

## Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* : a Postmodern Reading

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William Butler Yeats in his Poem '*The Second Coming*', wrote, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

Yeats had successfully captured the ethos of contemporary culture with these lines. Those were the times when the western civilization had just moved out of the shadows of the First World War. However, not even a decade was over before the western world found itself caught in the makings of another humanitarian disaster. The most violent era became witness to another holocaust. This time there was no escaping from the ugly truth that the world as these people knew it was not the same anymore.

The turmoil that the Western society witnessed in the aftermath of the destruction of two wars of twentieth century was not so easy to overcome. The era that was ushered in saw the rapid transformation of all that was familiar to the west. The social and cultural scenario in the West was in a state of flux as the post-war world witnessed several economical and political upheavals along with revolutionary technological developments.

Until the First World War, western society (specifically the European society) comprised 'the modern man', a man who despite being completely disoriented, alienated and lost still believed in the quest for coherence, in quest for some centre, some meaning (as in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*). All of this however was rendered ineffectual when by the end of Second World War; all the institutions had failed to keep the humankind at peace. Everything made the modern man realise the fallacy of searching for an absolute, an ideal, a centre. And thus, out of this disillusionment was born a culture where people revelled in the fragmentary, vague sensations and the mere simulations of the reality that they were now living. It led to the genesis of a sea of humanity who would rather identify themselves as products of a culture which was characterised by "super abundance of disconnected images and styles" (Baldick 266) than a one that was still hoping for some meaning. This culture then soon came to be known as Postmodernism.

Postmodernism, however has been arguably the most contentious of cultural movements. It was born out of both a continuation and a rebellion against the Avant garde or modernism movement. The term was coined in 1939 by Arnold J. Toynbee and was later on used to convey the dissatisfaction with the modern architecture. However it soon gained momentum and formed its own language, philosophy and theory. For instance, Promod K Nayar in his *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: from Structuralism to Ecocriticism* points out how, for Terry Eagleton, Postmodernism was : "a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation"(Nayar, 48)

For many critics, it was also the complete reevaluation of the touch stones of the Western society (as in religion, art, architecture, literature, philosophy, culture etc) that took place in the 1950s and 1960s aided by the onset of the socio-economic phenomenon of the “late capitalism” in the U.S. that signalled the commencement of an era of postmodernism. And for many it was a cultural phenomenon, that slowly but surely became a source of inspiration for Arts and Literature.

In literature, it constructed a discourse that rejected totalizing narratives and instead believed in partial, fragmented and incomplete narratives. Postmodernist fiction soon became an international phenomenon, with major representatives from all over the world: Günter Grass and Peter Handke (Germany); Georges Perec and Monique Wittig (France); Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino (Italy); Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie (Britain); Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru); J.M. Coetzee (South Africa); and Peter Carey (Australia).

This paper attempts an understanding of this phenomenon by exploring the representation of postmodern tendencies in the novel of one such internationally acclaimed writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, can perhaps be considered the most apt and complete exposition of Postmodernism.

Garcia Marquez through his novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* presented a postmodern masterpiece. The novel was inspired from Garcia Marquez's own life. A gruesome killing of his own friend in Sucre, Colombia (1951) in the name of honour was turned into a complex and rich plot of this novella. The story is an attempt to piece together the fatal day when a young man is murdered, for having seduced and deflowered a young woman, who is disowned by her outraged husband and is returned to her family.

Written in the vein of popular literary genre of postmodernism i.e. a detective fiction, *Chronicles of a Death Foretold*, helps in reinstating what Linda Hutcheon, in her phenomenal work *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* calls “the presence of the past”. As per Hutcheon, the most important concept of postmodernism is to see the past with critical eyes, Marquez's narrator, is a journalist, who comes back to his hometown in order to reconstruct the events that led to the butchering of his friend Santiago Nasar. Garcia Marquez's narrator is not the omniscient narrators of the past. On the contrary, this is an indecisive, subjective and hesitant narrator who finds it difficult to analyse the past incidents from an objective point of view, simply because the so-called recollection of facts pertaining to this murder get tinged with personal knowledge that the narrator has of all the parties involved. Nevertheless he tries to pierce through the veil of mystery that shrouds the death. The narrator, who is also the friend of Santiago Nasar and is searching for some answers, several years after the incident is made, to act as a journalist, historian, detective and a judge. This critical revisiting of the past incident then makes the narrator and thereby the reader questions the validity of the accounts of the eye-witnesses after such a long time has elapsed and more importantly it questions the notion of history and journalism as being a narrative that is true and absolute recounting of past.

