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DISCOURSE OF SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY IN
GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ'S CHRONICLE OF A DEATH
FORETOLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to examine Gabriel Garcia Marquez is concerned with an even more concrete social reality and a less concrete but more common human passion like love in all its psychological dimensions. As a whole, Marquez's novel, Chronicle of a Death Foretold, represent the levels of reality - social and psychological - that constitute the kernel of the author's comprehensive realism. Hence, the paper chose the most representative novel of Marquez which reflect his many-sided vision of life and his inner growth as a novelist. Chronicle of a Death Foretold gives us a concentrated picture of the contemporary Latin-American society characterized by false machismo and meaningless violence.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is the best-known writer to have emerged from the Third World and the best-known exponent of the literary style, 'magical realism,' which has proved astonishingly productive in other developing countries. After the publication of One Hundred Years of Solitude in 1967, the name of Gabriel Garcia Marquez established itself permanently as one of the greatest in the field of world literature. As a recognition of his genius, this Colombian author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1982. Since then, Marquez has been holding a special position as a representative voice not only of his native land Colombia but also of the entire Latin American Continent along with such writers as Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Alejo Carpentier of Cuba, Carlos Fuentes of Panama and Isabel Allende of Peru among others. In his portrayal of life and reality, Marquez is both personal and objective, drawing mainly upon the things that touch him most - his family and his native country. The attitude that he shares with the other writers mentioned above is purely South American, markedly different from the traditional Western or European ways of

thinking. It gives his novels a fresh, original and supremely enjoyable quality rarely matched in the history of novel writing.

Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* came out in 1981 in its Spanish original after a gap of some six years in the literary career of Marquez. During that time, the author has been busy with politics, mainly Colombian politics, which resulted in all sorts of trouble for the man, even life threat too. He fled the country in a hurry and got refuge in Mexico City. In such a turbulent political situation, the publication of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was a very significant event.

The real-life incident, on which the novel is based, however, has taken place some thirty-years before in 1951 when the political scenario of Colombia was much more disturbed, reeling under a prolonged period of bloodshed and massacre called *La Violencia*. Stephen Minta, in his *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Writer of Colombia* observes:

The long period of violence in Colombia which is known simply as the *violencia* took place between 1946 and 1966. The actual dating of the period, its causes, development ... the period was one of exceptional and prolonged savagery. (19)

The acts of homicide were nothing uncommon or unnatural in Colombian towns at that point in time, and the two murderers of Santiago Nasar should not be burdened with the whole responsibility of the gruesome crime because they are the products and also the victims of the society they belong to. The entire community has to take the blame as it fosters such an attitude of machismo that makes it almost mandatory for the two brothers to take revenge upon the person charged with their sister's deflowering. Notably, they try their best to get somebody to stop them as they continue to move about the town in a drunken state telling everybody that they are going to kill Santiago Nasar. But, surprisingly, nobody feels the necessity to stop them from committing such a heinous crime or to warn Santiago of his impending danger. Perhaps, the prevailing social code of machismo prevents the townsfolk to see the criminal side of the act as they take such honour killing for granted.

The novel opens with the description of Santiago Nasar's dream about trees and his feeling of being covered with bird's excrement. The good reputation of his mother, Placida Linero, as an interpreter of other people's dreams is put on question because she fails to see any "ominous augury" (2) in her son's dreams about trees. The suggestion is pretty clear: interpretation of dreams may be Freud's cup of tea, but not everybody's. Here, the possibility of a miraculous power is undercut by an ironical scepticism. The custom of the Nasars to keep the guns at one place and ammunitions in another may be strange, but there is nothing magical about it. Same is the case with the passage of a bullet that destroys everything in its way. (4) The volume of destruction might have been exaggerated, but it is, again, nothing impossible. Moreover, Divina Flor's feeling of Santiago Nasar's hand as "frozen and stony" (12) and Clotilde Armenta's impression that he "already looked like a ghost" (13) are actually the author's literary devices of creating an atmosphere of apprehension and foreboding. Along with these portents of death, there is grim suggestion of violence because Santiago keeps heavy guns, even sleeps with a gun in his bed, and the household cook, Victoria Guzman, chops

rabbits with a knife and threatens Santiago with the same knife. Another symbol, misinterpreted by Placida Linero, is the bird's excrement which seems to suggest blood that will cover Santiago very soon.

