



Violence and Brutality in *Chronicle Of A Death Foretold*

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Received: 19 May 2023; Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2023; Accepted: 28 Jun 2023; Available online: 05 Jul 2023

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Abstract— Acts of violence in any society are predominantly seen as disruptions in the ordinary ebb of everyday existence- as deviations from the norm. This essay, however, argues that violence often emanates from the structures of society and it is only through the alteration of these structures that we can truly and effectively counter the various violences and brutalities we see around us. To this end, this paper shall look at Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 1981 novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* to delineate on Marquez's attempt to show violence and brutality as intrinsic elements of Columbian society. Marquez shows how violence has been internalised and institutionalised in the novella's town by highlighting the fault lines of the novella's society which is deeply entrenched in brutality, patriarchal codes of machismo and honour and a cult of violence. The essay also looks at the tragic dramatic mode called *pundonor* which is central to understanding the vitiated codes of honour germane to the Columbian national psyche. The article ultimately concludes by looking at how in the overwhelming existence of violence and brutality, relations of and sustenance provide by love are splintered.



Keywords— Gender, Honour, Pundonor, Social codes, Violence.

“...we, the inventors of tales..., feel entitled to believe ... in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.”

Garcia Marquez's 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, [The Solitude of Latin America](#)

Chronicle of a Death Foretold, a novella written by Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez was published in 1981. Drawing inspiration from a highly reported real-life incident in Colombia, the novella, set in an unnamed town, revolves around the bizarre and preventable murder of Santiago Nasar. The murder of Nasar, revisited 27 years later by a journalist- narrator, highlights the fault lines of the novella's society which is deeply entrenched in brutality, patriarchal codes of machismo and honour and a cult of violence. Through a searing and economical use of language, a reworking of the

conventional crime mystery, a jarring narration that absolves no character or institution of their culpability in the crime, Marquez shows how violence has been internalised and institutionalised in the novella's town. A heterogenous society, Colombia, has had a bloodied history leading to a culture of everyday violence. In fact, the period corresponding to the 10 year long civil war between 1948-1958 is called '*La Violencia*' given its extremely violent nature.

An interesting inroad into understanding the vitiated codes of honour germane to the Colombian national psyche is the tragic dramatic mode called *pundonor*. A form of Spanish drama, *pundonor* prescribes that once the perpetrator(s) of an honour crime are named, they *must* be killed. The fatalist revenge code of *pundonor* is based on a privileging of the cult of machismo, class determined ideas of female chastity that translate into familial honour and hypocritically gendered sexual norms. Driven by the dictates of *pundonor* and its psychological inescapability the Vicario twins find themselves dutybound to avenge the dishonouring of their sister, Angela, by killing Santiago

Nasar, a friend with whom they shared drinks the previous night. These misplaced codes of honour are valorised by their society, as Pablo Vicario's fiancée announces with pride, "I didn't only agree, I never would have married him if he hadn't done what a man should do" [Marquez, 1981, 1996]. Reflected in Prudencia's understanding of 'what a man should do', this culture, like all other patriarchal societies, makes men the custodian and defender of a woman's 'honour' and sanctions and justifies the violence contingent upon these codes. This is evident in the society's justification of their inaction by consoling "themselves with the pretext that affairs of honour are sacred monopolies with access only for those who are part of the drama" [Marquez, 1981, 1996].

Prudencia's comments and the social acceptance of the 'necessity' to avenge may be understood better by viewing the family as the site of reproduction of these bigoted codes of honour and male pride. Nasar takes on his father's footsteps to believe it his right to sexually exploit Divina, the cook's daughter. The exploitation of the working-class women brings to the fore entwined relation between the codes of honour and class. While Angela's loss of virginity triggers a murderous retribution, the harassment of the servant girl is almost seen like a mechanical duty of the upper-class master- a necessary *taming*¹. Thus, violence is shown in the novel to be the mode of existence even in the domestic set up, accentuated by detailed description of the possession of fire arms by Nasar and the violent butchering of the rabbits by Guzman which foreshadows Nasar butchering. However, while men are trained to be libidinous so as to be masculine, women are taught to be masochistic and self-sacrificing in order to be good wives. The narrator's mother says of Angela and her sisters "any man will be happy with them because they've been raised to suffer" [Marquez, 1981, 1996]. The narrative bears out this suffering in explicit violent terms as Angela is returned on her wedding night with her satin dress in shreds, obviously due to beating at the hands of Bayardo. She is then mercilessly beaten by her mother as well².