This probing of the past was a reflection of the probing of all the other constructs that were "supposed" to provide mankind with certain absolute "truths". This suspicion of the absolute that could never be challenged was conveyed by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who in his ground-breaking work *The Postmodern Condition* established that "Knowledge was a commodity, whose acquisition leads to power" (Nayar, 51). It was knowledge that generated a sense of identity and a sense of self and therefore it was this body of knowledge that even generated the meta-narratives that governed our social and cultural conduct. To Lyotard, this knowledge was never objective or apolitical, as it created and disseminated dominant ideologies. Thus, in postmodern texts such as *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, one saw a definite shift from these Meta-narratives (as expounded by the authors in the Victorian novels) which were totalizing and homogenizing in nature to narratives that were small, local or heterogeneous.

There is a fragmentation of the narrative wherein multiple perspectives of all the townsfolk are provided as no single perspective can be considered real and complete. The meaning derived by the reader then became "the" meaning. The real, the unreal, the fantastic, the credible, the facts, the fiction all such boundaries gets blurred and the result is a work of magic realism, fabulation, pastiche and even parody.

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* contains multiple narratives, that is an amalgamation of facts, feelings, imaginations and memories of all the characters whom the narrator investigates in order to arrive at the crux of the death of Santiago Nasar. All of these narrations are peppered with several surreal and fantastic descriptions about the day and weather "...but most agreed that the weather was funereal, with a cloudy low sky and the thick smell of still waters..." (Marquez, 2)

It makes the reader realise that in narrator's world reality and fantasy coexist. This postmodern technique of fusing the ridiculous and real and thereby creating an alternative reality, attained perfection under the hands of Garcia Marquez who had achieved world recognition for his extra ordinary use of Magic Realism.

As per J. Hills Miller, the concept of time for Faulkner exists not as continuity but as a simultaneity that can be viewed all at once from multiple perspectives (Bhargava, 51). The same could be argued for Marquez's treatment of time in this novella, wherein the narration shifts through various time frames, rapidly drifting between the past and the present with relative comfort and ease. The novel starts in medias res, however, the events of the plot do not unfold in a straightforward manner, but rather move back and forth in time. "While Chapter 1 starts at 5:30 and has Santiago killed by 7:05, an hour and thirty-five minutes later, the narrator eventually takes the reader all the way back to the end of the nineteenth century and its civil wars." (Pelayo, 117)

In literature, Postmodernism succeeded in demolishing the distinction between high and low culture. Nothing was to be canonised or treated sacred because everything was a mere replication or simulation of the original. Jean Baudrillard, the biggest exponent of postmodernism, believed that due to the barrage of Media images in our lives "we only know the image of the real" (Nayar, 49). As

per Hutcheon, postmodernism resulted in the “transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself” (Hutcheon 9). Therefore, we have critics such as Ruben Pelayo informing us that the narrator of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is Marquez himself therefore providing us readers with a meshing of autobiographical elements with fiction. One must also realise that the novel brings to seemingly different discourses that of journalism and fiction together.

According to Linda Hutcheon, one of the main features that distinguish postmodernism from modernism is the fact that it “takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement”. One way of creating this double or contradictory stance on any statement is the use of parody: citing a convention only to make fun of it. True to the features of the postmodern literature, even the act of creating literary text and the philosophers who influenced in their creation are commented upon. The narrator while reading the judge’s summation of the case observes that the judge:

...was a man burning with the fever of literature. He had doubtless read the Spanish classics and a few Latin ones. And he was familiar with Nietzsche, who was the fashionable author among magistrates of his time... he never thought it legitimate that life should make use of so many coincidences forbidden literature, so that there should be the untrammelled fulfilment of a death so clearly foretold. (Marquez 100)

