



# Unravelling Marginality and Masculinity: Exploring the Interplay of Gender and Power in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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**Abstract**— This research paper examines the portrayal of gender prejudice and power structures in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novella, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Set in a patriarchal society in Latin America, the story revolves around the murder of Santiago Nasar and the societal norms that perpetuate toxic masculinity and misogyny. Through a blend of magical realism and journalistic storytelling, Marquez critiques the entrenched sexism and the concept of "machismo" in the culture. The paper explores the subordination of female characters, the association of honour with female chastity, and the destructive consequences of lopsided gender roles. The analysis highlights the marginalized position of women within the narrative and the social structures that contribute to their powerlessness. Furthermore, the paper discusses the resistance of certain female characters, challenging the prevailing norms and offering glimpses of agency and empowerment. Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a powerful critique of gender prejudice and exposes the harmful impact of gender-based social hierarchies.

**Keywords**— *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, gender prejudice, Latin American society, power structures



## I. INTRODUCTION

*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, initially published in Spanish, is a magical realist novella. The novella is about the murder of Santiago Nasar, a twenty-one-year-old wealthy Colombian, by the Vicario brothers to avenge the loss of their sister's virginity. Their sister, Angela Vicario, is 'returned' to her family when her husband, Bayardo, discovers on the wedding night that she is not 'pure'. Angela names Santiago as the one to whom she lost her virginity.

The novella, written in a journalistic fashion, has an omniscient narrator. Supposedly, the author, the narrator, attempts to chronicle and investigate the crime after twenty-seven years of its date. It is based on actual events that occurred in a town in Columbia. The names of people and places are fictionalized. The incident is well known in Columbia, and the truth associated with the novel

exemplifies the patriarchal society of Latin America. At the same time, several instances of women being humiliated, oppressed, attacked, dismissed, silenced and belittled are given to us. What is also made clear is that such treatment is entrenched in the social structures that govern this place.

From how daughters are brought up to how marriages are planned, female chastity is tied to concepts of honour, and the cult of machismo is upheld, the culture laid bare in the novella is built around highly prejudiced ideologies of gender. Mark Millington argues in his essay "The Unsung Heroine: Power and Marginality in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*" that the murder of Santiago Nasar encapsulates the power structure in the town, one that aims to safeguard the machismo. The women characters are "peripheral to the main actions of the narrative just as they are peripheral to the structures of power in the society represented." (Millington, 1995) As Mark Millington rightly points out,

the novella displays that the female characters remain powerless in the male-dominated society, specifically in the Columbian society where the novella is set.

The death foretold is bound to happen because of the lopsided gender politics. Before we know about the killers, we are informed about the victim, Santiago Nasar. He ensures he is within the culture of violence and the idea of male honour in his practice of owning guns and “falconry equipment.” (Marquez, 2014, p. 3) The cult of machismo endorses Santiago’s falconry, for it lauds both the social and sexual portrayal of male domination and power. These are violent and masculine traditions he has inherited from his father, even as his mother sits and broods alone in the large house.

Santiago Nasar displays the patriarchal tradition of looking at women as vulnerable, and for him, the idea of being the predator is exciting. He breeds horses and inherited from his father “the manipulation of firearms, his love for horses, and the mastery of high-flying birds of prey” (Marquez, 2014, p. 6). He, like his father, who seduced the cook Victoria Guzman in her teenage years, desires and manhandles the cook’s daughter, Divina Flor, with his “butcher hawk hand.” (Marquez, 2014, p. 12) When Nasar is killed in the story for having deflowered and consequently dishonoured Angela, the Vicario brothers plead not guilty before God, as the murder is “a matter of honour” (Marquez, 2014, p. 49). After three years of jail and trial, their plea of “homicide in legitimate defence of honour” (Marquez, 2014, p. 48) is accepted by the court, and they are acquitted of murder. The verdict is a joke on the customs of their society, which dismisses the charges of a cruel murder for the preservation of ‘machismo’. Honour and chastity are linked with Angela’s virginity, and revenge is justified for violating the code of honour. The community can rationalize the cruel murder of Santiago Nasar as he had expiated the insult and the Vicario twins had proved their status as ‘men’, and ‘the seduced sister’s honour’ was restored.

The critic Anthony Burgess writes, “The minimal distinction of the novella lies in the exactness with which its author has recorded the customs of a community in which machismo is the basic ethos.” (Burgess, 1983) The assertiveness and aggression associated with expressing masculine virility form the crux of the culture. Such a dimension of personality, i.e., social conformity, leads people to believe that the world is dangerous, and thereby, they exhibit a great degree of Right-wing Authoritarianism and prioritize the maintenance of social hierarchy in both their public and private lives by eliminating any kind of threat to the social order. However, the Vicario brothers, Pablo and Pedro, do not seem to be instigated enough to kill Santiago. They seem to be quite afraid. Pedro, quite

ironically and ridiculously, has a urinary problem, and he ties his penis to ease the pain as he prepares to kill. Intoxication is an aid to the brothers as they are compelled to murder “for honour”. Sharon R. Bird posits that “hegemonic masculinity” is perpetuated notwithstanding different individual approaches or belief systems that challenge hegemonic conceptualization. Even if there are non-conforming individual tendencies, the transgression of hegemonic masculinity generally fails. Punishment or excommunication is the most expected consequence. (Bird, 1996) The fear of such punishment is precisely the reason why the Vicario brothers fail to stop themselves from committing the crime of murder.

