

Chronicle of a Coerced Killing: Race, Retribution and the Anatomy of Honour in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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Abstract

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a colossal literary figure in the history of Latin America. This paper explores the theme of honour killing in his 1981 novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* which offers a journalistic reconstruction of the sequences leading to an act of honour killing twenty-seven years back. This paper delves deep into the social mores of mid-twentieth century Latin American society to understand how the code of honour operates in a patriarchal society obsessed with primitive cravings for sacrificial blood. This paper also highlights how in Marquez's novella racial prejudices merge with moral prejudices to culminate in the heinous crime of honour killing. This paper also underlines how the social prejudices interact with the legal jurisprudence. Finally, this paper explains how the code of honour killing not only puts the female figure under the scanner of social gaze, but also places young men of the family under compelling pressure to take revenge and thereby turn them into reluctant murderers. The social anxiety to reclaim its lost purity exposes the dark recesses of the collective psyche.

Keywords: Latin America, patriarchy, honour, race, sacrifice

Introduction:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a colossal literary figure in the history of Latin America. He has received wide acclaim for novels like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). This paper focuses on Marquez's novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981). It looks back at a real-life murder which took place in 1951 in the small Bolivian city of Sucre. Marquez's novella does not name any specific city, but the societal mores it reflects is quintessentially Latin American. This novella written in the style of journalistic reconstruction unravels a thorny facet of the mid-twentieth century Latin American society – the obsession with so-called family honour, culminating in “honour killing”. This paper elaborates how the entire town remains complicit in a murder where even the culpability has not been established. The primitive cravings for sacrificial blood become so paramount that Santiago Nasar's death appears inevitable. The anxiety of a society to reclaim its purity through a heinous crime raises more questions than it answers.

The notion of honour in traditional society often evolves around the chastity of its women. The Latin American society is no exception. Caulfield, Chambers and Putnam elaborate the social codes governing the Latin American Society in their book *Honour, Status and Law in Modern Latin America*. Writing in the context of Latin American society, they argue: “Although the parameters of patriarchal authority were gradually narrowed, male

control over women and women's sexual propriety remained at the core of modern definitions of honour." (Caulfield 2) They point out: "Elite women held honour so long as they maintained reputations as chaste and retiring daughters and wives; indeed their sexual purity was the key to maintaining familial honour based upon legitimate birth, clean Christian and European lineage." (Caulfield 3) They also underline that the legal system accommodated these social prejudices: "Liberal law uniformly accepted as natural the gender relations of the patriarchal family as well as the notion that family honour depended on women's sexual fidelity and propriety." (Caulfield 10) Thus social codes not only governed societal interactions, but also shaped the legal jurisprudence.

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the unnamed Latin American town bays for the blood of Santiago Nasar because he has been named as the perpetrator behind defiling Angela's chastity. Circumstantial evidence is scanty. However, Angela's feeble confession under tremendous familial pressure is enough to set the revenge-motive into motion. John S. Christie opines in his essay "Fathers and Virgins: Garcia Marquez's Faulknerian *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*": "Once the word is spoken, the facts become secondary; the telling creates the reality." (Christie 23) The power of the spoken word carries such enormous weight that Santiago is killed "not because he is unquestionably guilty, but because he has been accused" (Christie 23). This propensity towards blood-thirstiness even in the absence of solid evidence brings out the dark recesses of the collective psyche of the Latin American society.

The novella opens without creating any suspense regarding what happened: "On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on." (1) The story is about the death of Santiago Nasar. Marquez does not reveal the names of the murderers at the outset, but the names will soon be disclosed. The reader will soon learn that "they" refer to twin brothers -- Pablo Vicario and Pedro Vicario. The thorny question that the novella raises is why the two brothers killed Santiago Nasar -- whether the killing was done out of their own volition -- and if not, what compelled them to commit the killing. Grace A. Gomashie points out: "Marquez begins by reversing the biblical scenario of a birth foretold with that of a death foretold. While Christ was aware of his coming death and its purpose, which had been foretold in the Old and New Testaments, the same cannot be said for Santiago Nasar." (Gomashie 34)

Santiago Nasar indeed did not have any foreboding of his own death. He had attended the grand wedding of Bayardo San Roman and Angela Vicario, the sister of Pablo and Pedro Vicario the previous night. And early next morning -- the morning of the murder -- he woke up early, put on white clean clothes, and went to the docks to witness the arrival of the bishop who was supposed to bless the newly-wed couple. Thus it is obvious that Santiago did not have any sense of guilt or fear. He did not in any way try to escape the site of his murder; instead, he walked straight into it.