According to Isabel Alvarez-Borland this self-consciousness is also evident from the fact that the narrator while trying to find whether his friend was actually deserving of such a punishment tries to piece together the details of the fatal day through two sources i.e. the eye witnesses who were there when the tragedy took place as well as the 300 pages worth of report out of total 500 pages, that had been left behind as documentations made by an instructor who doesn’t appear on the scene but has an important presence in the text. (Bloom 222)

Irony the most avidly used technique by the postmodern writers has been suffused into this work to make it multi faceted. The title, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, makes a mockery of the process of chronicling as the story line operates in a circular manner; the novella begins and ends with death. Marquez pushes the envelope with his own deconstruction of the entire traditional way of presenting a murder investigation. Everyone in the novella is aware that Santiago Nasar is going to be killed, “There had never been a death more foretold”. (Marquez, 50) However, no one warns this unfortunate protagonist. Therefore, Garcia Marquez’s title operates on two levels, the death has been foretold to the readers at the onset and the brothers who would be avenging their sister’s honour also inform everybody about their intention of killing Santiago.

The other irony is the elusive question whether Santiago Nasar was destined to die, to which the narrator observes: “... but 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, 20).

The logic behind the honour killing becomes absurd when paradoxically, seventeen years after the death of Santiago, the couple responsible for his death reunite. As readers, one is left wondering - Was there any chance of saving Santiago? Was he as per the Columbian culture guilty of a crime he may or may not have committed? To all these questions there are no certain answers. The truth just like the exact narration of chronology of this murder remains outside the reader's grasp. According to Borland, this is a deliberate ploy adopted by Marquez because for him the important aspect of this novel was not to explain what happened rather to help the readers come to an understanding of what has happened. (Bloom 226)

Postmodernist novels had started the trend of defying the expectations usually associated with the main characters of a novel. One is then forced to view this chronicle as a parody or even a mock tragedy where the protagonist is fated to die. However, the complexity of this text lies in the categorization of Santiago as the hero. Throughout the entire novel one can't help but realize that Santiago was not the typical hero. He was not even a hero but an ordinary man who had his own fears, own faults and own flaws of character. Marquez deliberately tantalises the readers with various people's impression of Santiago in order to maintain the curiosity and confusion of his readers. On one hand, we have the narrator stating "by his nature Santiago Nasar was merry and peaceful and openhearted" (Marquez, 6) and on the other, we have Victoria Guzman, Santiago's servant who reveals about him "He was just like his father...A shit" (Marquez, 8). Further, we have the narrator's sister Margot who observes "I suddenly realised that there couldn't have been a better catch than him" (Marquez, 17). Now, what is left to reason is why would a man like Santiago who is such a "Catch" that he can marry any women in the village, force himself on a girl like Angela Vicario as was implied by the latter.

The detailed autopsy report of Santiago Nasar, prepared by an unqualified priest and the inability of the entire official authorities to prevent the butchering of Santiago from taking place, brings the element of absurd in the text to the forefront. The narration also erases the old beliefs about the inherent evilness about the villains, for Marquez through this novel shows the murderers of Santiago to be humans who are following their brotherly duty in avenging the honour of their family and especially their sister. "Their reputation as good people was so well-founded that no one paid any attention to them...." (Marquez, 52).

Beyond the inversion of narrative technique and the characterization of the hero, even the traditional path of love is turned upside down in this novel. The narrator mentions that Angela Vicario was never given the privilege of falling in love as she was brought up in a strict patriarchal society and at the beginning had detested her suitor Bayardo San Roman, "I detested conceited men, and I'd never seen one so stuck-up,..." (Marquez, 29). She is forced to marry this man as nobody in her family views love between the couples as a pre-requisite to good marriage. Moreover, for Angela's mother "love can be learned too" (Marquez, 34). However, Bayardo falls in love with Angela at first sight; but even Bayardo's

love is unable to overcome his wife's lack of virtue. Ironically, Angela after being abandoned on the doorstep of her parent's house, by her husband realises that she has now fallen in love with her husband.

Therefore what Marquez has achieved through *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is to provide the readers with a novel that is open to multiple readings. It reinforces its important feature of being comfortable with the self reflexivity, temporal disorder, fragmentation and irony, the cornerstones of cultural and literary phenomenon called postmodernism. And it is through texts such as this, that one can attempt to understand a complex phenomenon that has left all the critics divided in their opinion of whether to praise or to criticise it.

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