The novel's generic affinity to a crime mystery and Marquez's artful deviations from and reworking of the genre highlights the idea that violence and brutality are inherent part of the social fabric of the novella's society. It does so by denying any apocalyptic moment(s) of revelation that make clear the distinctions between the guilty and the innocent. Santiago, while a victim of the violent culture of

machismo is also its participant-beneficiary. Thereby, the cause and effect of the murder is shown to be enmeshed in the social codes and ideas that the community accepts as normative. By making Nasar's culpability in Angela's loss of virginity unclear and immaterial, the narrative is able to suggest that the murder isn't a culmination of individual deeds or misdeeds. The answer to why Nasar had to be killed, must be sought in the culture of unquestioned toxic patriarchy.

Such a complex scrutiny of the social structure is provided through the description and unwillingness of the Vicario twins to carry out the murder. The twins are not presented as hardened criminals but as anxious and worn-out men, unwilling to kill. Their beliefs and actions are not shown to be a disruption in the natural flow of the society, but as a continuum of the beliefs and values of the society. Thus, their 'ordinariness' puts the blame on the entire society. They also repeatedly announce their intention and plan to murder Nasar, in the hope to be spared "*the horrible duty that's fallen on them*" [Marquez, 1981, 1996]. Even though before the murder almost everyone in the town was aware of the twins' intentions nobody prevents it- "the publicly demonstrated intention combined with a forcible restraint would have provided a necessary fiction and saved the twins from the need for its (the ritual of killing's) literal enactment. [Bell, 1993]". Far from preventing violence the townspeople first become spectators of the murder and later become part of the second mutilation of Nasar through the "*inclement autopsy*" which was "*a massacre performed at the public school with the help of the druggist, who took notes, and a first-year medical student who was here on vacation*" [Marquez, 1981, 1996]. The unwillingness, notwithstanding, the twins remain proud of their act, despite physical manifestations of their guilt: urge to constantly wash hands, sleeplessness, uncontrolled bladders. Instead of reflecting on their actions they salvage their sufferings by blaming the immediately 'othered' Arabs.

The society's failure to prevent the murder is expounded by the collapsing institutions of Church and State-both fail to provide any moral framework to contain the violence. The codes of honour in being embedded so deeply in the psychology of the townspeople immunise themselves against the idiom of law. Apart from the overt failure of the mayor and the bishop to prevent the murder, the dilapidated state of the 'Palace of Justice' also suggests that this is a world at the brink of collapse. The judicial

¹ This double standard that determines which woman's honour is 'worthy' of being guarded is accentuated by the references to Maria Alejandria Cervantes to whom an entire generation of men lost their virginity.

² "The only thing I remember is that she was holding me by the hair with one hand and beating me with the other with such rage that I thought she was going to kill me." [Marquez, 1981]

system is not only inefficient to tackle the situation and provide answers but also complicit with the norms as the twins are let off after 3 years in prison. The Catholic Church too which is most starkly represented through the fleeting passing of the bishop provides no relief. In fact, the Bishop with a Spanish retinue at the background only reminds of colonial exploitation as it mechanically displays religiosity and is interested only in the spoils- roosters.

The narrative also highlights how in the overwhelming existence of violence and brutality, relations of and sustenance provide by love are splintered. This is evidenced by the ruin that the love house of the widower Xius falls into and the forced separation of Nasar and Maria Cervantes. This society views love as causing the unaffordable male vulnerability and *disorder*. Even the text's epigraph shows that in this culture love has been infected by violence and is seen in terms of hunt and violent control:

"the hunt for love

is haughty falconry" [Marquez, 1981, 1996].

Thus, Marquez pens down a novel that in elucidating the inherent violence of the culture and the refusal to revisit and disband the vitiated codes provides us a structure to question our accepted beliefs and practices. The importance of such questioning is rooted in its ability to propel a countering of the cycles of violence. The necessity of the self-reflection prompted by Marquez's succinct work can not be overstated in our contemporary times infested by myriad forms of violences and brutalities.

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