While it is only the men who defend the code of honour via action, the women accept and support the idea. It is representative of what Evelyn P. Stevens calls the concept of “marianismo”, which is the “other side” of the “male-oriented stereotype”. It “exalts the virtues supposedly associated with womanhood...chastity, coyness and timidity”, and the women are supposed to be “the custodians of virtue and propriety.” (Stevens, 1973) Most women in the novel uphold this concept. When Angela is brought back to her parents, her mother, Purisima Del Carmen, beats her up, and the very next day, she makes Angela wear a veiled red dress and takes her away to a remote village. Angela tells the narrator that her mother is “a poor woman devoted to the cult of her defects.” (Marquez, 2014, p. 93) II) Another instance: Pablo Vicario’s fiancée, Prudencia Cotes. She knows about the twin’s plan to kill Santiago and tells the narrator unflinchingly, “I knew what they were up to, and I didn’t only agree, I would never have married him if he had not done what a man should do.” (Marquez, 2014, p. 63) Prudencia subscribes to the belief that a man may not want to do it but should do it to confirm masculinity. This could be pointed out as masculinity being a masquerade. In his essay, “Masculinity as Masquerade”, Donald Moss rightly argues that masculinity “lacks the capacity to legitimate itself”. It always needs affirmation, and there, in that need, lies its delegitimizing “weak point...its confession to be less than—other than—it aspires to.” (Moss, 2012)

None of the men come up to stop the murder from happening; two women take charge but are unsuccessful in their attempt. Clotilde Armenta is the woman who owns the milk shop from where the Vicario brothers take the murder weapons and leave to kill Santiago. She is sympathetic towards the twins, and their bravado appears feigned to her. An insightful woman, she tries to stop Pedro Vicario. She is pushed away. Her husband does not believe her when she tells him of the murder plan. She remains helpless despite knowing about the death that was foretold by the brothers and failed in trying to stop it. The narrator’s mother, Luisa Santiago, leaves all chores aside when she knows that

Santiago Nasar is about to be murdered. She immediately leaves to warn her friend and Santiago's mother, Placido Linero, of the impending danger. She is resolute and unhesitant, but she meets failure.

In our attempt to understand the sexual prejudice addressed in the novella, the upbringing of the Vicarios is a critical aspect. They are brought up in accordance with the traditions of the patriarchal Latina society. The brothers were brought up to be men. The girls had been raised to get married. They knew how to do screen embroidery, sew by machine, weave bone lace, wash and iron, make artificial flowers and fancy candy, and write engagement announcements. Unlike the girls of the time, who had neglected the cult of death, the four were past mistresses in the ancient science of sitting up with the ill, comforting the dying, and enshrouding the dead. (Marquez, 2014, p. 30) The girls in Angela's house have been tutored to be wary of men and "raised to suffer". (Marquez, 2014, p.31) Such an ideology, i.e., Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), perpetrates sexual prejudice. (Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007; Pratto et al., 1994; Whitley) It supports the non-egalitarian arrangement of social groups and the presumption that some groups ought to command power over other groups. (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) How Marquez portrays the naturalized sexism of the Columbian society represents what Pierre Bourdieu calls paradox of doxa, i.e., "the established order! with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily" that the most prejudiced rules become normalised. (Hull, 2002)

The honour of the family is vested in the woman's virginity. "No one would have thought nor did anyone know that Angela wasn't a virgin." (Marquez, 2014, p. 37) Angela is anxious about Bayardo's discovery that she was not a virgin on their wedding night. She decides to tell her mother, but two of her closest friends urge her not to and tell her how to feign virginity. At first, Angela agrees, but later, she decides to remain silent. This results in Angela's return to her parent's house, where she is beaten and bruised by her mother, who later takes her away to a remote location. She is asked the name of her lover who took away her chastity, and on taking Santiago's name, her brothers plan to kill him. Her husband abandons Angela for seventeen years before they reconcile.

Angela's marriage is also a matter of convenience in which there is no space for her desire, and the chastity of the female is vital. The man is best suited for marriage if he is wealthy, as Margot, the narrator's sister, says. Bayardo does not court Angela himself, instead wins over her family with a show of opulence and power. Even when he chooses her

as his bride, his desire is an announcement. When Angela shows reluctance in marrying Bayardo, for she does not love him, her mother dismisses it with a rather indifferent remark suggesting that love can be learned. Angela tells the narrator: He seemed too much of a man for me. It reinforces the idea that a man, who may, if lacking the other traits to adhere to hegemonic masculinity (Bayardo is described as "fairy-like" in the novel), manages to still be an ideal or desirable man by masking himself with galore of wealth.

In the chronicle, like all other women within the society, Angela is subject to the authority of a male author who takes only pieces from her memory to tell the story of a death that was foretold. However, while the author represents the social reality, he also provides space for rebellion. Her friends teach her "old wives' tricks" to fake her lost virginity (Marquez, 2014, p. 38), so the women's survival strategies define the hollowness of the codes. Angela initially agrees but later refuses to do so and remains silent. In this manner, she frees herself from a loveless arranged marriage. Later on, when she feels love for Bayardo, Angela keeps writing weekly to him for seventeen years. She writes the letters when her mother has gone to sleep, and she feels that she is finally "mistress of her fate." (Marquez, 2014, p. 94) Bayardo's return after seventeen years becomes a mockery of the code of honour that compelled the Vicario brothers to kill Santiago. Angela becomes the "Unsung Heroine" of the novel in that sense. (Millington, 1995)

## II. CONCLUSION

The novella is a remarkable revelation and stark critique of the power structure and gender prejudice inherent in societies. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* masterfully combines the elements of magic realism and journalistic techniques to deliver a profound critique of gender prejudice deeply rooted in Latin American society. By blurring the boundaries between the supernatural and the ordinary, Marquez unveils the problematic aspects of what is considered 'natural' in the societal construct. Through his vivid portrayal of the characters and their interactions, Marquez exposes the pervasive gender prejudice that permeates all societies.

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