The novella is written in a journalistic mode. Twenty-seven years after the crime was actually committed, the narrator investigates the layers of the crime. It is not a simple and straightforward whodunit. The question is why? The answer to this motive of the crime cannot directly be traced to the two brothers Pablo and Pedro. In fact, as the unnamed narrator tries to put together the sequences leading to the crime, he finds some awkward details. Before committing the crime, the two brothers fell asleep on the benches in front of a milk-shop. The two brothers sharpened their knives twice on that fateful morning in complete public view. And while the knives were being sharpened, they announced to the by-standers that they were going to kill Santiago Nasar with the sharpened knives. The announcement is so brazen that the by-standers dismiss their bravado as the nonsense of inebriated persons.

Before committing the murder, Pablo Vicario even visited the house of his fiancée Prudencia and told his would-be mother-in-law about the crime he was going to commit. Shockingly, both Prudencia and her mother tell him to go ahead with his crime. Prudencia even goes to the extent of saying that she would never marry Pablo if he did not have the courage to defend his sister's honour.

While Pablo and Pedro had some faint expectations that someone might dissuade them from committing the murder, the reality was starkly opposite. The two brothers announced their plan to the townspeople in the hope that that someone would stop them from committing the crime. That would be the perfect solution for them – their demonstration of the anger would be visible, and at the same time they would not have to commit the crime. Unfortunately for them, nobody stopped them. The entire town saw the revenge as essential. What Jurgen Habermas writes in *The Inclusion of the Other* sounds pertinent: “the morality of a community not only lays down how its members should act; it also provides grounds for the consensual resolution of relevant conflicts.” (Habermas 4) The two brothers were therefore expected to commit the crime. Moreover, they must make every possible effort to turn the murder into a performance. The public posture of committing the murder is even more important than the murder itself. It is critical for the two brothers to demonstrate before the entire town that they felt the right quantity of hateful emotion before committing the murder. The two brothers strongly claimed during the trial that they had committed the murder at the heat of the moment and out of immense anger. However, the details unearthed by the narrator clearly point to the opposite. The two brothers took a nap before committing the murder. Clotilde Armenta, the owner of the milk-shop, said in her eye-witness account: “The men who were going to kill him had slept on the benches, clutching the knives wrapped in newspapers to their chests” (9). While traditional narratives of honour killing focus on the victim, Marquez's novella explores the psychology of reluctant perpetrators. On that accursed morning, Pablo and Pedro became participants in a killing in which they never willingly signed.

The novella is postmodern in the sense that it highlights the difficulty of arriving at a true account. The journalistic method that Marquez's narrator follows, reveals insightful but often contradictory details. Various persons that the unnamed narrator interviews, give contradictory information even regarding the weather on the day of the murder. Witnesses differ even on this basic fact. Some say that it was a sunny day, while others recall that there was a drizzle. However, one moot point where various witnesses agree is that Santiago attended the Bishop's arrival in a happy mood: “Santiago Nasar went through the shadowy house with long strides, pursued by roars of jubilation from the bishop's boat.” (12) The festive spirit of the wedding was palpable: “In the branches of the almond trees and on some balconies the coloured wedding decorations were still hanging.” (13) Margot recalls: “It was Christmas weather.” (16) This is replete with multiple significations. Apparently, the Christmas weather referred to the festive spirit of the townspeople. However, on another level, it was a time for sacrifice. Santaigo Nasar must sacrifice his life to redeem the wounds that the unnamed Latin American town has suffered.

The town was particularly agitated because Santiago is a racial outsider in that Colombian town. Racial prejudices boil as Angela dropped the name of Santiago Nasar as the culprit responsible behind her loss of virginity. Santiago's father Ibrahim came from Arab. The Spanish-speaking Latin American society views the loss of Vicario's honour at the hand an Arab person as an act of racial affront which requires an immediate retaliation. The Vicario family is expected to redeem the supposed loss of honour instantly. Although the novella

repeatedly includes characters like police, mayor and colonel, the Vicario family must proceed along the lines of primitive revenge. The rule of law does not apply here. The system of justice can be invoked only after the “honour killing” is completed. Even then, the trial becomes an act of chest-thumping. The Vicario brothers boast before the judge that they had to kill Santiago Nasar in order to salvage the family’s honour.

