life and literature. He says: “...I couldn’t bring myself to admit that life would end up resembling bad literature so much” (89). The narrator talks about the investigating magistrate, who was an ardent lover of literature. The marginal notes with literary overtones which he wrote in the folio are much admired by the narrator in that these notes portray the feelings of the judge as well as the narrator very clearly. In all these cases, he hints at the ability of literature to reflect life and emotions. Autobiographical elements can also be seen in *Chronicle of A Death Foretold*. Since the story is based on a real-life incident and the characters involved were close to Marquez, and he himself is the narrator, it is but natural that the people in Marquez’s life like his wife Mercedes Barcha, his brother Luis Enrique etc feature in the novel.

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the rain, the bellowing of the boat, the sound of the hens and dogs, and smells become recurring motifs. In this way, it is a novel of sense perceptions. The confusion about whether it was raining or not on that day is seen throughout the work. The sounds of the boat, the animal, the jingle of the keys ...all get integrated into the novel, contributing to its clamorous mood. The smell of death also pervades the novel. In several places, we see the narrator talking about Santiago’s smell pervading the entire village, bringing unpleasant sensations in the villagers as well as the reader. These motifs serve as essential components which help sustain the gloomy, ghastly aura of the work.

In many ways, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* resembles *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel by the American writer William Faulkner, who was a major influence on Marquez. Just like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Chronicle of A Death Foretold* is a memory novel. It is a novel based on the memory of the people involved. The narrator is recording the memories of different people regarding the murder of Santiago Nasar. Hence, there are varying perspectives. Also, like in Faulkner’s work, here too we see the technique of repetition. Several phrases like “It was the last time we saw him” (68, 105 etc) are repeated throughout. Again, Marquez’s Bayardo San Roman seems to be modeled on Thomas Sutpen, the protagonist of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Both come to the village out of nowhere and remain enigmatic figures who cannot be made sense of. They remain as mysteries to the villagers. Yet they marry girls from these villages for the sake of convenience and both marriages end up in disaster. Thus, the influence of Faulkner can be seen in this work.

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, as mentioned before, is not a chronologically arranged set of events. The five chapters are arranged in a more or less random order. Chronologically, Chapter 5 should come in the place of Chapter 1 and vice versa. Even the order in which the incidents are presented within chapters would be different. The narrator moves back and forth in time. Flashbacks are used in narration. It is journalistic and fictitious at the same time. The author, with his role as investigative-journalist, manages, through this work, to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity. It is also a detective story

which bends the norms of the genre. The lucid style of writing, along with the accurate use of words and expressions are a characteristic feature of this novel. With a limited number of words, Marquez has managed to capture the nuances of the life of people in the village. His love for the characters he has created is very evident in this masterpiece of Marquez's. The folly and pathos of human life is depicted in a charming way by the author. Above all, there is an underlying note of hope and optimism ...the possibility of a future unmarred by death and deceit and violence, as symbolized by the bunches of letters tied with colored ribbon that Bayardo brings back with him. What Marquez told Manuel Pereira I an interview about the apparent simplicity of this novel remains valid till date:

“A novel which appears very simple does not rest just on what sees and hears but everything that is behind it; it's like an iceberg, a block of ice whose tip appears so big and yet most of it is under water and supports the part which is visible and above water”.