The bishop's visit has been rightly termed a "fleeting illusion" (16) by the author as he takes a dig at the snobbery and hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders. The common people are very enthusiastic about these occasional visits of the bishop and they throng to greet him with their fattest roosters and capons and huge stacks of firewood. But the bishop flatly ignores these sincere offerings and he does not care to get down from his boat as he thinks it much below his dignity. He simply floats by the village, mechanically blessing the petty mortals who justifiably feel duped.

Marquez is equally critical of the town priest, Father Carmen Amador, who is more worried about the bishop's visit than about the life of a young man. Even after receiving the message from Clotilde Armenta, he does not feel it necessary either to warn the man somehow or to inform the police. This kind of callousness only shows how little respect the author has for the religious leaders who preach compassion and fellow-feeling, the qualities they themselves are devoid of.

The strange things that are associated with Bayardo San Roman are actually the expression of the townspeople's wonder and amazement tinged with a little jealousy at the newcomer to the town. The man is very rich as well as handsome, a representative of the outer fashionable world and, at the same time, he is immensely gifted in many respects. That is why everybody looks askance at his coming to town like a comet with the intention of marrying somebody, his exceptional knowledge in almost all the walks of life and his ability to defeat the best swimmers in the town among other things.

In a few days, however, people begin to like him for his honesty, generosity and, of course, religiosity as reported by the narrator's mother. As for how he met his would-be wife, there exist many versions and the author never ascertains which one is correct. Bayardo San Roman's father, General Petronio San Roman, a hero of the civil wars of the past century is said to have fought Colonel Aureliano Buendia. This kind of reference to the characters of his other novels is an amusing technique often used by the author to give a sort of pseudo-historicity to his favourite creations. However, as soon as Bayardo's family arrives in the town, all gossips about his origin stop together, his pedigree having been established.

In the like manner, the death of the widower Xius out of grief over his selling the house in which he had lived with his beloved wife for more than thirty years is surely strange, but nothing uncommon or out of the ordinary. These things happen in life because man is a fallible being and greed for money often wins over tenderly cherished memories. When Bayardo San Roman first throws his bid for the farmhouse, the widower Xius tells him "that the objects in the house had been bought by his wife over a whole lifetime of sacrifice and that for him they were still a part of her" (35). Three nights later, Bayardo offers him an incredibly heavy price of ten thousand pesos for the house, and the old man cannot resist the temptation of so much money. In the words of Dr. Dionisio Iguarán, a friend of the widower Xius, "Just imagine: an amount like that within reach and having to say no because of a simple weakness of the spirit." (36) This transaction, however, proves fatal for the old man who cannot bear the pricks of his conscience. With the house, he also sells the sweet memories of his wife that had kept him stout and healthy. So, his spiritual death occurs at the moment he gives in to the forces of temptation; his physical demise takes place only two months later. Hence, the tears "bubbling inside his heart" are in fact his pent-up feelings of guilt at having sold his soul to the devil like Dr. Faustus in Marlowe's immortal tragedy.

Although the term “magico” or “magical” is casually used with reference to Santiago’s talent for disguises, the same can well be an assiduously achieved mechanical skill. He is a frequenter to the brothel of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes and his favourite pastime is to confuse the identities of the mulatto girls there by his adept art of disguise. It is Santiago’s whimsical frivolity in his relationships with women that makes the accusations of Angela Vicario believable to the townsfolk. Significantly, the epigraph of the novel, quoted from a poem by the great medieval Spanish-Portuguese poet Gil Vicente, underlines the violent and predatory aspect of love: “the hunt for love/is haughty falconry”. In “Free-play and Fore-Play: The Fiction of Non-Consummation: Speculation on Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” Bernard McGurk observes multiple punning in this epigraph, “for ‘altanería means height, high flight, falconry, haughtiness and pride; ‘de amor’ might also mean ‘of love’ and the second ‘de’, too, might mean ‘of for’ for ‘for’. To the Colombian ear, ‘la caza’ (casa) de amor(fes)’, too, might prefigure the brothel of Maria Alejandrina Cervantes” (167). Notably again, the terms in which the narrator warns Santiago regarding his mad passion for Maria Alejandrina Cervantes relate to the theme of dangerous and elusive love: “A falcon who chases a warlike crane can only hope for a life of pain” (65). This is, too, from the same poem by Gil Vicente.