Another point to notice here is that when the wedding between Angela and Bayardo was fixed, Pablo and Pedro were not part of the decision-making process. The sequence leading to the wedding was almost like a fairy-tale. Bayardo is a dashing outsider who caught the attention of the town with his swagger. The moment his eyes fell on beautiful Angela, he vowed to marry her. The Vicario family is initially hesitant. However, after Bayardo’s parents visit the town in their expensive auto-mobile with official number plates, the Vicario family swiftly agrees to the marriage. The narrator finds out: “Angela Vicario was the youngest daughter of a family of scant resources. Her father, Poncio Vicario, was a poor man’s goldsmith.” (30) The wealth and opulence of Bayardo’s family stun the Vicario family. It is a classic case of a beautiful girl finding a wealthy suitor. The Vicario family is so relieved to get a wealthy husband for Angela that they do not even bother to ask Angela’s opinion. Angela’s parents and elder sisters force their decision upon Angela. Angela on her part tried to resist. Her view was: “He seemed too much of a man for me” (34), but her views were overlooked. The two brothers Pablo and Pedro had no part while the decision was made. In fact, Pablo Vicario felt at that point that “It looked to us like woman problems” (34). The irony is that when the marriage falls flat immediately after wedding -- as Bayardo returns Angela to her mother’s house -- it no longer remains a woman problem and the two brothers are expected to bear the burden of taking revenge.

The other mystery remains whether Santiago Nasar was indeed the man responsible for Angela’s loss of virginity before her marriage. The doubt deepens because Santiago in no way anticipates life-threatening danger coming his way. This further raises the question whether Angela told a lie. Even decades after the event, Angela stuck to the claim that Santiago was the perpetrator. The narrator fails to arrive at any definite conclusion. However, his suspicion is that Angela concealed the name of her actual lover in order to protect him from any potential harm. Angela must have been aware of the fact that her family would pursue the ‘culprit’ in order to redeem its honour in the eyes of the society. Even then, the question still lingers why Angela chose to mention the name of Santiago Nasar. The narrator’s assumption is that Angela probably considered Santiago a powerful enough man against whom the Vicario family will hesitate to unleash a revenge. The other reason could be Santiago’s reputation as a wealthy playboy, thus pinning the guilt squarely on Santiago and partly exonerating Angela’s transgression. However, the mention of Santiago’s name makes the situation more problematic as it draws the racial angle. It is not merely the loss of honour, but loss of honour at the hands of an outside Arab. It also stokes the town’s instant demand for revenge. Gomashie makes the pertinent point: “If Santiago Nasar is indeed a sacrificial lamb, why is he chosen as scapegoat by the community? He becomes the target of the community because he is viewed as an outsider. Santiago is the only child of an Arab father and Hispanic mother.” (Gomashie 37) Racial anxiety accentuates the call for vengeance.

Since the narrator investigates the happenings long after the dust has settled, she discovers a few more collateral victims of this ‘honour killing’. One is Bayardo San Roman. The narrator finds out that Bayardo remained in touch with Angela, writing her letters and eventually meeting her in person. Bayardo went into violent mental turmoil after the disastrous wedding. While Bayardo himself returned Angela to her mother immediately after

the wedding, later he felt the urge to get back to Angela. After the initial shock was over, he gradually realised the need of reconciliation. But since the honour killing has been completed and the entire town knew of Bayardo's rejection of Angela, any proper reconciliation between Bayardo and Angela remained out of scope. It was way too late when Angela and Bayardo recognised that the honour killing has permanently thwarted their scope of formally getting back together.

Thus Gabriel Garcia Marquez demonstrates how the social code of honour triumphs over individual decision-making. Once the society perceives that its honour has been wounded, the remedy lies through a formulaic act of retributive murder. John S. Christie rightly points out: "The final ritual of a town full of people watching a murder like spectators at a bullfight is the gruesome extension of a small community's obsession with public honour and social codes." (Christie 24) The honour killing activates a chain of events whose repercussions even the girl's family cannot escape. Society demands the honour killing, but does not accept its culpability behind the crime. Instead, it passes it off as inevitable and fated. Marquez's novella thus exposes the dark chambers of the mid-twentieth century Latin American society governed by a regressive collective morality marked by anxiety, racial prejudices, and primitive desire for revenge.

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