The case of finding a medal of the Virgin of Carmel from within the stomach of Santiago is really strange and it is clinically verifiable whether such a thing can remain intact for so many years in the same place. But surely, this medal strengthens the interpretation of Santiago as a Christ figure. In *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: His Life and Works*, Stanley P. Baldwin is of the same opinion:

Perhaps this little token of goodness symbolizes the intangible goodness that Santiago carries inside himself like a medal. Further, the stab wound in Santiago’s right hand resembles one of the wounds of the crucified Christ ... Santiago appreciates whores, Christ loved whores as he loved all people. (77)

In tune with this interpretation, the autopsy report also comments about the stab wound in Santiago’s right hand in these terms: “It looked like a stigma of the crucified Christ” (76). Moreover, Santiago’s white linen dress, perforated in several places by stab wounds, is another tell-tale marker for such religious overtones.

The gradual disappearance of all the valuable things from the farmhouse newly bought and soon deserted by Bayardo San Roman is happily explained by the widower Xius as the workings of his dead wife. It is further confirmed in a stance with the deceased woman held by the mayor. Now, this thought gives the widower some kind of relief and a sense of poetic justice as he was very reluctant to sell the house. But, a common-sense view of the thing will hold that it is a simple case of theft as valuable items cannot remain for long in a deserted house. There might be, however, a moral lesson here: Bayardo can snatch away the house from the old man by his power of money to please his would-be wife, but he cannot buy happiness anyway through his marriage which turns out to be a disaster.

The way Bayardo San Roman returns to his deserted wife twenty-three years after the humiliating confusion of the wedding night might be extraordinary, but again not impossible. Human mind is a very vulnerable thing and Angela Vicario’s tenacity in writing letters to her faraway husband, unanswered, for long seventeen years might have melted even the stony heart of Bayardo. Although he has never opened a single letter, he has arranged them by dates and kept them in “bundles tied with coloured ribbons” (96). This amount of care is only possible if he retains some tender feelings for

his distressed wife. Significantly, when the narrator meets him for some information regarding Santiago's murder, he refuses to furnish any. Hence, that he wants to forget everything about the disaster of the wedding night and its aftermath is an indicator of the fact that now at least he does not want to lose anyway his long-lost conjugal happiness.

There are diverse interpretations about the ending of the novel. Marquez himself says that it is clear to him that the book has to end with a meticulously detailed description of the crime. Santiago's walking more than a hundred yards to reach the kitchen door from the main door after being mortally stabbed by the Pedro brothers might be an exaggeration on the author's part, but this is commensurate with his stature as a tragic hero. In the history of tragedy, the heroes have often been shown to perform even tougher jobs to command respect and admiration from the audience. What is more important, however, is the manner in which the murder is allowed to be committed. First of all, there is no proof that Santiago is the person responsible for Angela's loss of virginity, which is why the man dies completely flabbergasted as to the reason of this fatal punishment.

Secondly, the Pedro brothers keep on telling people for quite some time that they are going to kill Santiago, but nobody feels the necessity to warn the concerned person. These are two mysteries that are never cleared in the text, partly because the author holds the entire community responsible for the murder as it maintains a dangerous, outdated and ludicrous code of honour. Highlighting this ritual aspect of the murder, Carlos J. Alonso, in "Writing and Ritual in Chronicle of a Death Foretold," observes:

From this ritual perspective the entire narrative assumes a preparatory and propitiatory function for the sacrificial murder of Santiago Nasar with which the novel ends. ... Its incongruity with the epistemic project of the investigative model is represented by the fact that the avowed inquest into the murder should end paradoxically with the repetition of the original crime. (263)

This theory of the Chronicle of a Death Foretold being a ritual re-enactment of the original murder gets a further support from the general festive atmosphere of the novel. It opens with the preparations for the bishop's visit which, in this small town, is an important ceremony. For the rest of the novel, it is the grand wedding of Bayardo San Roman and Angela Vicario that occupies the mental space of the townspeople. We have already seen how Santiago's murder carries reverberations of the crucifixion of Christ. The author's indication is unmistakable: the real murderer is the cult of machismo, associated in this male-dominated society with the code of virginity, which compels the Pedro brothers, against their will, to perpetrate the abhorring crime. The stagnant society can only watch the ritual sacrifice, dumb, inactive and helpless, while promising lives are wasted in the name of honour.

To sum-up, there is less magic and more reality in this immensely popular novel of Marquez. The ostensibly magical passages in the text actually contribute to make the picture of a small-town Colombian society concrete and vivid. The setting comes alive with the details given about the people's beliefs and superstitions, age-old conventions and dead habits. His indictment of such a society, especially for its anachronistic cult of machismo, ultimately comes from a reformatory zeal which is often thwarted and even throttled in real life by the reactions of the society and the state, but which, nevertheless, gets firmly encoded in the fictional reality of Marquez's fictional works.

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